

# The Future of the Scholarly Journal

*by Michael Gorman*

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*The scholarly journal will disappear and be replaced by a new model (economic and technological) of article distribution.*

The scholarly journal is a phrase that embraces many different kinds of communication from modestly priced literary journals to fabulously expensive science journals. All librarians know of the long-standing financial problems posed by scientific, medical, and technical printed journals and the newer economic issues surrounding print and online and print or online journals. Though there are a few truly online journals, they remain rarities in the midst of an industry that is based economically on the production and sale of printed journals.

When one looks at the literature on scholarly communication, it is evident that the discussion is centered on the question of when and how the paper journals of today and yesterday will be replaced by the online journals of tomorrow. Those discussions remind me of nothing so much as "two bald men fighting over a comb."<sup>1</sup> Why argue about economic models of journal publishing when there is no reason to perpetuate the journal at all?

The journal was invented more than 200 years ago to serve a small homogenous class of upper class scholars with a wide range of interests – people who might well read articles on archaeology, biology, and theology. Today, thousands of scholarly

journals serve thousands of micro-communities of intensely specialized scholars who know more and more about less and less. Despite this complete inversion of purpose and increasing specialization, journal publishers still bundle together articles and force libraries and individuals to buy those bundles without regard to the possible readership (or lack of readership) of any one article. The 20 / 80 truism tells us that 20 percent of articles account for 80 percent of reading. In other words, the economic model of the scholarly journal is based, *inter alia*, on selling five articles for each one that is heavily consumed.

But that is not the only aberration in the journal business. The journal publishing industry is the only one that has a highly educated work force (professors and researchers) *working without remuneration*. No wonder that the search for an economic model for online journal publishing has been a failure.

I have always argued that technological advances should be met with a complete reconsideration before technological change

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is implemented. Automating and/or digitizing what is, rather than what could be, always leads to failure. Such a reconsideration of the scholarly journal, if complete and if viewed from the point of view of the scholarly reader, leads inevitably to the dissolution of the journal and an economic model based on the distribution and preservation of *articles* without bundling them into journals. This is inevitable but scarcely to be accomplished with ease.

The present system was economically precarious before the Internet and the Web, even though money was made by selling the majority of the unread with the minority of the read and on the basis of a high-level, unpaid work force. How much more marginal will the profits be if only those articles that are actually used bring in any money? To some, this would mean that scholarly communication must be taken over by governmental or academic agencies and removed from the private sector. In an ideal world, that might be a practical solution, but this is far from an ideal world and it is inevitable that a capitalist society will demand a capitalist, private sector solution. If the effort and ingenuity that is going into the blind alley of digitizing books<sup>2</sup> were to be expended in a potentially more productive effort to create a viable economic model for distributing scholarly articles online, there is no doubt that a public/private solution could be found.

I envisage large subject-based databases containing articles that have been subject to peer refereeing (much as is done for refereed journals today) and that have been catalogued and indexed exhaustively, using controlled name and subject vocabularies. These databases would be maintained by commercial interests, which would also pay for the cataloguing and indexing. Libraries and individuals could subscribe to the databases, either choosing to download or print individual articles or receiving notification of relevant articles (matching the library's profile). Libraries would pay fees to distribute articles to users and to build their own databases.

There are many questions, of course: Who would be responsible for the preservation and "archiving" of articles (including those that had little or no use)? How would the fee structure for the various services offered by the article databases be set – by individual use, by size of library?

What is inevitable, in my view, is that the present ramshackle structure of journal publishing will have to be replaced by a computer-based system that distributes scholarly articles, organizes peer review and indexing, and preserves the scholarly record in perpetuity.

(Footnotes)

<sup>1</sup> Jorge Luis Borges' phrase. He was describing the Falklands/Malvinas War.

<sup>2</sup> See, among others: Michael Gorman, "Google and God's Mind," *Los Angeles Times*, Dec. 17, 2004; [www.latimes.com/news/opinion/commentary/la-oe-nugorman17dec17,1,7568022.story?coll=la-news-comment-opinions](http://www.latimes.com/news/opinion/commentary/la-oe-nugorman17dec17,1,7568022.story?coll=la-news-comment-opinions)