

Some Thoughts on Beyond the Paper

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Today the journal *Nature* has released a special on the Future of Publishing. It includes a lot of interesting reading, but I want to focus on the comment Beyond the Paper by Jason Priem. In the comment Jason describes his vision of the future of scholarly communication, a future where many of today's roles for articles and journals will be replaced by the *decoupled journal* and online tools taking the lead in dissemination and filtering of scholarly content.

Jason makes a strong case for this vision, and takes his time to also discuss the concerns and challenges. He doesn't have the space to discuss in more detail how we get to that future, and in particular what the role of researchers, publishers, libraries and funders be in that transition.

Jason's vision will probably be overwhelming for many researchers, and might not directly address what is probably the biggest issue for most researchers: funding for grants and jobs is limited, and the processes we use to select for good science and good scientists are inefficient and often arbitrary. Most students entering graduate school will not be able to have a career in academia, and most academics will say that they spend far too much time with evaluations – of their own work and the work of others. It is unclear to me how we can get from the current system – where one misstep such as denied grant or submission to the wrong journal can mean the end of a career – to the system that Jason envisions. The current climate doesn't really foster experimentation by researchers and I am interested to understand how researchers can take part in this process of change.

The vision of the decoupled journal is very threatening for some of the stakeholders of the current scholarly communication ecosystem, in particular publishers and libraries. Every journal publisher and library knows that it has to reinvent itself to survive the digital transformation, but a vision that is build around a new ecosystem of service providers needs to be clear how publishers and libraries can be part of the transformation process.

Lastly, I disagree with the notion that *today's publication silos will be replaced by a set of decentralized, interoperable services that are built on a core infrastructure of open data and evolving standards — like the Web itself*. I would argue that both scholarly communication and the web in general have a tendency for

centralization, and that scientific infrastructure needs to be interoperable first and decentralized second. Without a focus on interoperability the future of scholarly communication will not be open and in the hands of many, but will be a race to become one of the dominant players in this new ecosystem, and we might end up with not 1000s of libraries and publishers but just a handful of technology companies holding the keys to our scientific infrastructure.

References

Priem, J. (2013). Scholarship: Beyond the paper *Nature*, 495 (7442), 437-440
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