

Captivating the Digital Audience: Beyond Scholarly Publication

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In a virtual world dominated by Google and Wikipedia, how do scholarly institutions captivate an audience? That was a major theme at a recent symposium titled “The Changing Landscape of Scholarly Communication in the Digital Age”, held 11–13 February at Texas A&M University. Michael Jensen, director of publishing technologies at the National Academies Press, delved into this topic during his lecture “Scholarly Authority in the Age of Abundance: Retaining Algorithmic Relevance in the New Landscape”.

Jensen engaged the audience with humor, insight, and anecdotes as a speaker at the symposium. He explained that despite the benefits of knowledge abundance, it is difficult for a person to establish authority on a topic in an age when search relevance has replaced expertise.

Jensen stated that expertise based on deep immersion in the study of a topic is not enough to gain public attention, nor is scholarship or publication record. He explained that in a past when knowledge was scarce, authority could be obtained by default, but academics now must compete with organizations, superstars, blogs, and countless other knowledge sources. Formerly, the cost of publishing limited what could be published and necessitated standards of excellence based on merit, audience, and interest. Internet publication, in contrast, does not require editorial feedback, and published information may no longer be trustworthy. Internet search engines do not identify quality by standards of expertise, nor can they implement the nuance or perspective that a live audience can exercise; thus, scholars are sometimes unrecognized, potentially to the detriment of public edification.

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So how does one gain “algorithmic authority”?

Search algorithms used by sites like Google rely on proxies of popularity and usefulness to rank the relevance of available sites to a given query. One factor affecting algorithmic relevance is named or live links, which are hyperlinks to Web sites that contain keywords or names rather than “click here”. If your Web site is commonly linked to, your relevance increases; if the link includes keywords, relevance increases further. Other influencing factors include Web-site age, server stability, and keyword distribution; and search engines constantly update features to improve algorithms.

In the digital landscape, those virtual characteristics bestow on Web sites an appearance of authority. Jensen suggested that academic institutions might benefit from helping their scholars to penetrate into the first two pages of a Google search. Open access may also help in the pursuit of Internet authority, inasmuch as free knowledge is more likely to be used by a ravenous Web surfer eager for quick answers, but this alone will not restore scholars to the top of the information ladder. Jensen proposed that live links are an easy target, particularly if institutions are willing to promote each other. By linking to each other’s sites and publications (in some cases, abandoning a history of interinstitutional competition to do so), institutions can increase their collective search relevance and boost their algorithmic authority.

Jensen continued that a more radical scheme might also be prudent; he termed it “promoting the scholarly brand”—although he admittedly expected his academic audience to cringe at the label. He listed the attributes of modern-day authorities: fame, visibility, photogenicity, punditry, quotability, and digestibility. Those attributes could gain the “scholarly brand” attention in the age of abundance. Before cringing,

Jensen protested, remember that “in order to influence, we must engage.” To captivate the modern public, academic experts need visibility and maybe even entertainment value. Otherwise, Jensen cautioned, the online consumer culture of today may not have room for scholarly communication.

So perhaps we will now have survival of the attention-grabbing fittest. Institutions have few options to cultivate public interest, and the best may be to re-examine experience-based expertise and recognize that today’s public needs to see us to decide whether we have merit and that, yes, they get to decide whether we have merit. They have myriad other sources to give them information if we disappear. We must first be seen by gaining algorithmic relevance and then engage by meeting requirements of today’s audience to do so. Only then can we hope to send the message: “I am an expert; let me share with you what I know.” It may be humiliating to accept that expertise requires more than knowledge, and it may be frustrating to navigate an information landscape where algorithms have replaced human intuition; but if we remain silent, educated hermits in the virtual world, we cannot expect the public to come to us for answers. For good or bad, that is our future, and we must establish ourselves in it.

For online video access to presentations from the symposium, please see futureof-publishing.tamu.edu/program. 