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## Reports of Meetings

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### Empires of the mind: inventing the future of scholarly publishing

*SSP 30th annual meeting, Boston, 28-30 May 2008*

The 30th annual meeting of the Society for Scholarly Publishing ([www.sspnet.org](http://www.sspnet.org)) in Boston was well attended—almost 800 delegates turned up at the Westin Copley Place to participate in an extensive two-day conference programme (not including the pre-meeting seminars) consisting of three plenaries; 16 parallel sessions of 90 minutes each, featuring panels of three to four experts; 13 luncheon roundtable discussions organised around topics covered in the sessions; and a lively exhibition featuring 38 booths.

Two keynote speakers looked at publishing's past to find possible clues for conceptualising and predicting its future. Alex Wright, an information architect at the *New York Times*, opened proceedings with "The deep history of the information age", trying to find clues in past periods of transition that were characterised by disruptive new publishing technology for how the information age may unfold in the future, and the publishing industry with it. The third plenary speaker, Pattie Maes, an associate professor in MIT's programme in media arts and sciences, focused entirely on the future in her talk, "Just-in-time information". She featured some interesting technological developments that try to integrate information more closely into people's physical lives so as to make accessing it less disruptive than it is at the moment—for example, electronic sticky notes that can send electronic messages to electronic media.

The closing plenary lecture, "The authenticity engine", by Adrian Johns, history professor in Chicago, reflected on historical developments in book publishing, which he interpreted as a "history of endeavours to authenticate both a technological culture of communication and the products of that culture." Amusingly, he framed his lecture with a Hannibal Lecter question from the film *The Silence of the Lambs*: "What is it in itself and of itself?" to move from Galileo and about half a dozen other carefully selected examples to the present and possibly the future.

The two days in between contained sessions that touched on just about any subject area that is relevant to scholarly publishing today: green issues; multimedia content, new business models, and working in global markets; tagging, taxonomies, and folksonomies; accessibility and archiving; search engine visibility and reference resource discovery; blogging and online communities; marketing copyright issues; and even dropping print completely.

The session in which I participated as a speaker and panellist was entitled "Building a better blog—value added or just another distraction?" Jane Hiebert-White from US health policy journal *Health Affairs* was the first speaker and covered much common ground in terms of setting up regular blogs, blogging software and web administration, staffing issues, guest bloggers, blog content, and how to

use blogs to drive article usage. I then gave a historical tour through the *BMJ*'s attempts at getting blogs up and running, describing how we went from next to nothing to almost daily blog updates from guest bloggers within a mere three months after implementing a new blogging strategy and actively recruiting opinion leaders in medicine as bloggers ("Comment is free, and everybody is welcome"). The third speaker, David Crotty, executive editor of *Cold Spring Harbor Protocols*, presented a different model. As the "voice of the organisation", he has his own blog, Bench Marks, on [www.cshprotocols.com](http://www.cshprotocols.com), and focuses on laboratory methods or Web 2.0 issues. All three of us agreed that blogs are time consuming, for writers as well as administrators, and if blogs are to succeed as a form of user generated content then resourcing and strategy are important considerations.

Other sessions I attended included "New content and business models in the new publishing world order", with an excellent panel that suggested many ideas on how to adapt to shifting content models and make money from their web offerings in the new publishing world order. iTunes, online books, and content aggregators were among the topics discussed in this session.

One of Friday morning's sessions, aptly entitled "Copyright 2.0—the agony and the ecstasy", gave insights into one of the probably most unsettled areas in publishing at the moment. New technology enables just about anyone to misappropriate someone else's content and repurpose it without any identification of its origin—for example, by placing a "widget" (one of the buzzwords at the conference) on their site. Discovering such a "theft" would not be easy and probably more a happy accident.

Another Friday morning session, "Interactive marketing and advertising: when the web gets personal", (re)familiarised the auditorium with personalised offers, packages, and recommendations that retailers such as Amazon use with great success. Using automation to create a more personal user experience was the fascinating paradox, and the speakers included a publisher, a marketing expert, and a speaker from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation in Europe, with the OECD website as a case study.

I very much regretted not being able to attend more of the sessions, but they were incredibly rich in detail, and drifting in and out did not seem a good idea for fear of missing something important. In spite of this minor niggle, a compliment to the organisers for compiling such an interesting programme.

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