

Re: Article: Scientists get their own Google

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From: Tomasso (tom_at_r.so.com)

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"Tom Roberts" <tjroberts@lucent.com> wrote:

> *Tomasso wrote:*

>> *Of course in scholarship you "should" cover all original sources, but*

>> *typically only notables are included. To do that, you either go to*

>> *the library or pay a fortune in download fees.*

>

> *Of course most real scientists have an affiliation with a university,*

> *laboratory, or corporation that subscribes to the major scientific*

> *journals, and can download articles from most journal websites without*

> *paying any additional fee.*

[Warning – bit of a rant below. But worth a read, IMHO. Free, too].

Yes, Tom, you can say things like that, but there are serious gaps in the provision of articles to real, working scientists. I was an academic for 13 years, and for about 10 years, I administered the library budget for my half of a Faculty (it was Maths + Comp Sci). One of my PhDs even went to work at Lucent!

So how good is the journal coverage in most university libraries? Well, in this country (Australia), the decisions are usually about which six to cut (per discipline) THIS year. Yes, there was budget for subscriptions, but only a handful of people bothered (because of the complications or time). The frequent way to get copies was to ask a friend to send a photocopy. This needed a good collection of "mates" around the planet.

I regularly had to use inter-library loans, rely on friends, get "pay per paper" downloads, often to find that the author did little justice to the subject and made a small contribution not relevant to my (current) work. I even had some grant budget to play with...

Is the story the same elsewhere? At other Australian universities, it is. And when I was at SoCal (USC) on Sabbatical, the library coverage was pretty good, but it still fell short. UK? Well colleagues say similar to Australia...

And corporations? "Major journals"? Etc? One major concern is that the hunt for the elusive articles often reveals half a dozen or more pieces of drivel for each valuable item. The half dozen are pumped out (often re-cycled)

in the pursuit of tenure or promotion by someone employed as a scientist, but spending more time priming the pump than pushing the limit. It's no secret.

[Am I bitter? Well no, and I was involved in several research groups and "communities" where progress was the focus, and hard questions were the challenge. I'm not real happy about the amount of activity, the volume of paper, and the cashflow, etc that was basically contributing little to anything "scientific". I appreciate the good work and well-written stuff].

So, why whinge? Well, I think the free (reviewed) journals (espec web) are the way of the future. It's not a cause created by penny pinching skinflints like me, it's a matter of rationalising the content and flow of scientific communication.

Also the Third World has been starved of content, and that "Third World" in this sense, includes countries like Britain, Australia, Canada, etc (but probably not Singapore). It even covers great slabs of the US.

One of my PhD students was a great investigator, but a poor (unmotivated) writer. I said to him, more than once, that it's "not science, till it's out there for people to read and digest". If readership is filtered by cost, there's even a problem in my message to him.

The converse doesn't necessarily follow. There is plenty of material out there which isn't really science (even though the content is "scientific").

A lot of people understand these problems, but still participate in the system. Let's talk about it again in five years.

Tomasso.

PS: I left academia six years ago (hey, it's six years in 3 days), and have been testing my ideas and methods with some of the biggest corporations on the planet, and some smaller ones, all interested in being able to do things they couldn't formerly do, and overcome problems by having more insights and better, usable information than before. I read heavily (including papers that cost money), and a university library 10 minutes walk from my home. I've decided I'm not really a hierarchies person, so academic games and large corporations don't take up much of my time.