



# Bookshelf

**Brian Cox**

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## **What Authors Want. The ALPSP research study on the motivations and concerns of contributors to learned journals**

Alison Swan and Sheridan Brown

*Key Perspectives Ltd. Worthing, The Association of Learned and Professional Society Publishers, 1999 (Obtainable from John Morris, ALPSP, South House, Clapham, Worthing, West Sussex, BN13 3UU. Spiral bound. £100/\$200)*

In 1993 the Royal Society, the British Library and the Association of Learned and Professional Society Publishers (ALPSP) published the results of a study of the STM system in the UK that gave particular attention to the needs of the users of the system. The information was largely gathered by means of questionnaires completed by library users and librarians, and set out the problems facing librarians, publishers and library users at that time, and was mainly concerned with the future of the academic library.

The present study is different, in that it was aimed to identify the needs of authors, as distinct from library users, and determine whether these were being met by the current publishing system. This is important, for in the cut and thrust of debate of the future of the academic journal and the financing of libraries, the interests of the humble academic author tend to be overlooked. Further, the survey covered the humanities as well as the sciences and was international in scope. In organising the survey, ALPSP set out to determine the main motivations of authors in publishing their work, the factors that led them to publish in their favoured journals, the existence of any particular concerns among authors about the publishing process, and the views of authors over the future of journal publishing.

Initially, the research steering committee drew up a list of 38 co-operative publishers prepared to send out questionnaires to their authors and then selected a broad range of journals, aiming to reflect the numbers of journals published in the main areas of research, and to ensure the inclusion of as many top-ranking journals as possible. Evidently much effort was devoted to the drafting of the survey and the final questionnaire emerged at the end of considerable discussion and feedback from selected authors who saw preliminary drafts. Ultimately, 10,970 authors were canvassed, with 40% of them in North America, 40% in Western Europe, 10% in Australia and New Zealand, and 10% in India, South Africa and Latin America. There were 3218 replies, representing a response rate of 29.3%, which was very good, and 90.5% of respondents came from university or research institutions. Interestingly, 463 questionnaires were completed online.

Many of the findings match expectation, in that the most important objective in publishing a paper was communication with peers, listed by 33.1% of respondents, followed by career advancement (22.1%), and personal prestige (8.5%). Publication with the aim of securing continued funding (8.3%) was a significant consideration for scientists, but much less so for the arts (2%). In looking at the factors important to authors in achieving their objectives, communication to the widest possible audience came top at 65%, publication in high impact journals (58.1%) next, closely followed by quality of peer review (57.8%). The desirability of peer review is often questioned because of the cost and effort involved, so it is reassuring to see this process featured by the authors. When the

authors were asked whether they were satisfied about the working of the peer review process, 69.5% were very satisfied or satisfied and only 1.3% very dissatisfied. Upon digging deeper into the reasons for dissatisfaction, the main one (8.2%) was delay in publication produced by the referee, followed by superficial reviews (5.4%) and unnecessarily hostile reviews (5.2%). There was little difference between the arts and sciences in these respects.

Many other aspects of the publication process were explored in this study, with two being of particular interest to the library community: the impact factor and copyright. Perhaps because of the research assessment exercise in the UK and similar evaluations elsewhere, 30.7% of authors always checked the impact factor of a journal before submitting a paper to it, while another 39.5% sometimes did this. However, in deciding whether to submit a paper to a journal the reputation of the journal mattered more to authors overall (41.5%) than the impact factor (16.8%). This distinction was sustained whether the author came from the sciences or the arts. A sizeable minority (15.0%) never looked at the impact factor because they did not know where to find the information.

Copyright is important to all authors, but no burning issues were uncovered. When authors were asked about the factors seen as obstacles in achieving publication, only 1% noted difficulties in reaching agreement with publishers over rights. Publication delays (45.4%), the peer review process (17.6%), and the requirement to submit to only one journal at a time (10.3%) were far more significant. Upon being asked specifically about the various ways of handling copyright, 38.1% were content with the transfer of copyright to the publisher, 38.0% preferred to grant full publishing rights to the publisher while retaining the copyright, and 23.4% wished to retain the copyright while granting limited publishing rights to the publisher. There is evidently a diversity of view.

General contentment with the current publication system was indicated by the 69.6% of respondents who considered that the scholarly publishing system should continue more or less in its present form. No opinion was expressed by 11.8%, and 11.5% wanted change, with the use of electronic publishing alongside a rapid peer

review system favoured in 50.8% of the replies.

This is not the place to go over the report and its findings in detail, but enough has been written to indicate the scope and depth of its findings, and to provide a taster for the reader. The questionnaires and the summarised responses to them provide much material for contemplation by librarians and publishers alike, and provide a valuable research tool. Are there any caveats? Yes, one: I would have liked some statistical analysis of the findings, if only of a preliminary nature.

Bernard Donovan  
Maney Publishing

### **A Guide to Finding Quality Information on the Internet – selection and evaluation strategies.**

Alison Cooke

*Library Association Publishing, (March) 1999. 176 pages  
ISBN: 1856042677*

The growing size and importance of the Internet in our daily lives brings with it growing problems. How do we find the information we need, and how can we be sure we can trust the information that we find? Searching skills are covered by many writers, most of whom mention evaluating only as a sub-topic. This book brings the crucial skill of evaluation up to its proper position in the list of skills required by effective information professionals.

This book approaches the process of evaluation from several directions. An introductory chapter explains the background to the topic, followed by a chapter which explains thoroughly how effective searching maximises the retrieval of quality information. As the author, Alison Cooke, takes the reader through various styles of searching – index, directory, gateway and metasearch – she highlights the potential problems with each one both in terms of information retrieval and evaluation of the resources retrieved.

At the end of the chapter on searching, the author uses the first of many checklists. It is these checklists that give the book real usability by the non-academic searcher. Providing a simple list of features, issues or questions enables the novice user to extend skills and awareness, whilst reminding the expert of key areas of concern.

The third chapter covers assessing the quality of

an information source. Coverage, authority, accuracy, currency, accessibility, presentation, ease of use and overall quality are all examined with an accompanying checklist. As well as providing an aide-memoire, the checklists offer an opportunity for the reader to conduct almost a dialogue with the book. Looking at the checklist and answering the questions allows the opportunity to test the hypotheses offered by the author. Are they exhaustive? Can they be answered at all? Is there a 'correct' answer? The answer is almost certainly no in most cases – rather, they provided the starting point for developing a critical approach to everything found on the Internet.

The fourth and final chapter looks at evaluating particular types of sources. These include organisational, personal and subject-based Web sites as well as FTP, Telnet, Email and Newsgroup resources. Again a checklist for each item provides not only a reminder of the method, but also a reminder that different sources and media require different evaluative methods.

Extensive references and an annotated bibliography both reveal the academic underpinning of the book – it is the topic of the

author's PhD research – and provide the basis for further use of the book as a teaching and training support tool – whether self-teaching, or for others. Exhaustively researched and clearly presented, the author has provided an accessible guide to one of the essential skills of the information professional – the ability to find, assess and select information sources in a methodical and reliable manner. This book should find its way on to the bookshelf of all who intend to use the Internet as a credible information source in the course of their work or study.

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(Originally published on the Free Pint website and  
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Mark Kerr is centre manager of London ASPECT, a DTI-funded Local Support Centre based at South Bank University giving advice, support and training to small and medium sized businesses as they seek to compete in the new electronic trading environment.. Further details can be found at <http://www.sbu.ac.uk/aspect/> and <http://www.sbu.ac.uk/training/>.

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