

Scholarly Reputations: Who's Got *Buzz*?

While giving a presentation at a recent international meeting on institutional repositories, I responded to a member of the audience who questioned the motivation for faculty to participate in such repositories. The individual repeated the oft-mentioned position that scholars, by placing publications in such repositories, unduly risk their contractual relationships with publishers. I responded by acknowledging the concern and by describing options that minimize risk, but since I had the stage, I also wondered aloud about which “big win” choice scholars would make as time moves forward. Those of us who believe both in the rigor of peer review and in open access know that these are not mutually exclusive choices but rather are mutually beneficial elements in advancing scholarship. However, for the sake of the argument, I asked if scholars would choose (1) to have their work published in the premier journal in their field or (2) to have that work regularly come up on the first screen in an appropriate Google search. Although I made the statement to stimulate discussion in front of an audience, I believe that my straw-man choice raises issues that need to be discussed further.

The development of the “design patterns and business models” of Web 2.0 formalizes the very real and powerful changes that have been taking place in common information-seeking behavior.¹ In the Web 2.0 world, the quality of a resource is determined by the intensity of its use. What is rated as “the best” is what is used the most and what shows up first. For example, Tim O’Reilly is now a guru

of Web 2.0 not because he published a well-placed scholarly article but because his article “What Is Web 2.0” appears on the first screen of a standard Google search of “Web 2.0” and is a reasonably comprehensive overview of the topic. O’Reilly took advantage of the very Web 2.0 qualities of which he writes to place himself—and, probably, his well-known publishing house—at the forefront of the Web 2.0 discussion.

Like classic publishers, search engine companies such as Google do make efforts to differentiate information based on content, audience, or even semantic schema and to place such differentiated information packets into specialized instances (e.g., Google Scholar). But searchers are not tolerant of such differentiations; they want one-stop retrieval shopping, and they want to see the best results first. Such a lack of tolerance for multiple search pathways is likely generational and is creeping into the scholarly community as younger generations grow as scholars. Contemporary students, our future scholars, do not want to have to learn how to do a complex search; they want quality scholarship that is discoverable through a single, common search.

For information-seekers using their favorite search engine, *quality* is simple to define. If a result displayed on the first screen seems to be clearly objective in perspective, if it is not part of some commercial scheme (e.g., a link to buy this book at zzz.com), and if it is immediately available for full-file use, then it is deemed to be of high quality. Moreover, because the seeker has quickly been successful in obtaining a work of high quality, there is a transfer of quality to the work’s authors, who receive

a high “expert” ranking. The effect may not be rational but it is increasingly true, regardless of whether the work is otherwise associated with any peer-reviewed process. New graduate students in physics can be taught to begin research with review articles such as those in the highly respected *Reviews of Modern Physics*. Yet it is increasingly likely that they will first search Google; the article that shows up on the first page of results will be a winner no matter what its published pedigree.

We value what others value. It is the human condition to do so. In a Web 2.0 world, technology elevates conformity. The Web, with sites such as MySpace.com, reinforces the self-referential notion that what is “hot” is what is “hot.” The academy is no different. Colleges and universities now make significant efforts to market to prospective students on the Web by seeking to become—or, if they are lucky, to remain—hot. In the standard irony of advertising, most institutions do so by copying old hot concepts. The “Most Wired” status is sought less for academic productivity than for the *buzz* it creates. Why should we assume that a student’s approach is any different? A student is looking for a school to attend? Who’s hot? Looking for a graduate program? Who’s hot? Looking for someone to study under? Who’s hot? What do you call a potential major advisor who has lots of citations in the best journals but no Web presence? Well . . . let’s move on.

We can advise students on how to use tried-and-true methods designed to make them successful, eminently marketable professionals. But if we are promoting only hard work and there is no buzz, we are starting at a deep disadvantage and,

I would sadly suggest, are likely to fail. For confirmation, look at the popularity of higher education majors in relation to market demand and even starting salaries. The journal *Nature* is the most highly cited science journal in the world; having one's article make the cover of *Nature* has long been one of the pinnacles of success in the science field. But for a scholar to be successful in attracting good students or in persuading them to take on a course of study that is quietly demanding, making the cover of *Nature* is not likely to create buzz in today's Web 2.0 world.

Funding for scholarship is another matter relevant to this discussion. In a purely traditional approach, the rigors of peer review play a huge role in validating a scholar's work and in securing funding for future work. Professional buzz was traditionally created by venues of publication, funding track record, and the number and the cumulative success of one's graduate students. What is less clear now is the role that Web-based significance plays in funding research. I would assume that any grant reviewer in today's environment would, as a matter of course, Google both the name of the principal investigator (PI) and the PI's topic of research interest as background information for the assessment of a proposal. What we don't yet know is how much a successful Google result, the degree of perceived buzz through relevancy-based results, affects the evaluation of that proposal. Nevertheless, if a lot of ongoing research money is at stake, creating a superb Web presence might be a wise investment for a PI to make.

Finally there is the issue of public support for scholarship. Clearly, public opinion is hardly swayed by the relative degrees of prestige accorded to various publishers or publication titles in a given discipline. But public opinion *can* be swayed by open access to scholarly information on the Web, especially when the researcher is aware of the actual or potential links between his or her research and community, societal, or personal issues. Creating metadata that connects scholarship not only to one's scholarly or disciplinary community but also to potential communities in the wider society can help make the connection between scholarly research and public good. And as in

other Web-based arenas, buzz is important. When a researcher has no significant Web presence or relies on the pedestrian Web presence created by his or her scholarly publisher, buzz is unlikely.

At the start of this column, I noted that the choice between a prestigious scholarly publication and a high Google ranking was not really an either/or choice. No one should dismiss or diminish the value of using high editorial standards to point both the scholarly and the general communities to work of high quality. However, the placement of scholarship in an open-access institutional repository need not preclude publication in a prestigious title. Authors and their publishers can move to provide open access to their works in pre- and/or post-publication versions. From the perspective of return on social investment, open access to published works can create positive returns for both authors and scholarly publishers. My straw-man choice was contrived, of course: neither scholarship without perceived relevance nor scholarship evaluated only on Web buzz is desirable.

Within the classic and respected framework of scholarly review and selection, scholars need to think about the impact of contemporary, open information access and about the mechanisms that can be used to generate relevance in their work. They need to think about choosing appropriate metadata and about how others, not necessarily just their disciplinary peers, might seek and use their information. They need to think about the links that ought to exist between their work and the broader society that inevitably supports it. Finally, they need to give some thought to the very unscholarly but pragmatic aspects of their work: marketing and promotion, which contribute to the creation of scholarly reputations with "buzz" on the Web.

Note

1. For a succinct description of Web 2.0 concepts, see Tim O'Reilly's "What Is Web 2.0: Design Patterns and Business Models for the Next Generation of Software," O'Reilly, September 30, 2005, <<http://www.oreilly.net.com/pub/a/oreilly/tim/news/2005/09/30/what-is-web-20.html>>.



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