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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Author perceptions of journal quality

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ABSTRACT. One of the most important issues facing scholarly communication today is what constitutes quality in the publishing and dissemination of research findings; the aim of this exploratory research study was to investigate author-perceived quality characteristics of science, technology and medicine journals. We triangulated data from a small number of volunteer full-time faculty members of Long Island University, using three different research techniques: (1) questionnaire survey, (2) focus groups, and (3) semi-structured face-to-face interviews. The study identified some significant differences by discipline, gender, and tenure status. Overall, the three most important attributes were the reputation of the journal, the estimated length of time to article publication, and the readership of the journal. Our findings bring new insight into this area for the scholarly research community as a whole.

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Introduction

The idea of journal quality is not new. There have been a variety of interpretations of its meaning; however, perhaps the most important concept is 'quality as defined by the customer'. To journal publishers this has to do with the way our authors and researchers perceive our products, services, and brands, and which specific attributes of the journal are most important to author and customer satisfaction. Since publishers began producing journals they have struggled to determine what constitutes quality for authors. What does quality mean for a journal author, and what makes for high-quality prestigious journals?

In the new electronic and Web-based information age, sustaining journal quality is not limited to providing good, timely articles; it goes far beyond that. New technologies have transformed the way that scholarly publishers do their business. Publishers are well aware that they have to develop solutions to keep up with the fast pace of change in today's scholarly endeavor.

The aim of this research study is first to explore author-perceived quality characteristics of STM journals and to understand why scholars often refer to some journals as 'prestigious' while viewing others as of lower value or reputation. Second, we have identified in the research literature 16 separate quality attributes which affect scholars' behavior; this study includes all of these factors for the first time. The study investigates: (i) the quality attributes of science, technology and medicine (STM) journals, and (ii) why potential authors characterize some of these attributes as more important than others. We believe that using three different research methods (questionnaire survey, focus groups, and semi structured face-to-face interviews) – triangulation[1] –

Note

This article summarizes the findings of a study, *Author-perceived quality characteristics of STM journals*, funded by ALPSP; the full report is available at http://www. alpsp.org

for this study affords insights that could not otherwise be accomplished within the constraints of time, cost, and sample size.

The following research questions were investigated:

1. What quality characteristics are most important for STM journals?
2. What are some of the underlying differences among journals and researchers that might lead to certain journals being viewed as 'prestigious' while others are considered less valuable?
3. What are the key factors considered by potential authors in submitting articles to STM journals?
4. Which attributes might become more important in the changing electronic publishing and web-based market?

'journal quality' is a complex and elusive concept

Literature review

Each of the 16 journal quality attributes that were used to measure author-perceived characteristics of STM journals in the study had been identified in the research literature. This research represents the first effort to incorporate all of these attributes into a single study.

'Journal quality' is a complex and elusive concept that interacts continuously with all the aspects of daily life of scholars. Therefore, this study employed two different qualitative data collection methods, in addition to a questionnaire survey, to seek detailed information on these 16 journal quality attributes (see Table 1).

Methodology

A brief questionnaire survey and two qualitative research methods were used for this study: focus groups and semi-structured face-to-face interviews. The survey was conducted with the focus goup participants before the group discussions commenced; the in-depth interviews came last.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire consisted of 23 questions in two parts. The first part asked for the key demographics such as academic title, tenured status, number of publications in last seven years, and gender. The second part of the survey asked participants to rate the importance of each of the 16 journal attributes. A five-point Likert scale was used from

Table 1. Sixteen journal quality characteristics cited in the literature

1. Online tools	Tibbitts[2]; Rowlands and Nicholas[3]; Mabe[4]
2. Society-published	Mabe[4]; Chressanthis and Chressanthis[5]; Gorman and Calvert[6]
3. Editorial board	Tibbitts[2]; Rowlands and Nicholas[3]; Mabe[4]; Franke *et al.*[7]; Nisonger[8]
4. Past experience	Mabe[4]
5. Impact factor	Tibbitts[2]; Rowlands and Nicholas[3]; Mabe[4]; Garfield[9]; Yue and Wilson[10]; Saha[11]
6. Reputation	Tibbitts[2]; Rowlands and Nicholas[3]; Mabe[4]; Frank[12]
7. Rejection rate	Björk and Holmström[13]; Rowlands *et al.*[14]
8. Time to publication	Tibbitts[2]; Rowlands and Nicholas[3]; Mabe[4]; Björk and Holmström[13]; Gleser[15]
9. Price	Rowlands *et al.*[3]; Chressanthis and Chressanthis[5]; Björk and Holmström[13]
10. Publisher	Mabe[4]
11. Readership	Tibbitts[2]; Rowlands and Nicholas[3]; Franke *et al.*[7]
12. Colleague recommendation	Mabe[4]
13. Journal online	King *et al.*[16]
14. Copyright	Rowlands and Nicholas[3]; Grimby[17]
15. Open access	Rowlands *et al.*[14]; Schroter[18]; Regazzi and Caliguiri[19]
16. Design	Mabe[4]; Gorman and Calvert[6]; Joseph[20]; Erdman[21]

5 = very important down to 1 = very unimportant. The survey instrument was pretested with three subjects in order to test the quality of the measure.

The consistency and reliability of the questionnaire survey instrument was measured by Cronbach's alpha (also known as coefficient alpha), which is the most common estimate of internal consistency of items in a scale. The Cronbach's alpha score for this test was $\alpha = 0.8$ (the range is from 0 to 1), indicating a high level of both consistency and reliability.

Focus groups

Two focus groups were held in the Doctoral Lab of the College of Information and Computer Science (CICS) at Long Island University (LIU). Eight faculty members were invited in each case; seven participants attended from the CICS faculty, and six from the School of Health Professions and Nursing (SHPN) faculty. The aim was to collect feedback from two different research disciplines in the university, in order to judge any differences between them.

Focus group participants were asked to discuss and evaluate the importance of selected journal characteristics: journal impact factor, appropriateness of the subject content of the journal, knowledge of the editors and editorial board members, frequency of publication, holdings in the university's libraries, online availability. In the course of this discussion, a range of interpretations arose of the importance of these attributes; however, no new attributes were proposed by the participants. Each focus group lasted about 60 minutes.

Interviews

At the end of the focus group, subjects were asked to sign up if they were willing to participate in face-to-face interviews. A total of five in-depth interviews (two with CICS and three with SHPN subjects) were conducted a few days after the focus groups to discuss the quality attributes in greater depth. Each interviewee was asked to describe the process that he or she followed from research phase to article submission, and when and why a journal was considered. The interviews focused on understanding when in the research process a journal is considered, and why. Each face-to-face interview lasted about 45 minutes.

Findings

Both descriptive and inferential statistics were employed to analyze the data from the survey questionnaire. The CICS group consisted of four females and three males; the SHPN group had four females and two males. The CICS group consisted of four professors, two associate professors, and one assistant professor, while the SHPN group had three professors, one associate professor, one assistant professor, and one other. Six of the CICS subjects were tenured and one non-tenured faculty; the SHPN group had four tenured and two non-tenured participants.

The last 'demographic' question asked approximately how many peer-reviewed journal publications they had authored (or co-authored) since 2000. The results are shown in Table 2.

The next part of the questionnaire asked respondents to rate each of the 16 attributes from 1 = very unimportant to 5 = very important. Tables 3 and 4 show respectively the CICS and SHPN faculty rankings.

CICS faculty rated reputation as most important (M = 4.57). Time to publication (M = 4.43), impact factor (M = 4.29) and readership (M = 4.29) follow. On the other hand, availability of online tools is the least important attribute (M = 2.71), closely followed by society publication (M = 3.00). Price and rejection rate (M = 3.29) are also relatively less important.

SHPN participants rated readership as the most important (M = 4.67), followed by previous experience with the journal and reputation (M = 4.50). The SHPN focus group, like the CICS group, rated price (M

the aim was to collect feedback from two different research disciplines

Table 2. Number of peer-reviewed publications since 2000

	None	1–2	3–5	6–10	>10
CICS	0	2	2	2	1
SHPN	1	3	1	0	1

Table 3. CICS faculty ratings of attributes

	n	Minimum	Maximum	Mean (M)	Standard deviation
Reputation	7	4	5	4.57	0.535
Time to publication	7	3	5	4.43	0.787
Impact factor	7	4	5	4.29	0.488
Readership	7	3	5	4.29	0.951
Open access	7	3	5	4.14	0.690
Colleague recommendation	7	3	5	4.14	0.690
Journal online	7	1	5	4.00	1.414
Copyright	7	2	5	3.86	1.069
Previous experience	7	3	5	3.86	0.900
Editorial board	7	1	5	3.71	1.380
Design	7	2	5	3.71	0.951
Publisher	7	3	4	3.57	0.535
Price	7	1	4	3.29	1.113
Rejection rate	7	3	4	3.29	0.488
Society-published	7	1	5	3.00	1.414
Online tools	7	1	4	2.71	1.254

although the two focus groups represent different disciplines, they show strong similarities

= 3.17) as the least important attribute, followed by the specific publisher (M = 3.50), and publication by a society (M = 4.00).

Figure 1 presents each group's rankings by attribute. Although the two focus groups represent different disciplines, they show strong similarities regarding most of the quality characteristics studied.

The primary purpose of the statistical analysis was to find out if there were any significant differences in the perception of journal quality between respondents. A

Table 4. SHPN faculty ratings of attributes

	n	Minimum	Maximum	Mean (M)	Standard deviation
Readership	6	3	5	4.67	0.816
Reputation	6	3	5	4.50	0.837
Past experience	6	4	5	4.50	0.548
Journal online	6	3	5	4.33	0.816
Online tools	6	4	5	4.33	0.516
Colleague recommendation	6	3	5	4.33	1.033
Time to publish	6	2	5	4.33	1.211
Design	6	3	5	4.17	0.753
Open access	6	3	5	4.17	0.983
Copyright	6	3	5	4.17	0.753
Editorial board	6	3	5	4.17	0.753
Rejection rate	6	3	5	4.00	0.632
Impact factor	6	2	5	4.00	1.095
Society-published	6	3	5	4.00	0.632
Publisher	6	3	4	3.50	0.548
Price	6	2	5	3.17	0.983

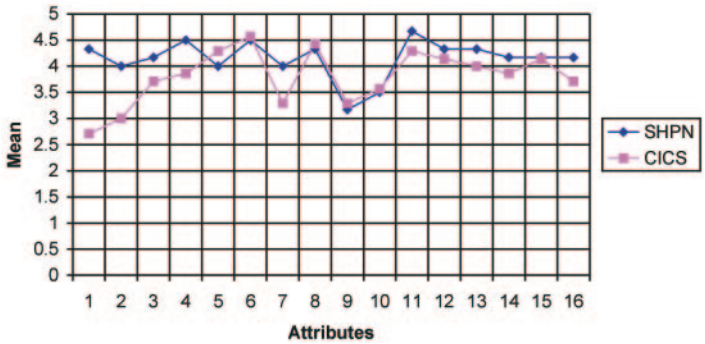

Figure 1. Ranking by group and attribute.

one-tail *t*-test was used to compare the two groups by discipline (CICS vs. SHPN), gender (male vs. female), and rank (tenured vs. not tenured).

The CICS and SHPN groups were significantly different in respect of two quality attributes: the availability of online manuscript tools was rated significantly higher by SHPN than by CICS faculty ($P = 0.013$); SHPN rated rejection rate significantly higher than CICS faculty ($P = 0.042$). (The *P*-value represents the degree to which a certain result is a chance event; $P < 0.05$ is the most widely accepted value for statistical significance.)

Male and female participants differed significantly on three quality attributes: availability of online manuscript tools, colleague recommendation, and society publisher. In each case, females rated the significance of these attributes higher than males.

male and female participants differed significantly on three quality attributes

Tenured and non-tenured participants differed significantly on only one attribute: copyright restrictions. Tenured faculty rated copyright restrictions significantly higher than non-tenured faculty ($P = 0.023$).

Focus group – text analysis

Each of the 16 quality attributes was clearly defined; synonyms were listed in order to be able to capture implicit terms. A simple cod-

Table 5. Text analysis of focus group transcripts

Attribute	CICS	SHPN	Total	Mean
Readership	12	12	24.00	12.000
Time to publication	9	8	17.00	8.500
Reputation	8	8	16.00	8.000
Copyright	8	2	10.00	5.000
Colleague recommendation	8	2	10.00	5.000
Online tools	6	2	8.00	4.000
Journal online	7	1	8.00	4.000
Open access	4	4	8.00	4.000
Impact Factor	4	4	8.00	4.000
Editorial board	2	4	6.00	3.000
Society-published	2	2	4.00	2.000
Publisher	1	1	2.00	1.000
Design	1	1	2.00	1.000
Rejection rate	0	1	1.00	0.500
Price	0	1	1.00	0.500
Previous experience	0	1	1.00	0.500

ing schema was created in Microsoft Excel. The frequency with which each concept occurred in the transcript was then noted and the count was repeated for verification. The results are shown in Table 5.

Interviews

The interviews explored how decisions and journal attributes fit into the subjects' workflow. The following examples illustrate some typical questions used to initiate this discussion:

- When do you start thinking about journals?
- To how many journals do you consider submitting your article?
- How do you think about journals at different points of research process?

The five subjects interviewed identified the stage of research at which they began to consider a journal, and the number of journals they were considering at that point. Three stated that when they had the research idea, they already had in mind the names of one to three journals for possible publication of the results. One reported that the name of the journal came up while doing the literature review, while another subject said that the names of two possible journals emerged during the data-collection stage.

only a few characteristics are of critical importance to authors

Ratings of individual attributes

This study reveals that although there are many factors which might constitute journal quality, including the 16 quality characteristics analyzed in this paper, only a few are of critical importance to authors. In this section, each of the 16 attributes is discussed separately and they are then brought together. This leads to identification of the key attributes isolated in this study, which represent the few essential perceived quality attributes for these groups of authors.

Availability of online manuscript tools

Availability of online manuscript tools was ranked least important by CICS participants, but 'somewhat important' to 'very important' by the SHPN group. A similar difference was also found between males and females; females ranked this attribute significantly higher.

The actual online manuscript tool appeared to matter little; one of our CICS participants stated, 'There are no fundamental differences [among different manuscript tools].' This respondent did not think this was an important quality attribute because every journal has to have online manuscript tools in order to keep up with new technologies and the World Wide Web.

Journal published by a society or other non-profit organization

Although this attribute was cited very positively during focus group discussions, the CICS participants rated publication by a society or other non-profit organization as one of the least important quality attributes. It was also one of the least important attributes for SHPN respondents. However, significant statistical difference by gender was found; female subjects rated it significantly higher than males ($P = 0.005$; Male $M = 2.40$, Female $M = 4.13$). One of the subjects summarized the discussion about this attribute as follows: 'It is a plus if it is a society, but not critically significant.'

The editorial board

This attribute was given mid-ranking importance by members of both groups. One of the subjects underlined the importance of an international editorial board by saying: 'Who is on the editorial board and if the names are familiar is also important. If I know the names, I feel like they can understand my words better. Better communication.' Another said: 'Journals have common practices. Variations have more to do with individual reviewers. A good reviewer gives good comments.'

Previous experience with the journal

Previous experience with the journal was one of the top attributes for SHPN subjects, while it was ranked eighth by CICS respondents. Some stated they might not consider a journal again as a publication venue, if they had a bad experience with the review-

ing process; first impressions appear to carry some weight.

Impact factor

There is no doubt that impact factor is still a very important perceived attribute for scientific evaluation. However, most of the subjects stated they did not actively research the official impact factor index. One said: 'I don't look at the numbers [impact factor] but I have a general feeling of which is more highly cited than the other.' However, the CICS subjects ranked it third in order of importance, whereas the SHPN respondents ranked it only 12th.

The reputation of the journal

Overall, this was the most important quality characteristic of a journal. The CICS focus group subjects rated the journal's reputation as the most important quality attribute of all, and the SHPN respondents ranked it second. Most of the subjects also agreed during the interviews upon the importance of a journal's perceived quality (i.e. reputation).

Rejection rate

Neither CICS nor SHPN subjects ranked the journal's rejection rate as an important attribute of journal quality; it was ranked 13th by both groups. However, the ranking was significantly different between the two disciplines (CICS M = 3.29 and SHPN M = 4.00).

Rejection rate was particularly important to non-tenured faculty members of both groups because of their upcoming academic evaluation process. The importance of rejection rate for untenured faculty seems to have more to do with time to publication than the rejection rate itself. Since the number of published peer-reviewed articles is one of the measures for tenure and promotion decisions in universities, our respondents indicated that when they have completed the research they must publish it as soon as possible, if necessary in a journal with lower rejection rate if time to publication is better for that journal.

Length of time to article publication

When a researcher has completed a research paper, as various studies have noted,[2,3,4,13,15] he or she wants to publish it as soon as possible. Naturally, this factor was ranked relatively highly by both focus groups; CICS participants ranked it second and SHPN ranked it seventh. Some of the comments made during the focus groups were: 'You want to publish on time.' 'Time is important.' 'Time is really essential [regarding tenure vs. untenured], a high factor.' 'For non-tenured writers, time is important, because they have to publish.' As our one of our subjects stated, while they are passionate to share their research findings, they don't want to be 'stuck with a long review process'.

Journal price

Neither group saw price as an important quality attribute for a journal. During the focus groups, one of the subjects stated that, 'Price is not important because the library buys it.' Another said 'No, [price is not important] because most people have access through their library.'

The specific publisher of the journal

The importance of the publisher was ranked 12th by CICS, while SHPN ranked it 15th. This is in keeping with a recent study[4] which concluded that most of the quality choices regarding a journal are 'intimately connected with brand identity issues of journals not publishers'.

The readership of the journal

The appropriate readership was rated as the most important quality attribute for a journal by SHPN subjects, while CICS respondents ranked it third. During the focus group discussions, subjects highlighted the fact that, 'If you want to get the idea out there, journals with the right audience make much more sense.' When we asked one of our interview subjects why a particular journal came to his mind to publish his paper, he stated: 'Because more computer people will read [the journal].' He also touched upon the role of that particular journal to reach the right audience with the statement: 'Be-

the reputation of the journal was the most important quality characteristic

cause they are the people you would like to communicate with. . . . The more visibility you get the better.'

Recommendations from colleagues

Colleague recommendation was ranked sixth by both groups. However, females ranked this factor as significantly more important than males.

The availability of the journal online

online discoverability was key

Online availability was relatively important to both groups; it was ranked seventh by CICS and fifth by SHPN. Most participants stated that online discoverability was key. One of the subjects stated: 'I think [disseminating your findings] has changed so much after the Internet'; they want their work to be 'out there'.

Copyright restrictions

Copyright restrictions were somewhat important to each group; they were ranked ninth by CICS and eighth by SHPN. There was a significant difference between tenured and non-tenured subjects, with tenured faculty rating this attribute much higher than non-tenured faculty. Some copyright restrictions limit authors' ability to re-post the author's final manuscript and some of the subjects found this policy a barrier to disseminating their research findings.

Open access, public access and web posting policies of the journal

The CICS subjects ranked the availability of these options sixth in importance. Although the SHPN group mean was similar, they ranked this factor 11th. This attribute was intensely discussed and seemed to receive strong support from our subjects during the focus groups. Some other subjects also touched upon the concept of 'social responsibility' as a positive brand attribute for publishers who practise more liberal open access and public access policies.

Design

CICS subjects ranked production quality (i.e. quality of images, typesetting, etc.) as 11th in importance, while SHPN respondents ranked it ninth. In the SHPN group discussion, quality of images emerged as one of the important components of overall journal quality, since a health science paper may rely heavily on some images.

Summary of findings

In order to try to put these ratings into a single framework, we combined two sets of

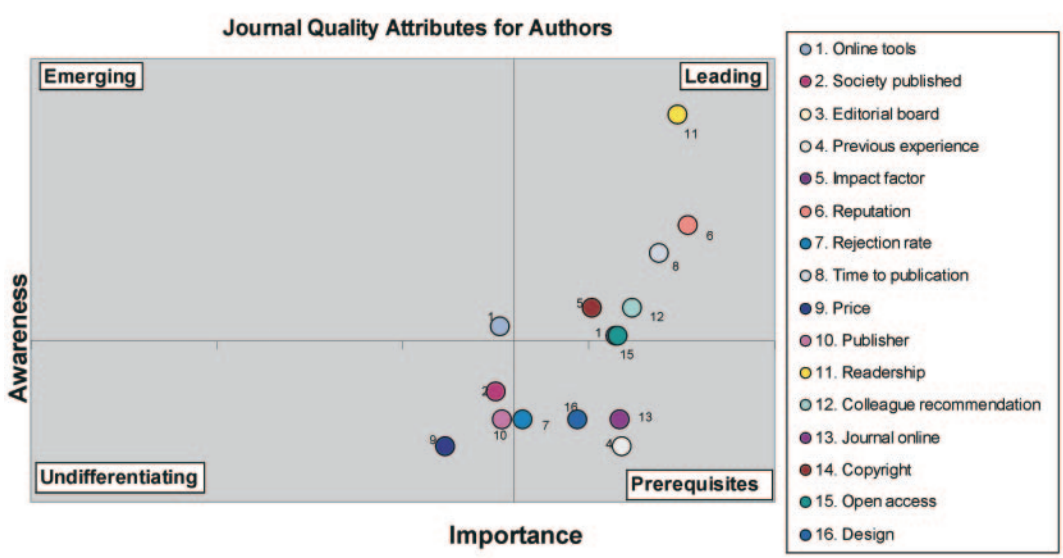

Figure 2. Analysis by attribute importance and awareness.

data: (i) ranking from the questionnaire survey, and (ii) frequency with which concepts were discussed in the focus groups, using content analysis. We plotted each attribute by importance ranking and frequency of discussion (see Figure 2). From this we created the four categories shown in Table 6.

Table 6. Categories of attributes

Profile	Name
Highly Ranked/Highly Discussed	Leading
Highly Ranked/Little Discussed	Prerequisite
Low Ranked/Highly Discussed	Emerging
Low Ranked/Little Discussed	Undifferentiating

continuous innovation in new modes of publishing may be required in future

Using this typology, our study shows that 'leading' attributes are: (1) the reputation of the journal, (2) the estimated length of time to article publication, (3) the readership of the journal, (4) recommendations from colleagues about the journal, (5) copyright restrictions, and (6) open access. Prerequisites are: (1) previous experience with the journal, (2) the rejection rate of the journal, (3) the availability of the journal online, and (4) design (production quality).

There was only one 'emerging' attribute: availability of online manuscript tools.

Perhaps surprisingly, our subjects defined the following characteristics as 'undifferentiating': (1) journal published by a society or other non-profit organization, (2) the price of the journal, and (3) the specific publisher of the journal.

Conclusions

The study identified the following significant differences between cohorts:

1. Discipline (computer science vs. allied health) – there were significant differences for online tools and rejection rate; SHPN ranked both significantly higher than CICS.
2. Gender – there were significant differences for recommendations, online manuscript tools, and society publisher. Females rated all of these notably higher.
3. Tenure – there were significant differences on copyright, which was ranked significantly higher by tenured than by non-tenured faculty.

Overall, the leading quality attributes were: (a) the journal's reputation, (b) the estimated length of time to publication, and (c) the journal's readership. These were closely followed by (d) recommendations from colleagues, (e) copyright restrictions, and (f) open access.

From this explorative study, several lessons may be learned for improving journal quality. Journal publishing is still being driven by some of the same basic values: delivering the right audience (readership), processing articles in a timely fashion, and strong branding and reputation. However, publishers will need to develop new ways of promoting their online content, such as social networking features (to generate recommendations from colleagues). Copyright policy changes to adapt to new technologies, and open access, also seem to be of some importance to researchers. Perhaps most importantly, continuous innovation in new modes of publishing, as well as tools for ever timelier processing, may be required in future to continue to build reputation and brand loyalty.

Recommendations for further study

The aim of the study was to understand the perceived quality characteristics of STM journals by studying selected faculty members at LIU. Although our results cannot be generalized due to the small sample size used in the study, they give an analytical picture of journal quality characteristics for a representative academic group.

Further research would be beneficial in two ways. Firstly, it would be valuable to expand the coverage of the research, including more subjects from a wider range of disciplines and geographical locations in order to test for the replicability of the findings and to discover any other significant differences across the research community.

Secondly, given the importance of the Web in some of the leading attributes or in the discussions, future research providing better understanding of the implications of Web 2.0 tools for scholarly publishing, particularly for STM journals, could be highly useful. In particular, prospective authors

want to collaborate in new and emerging platforms on the Net; as Larry Sanger[22] stated at the 2007 Society for Scholarly Publishing Annual Meeting, 'strongly collaborative systems, such as Wikipedia and Citizendum, are surprisingly productive'. Similar points were made by several of our subjects. Thus, it seems publishers will need to provide collaborative communication platforms for their stakeholders and further expand journal capabilities to accommodate the growing expectations of researchers on the Web.

publishers will need to provide collaborative communication platforms for their stakeholders

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