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Scholarly societies partly to blame for post-truth age?

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Reading the reactionary defense of the digital stone age in AAAS' flagship magazine *Science*, I felt reminded of the now infamous "Make American Science Great Again" letter to Trump and all the other public statements by scholarly societies over the last 30 years on how this internet thing is a threat to their revenue and hence must be opposed.

The development of the internet by scholarly institutions should have been the opening bell for a broader thought process within scholarly societies of how this new technology may revolutionize scholarly discourse. After all, the purpose and mission of scholarly societies is the building and maintenance of communities and fields of study. Nobody was more aware of that than Henry Oldenburg when he founded the first scientific journal for his society in 1665, the "Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society". Granted, with the journal lagging the invention of movable type and the Gutenberg-type printing technology by about 200 years, Oldenburg wasn't really taking advantage of what one would call modern technology, but his Royal Society was only founded in 1660, so he clearly reacted quickly to the needs of his members.

The same cannot be said of his successors in today's many scholarly societies. Prioritizing revenue, it was not lost to them that technologies such as email and browsers would allow them to copy their mail and journal distributions onto a digital format, at huge savings. Judging from their public messaging since then, for the exact same financial reasons, they have refused to invest even the smallest amount of innovation or progressive thought into what broader opportunities internet technology might provide for their mission going forward. Instead, it looks as if all of that intellectual energy flowed into conserving outdated concepts and demonizing digital progress into a threat for every scholarly society's revenue. For nearly three decades now, scholarly societies, collectively, appear to have been preoccupied with looking back, at the expense of looking forward. Not even after 2006, when the term "social media" should have provided an etymological prompt even for the dimmest of professional "society" administrators, was there a change of direction. Apparently, the best some of our societies can do these days is installing forum technology from the late 1990s and call it "community".

Much has been written about the consequences this reactionary attitude has had on the public accessibility of the scholarship these societies have been publishing. Here, I would like to speculate on perhaps much more pernicious consequences.

Ever since the infamous "Flame Wars" in the Usenet/Newsgroups of the 1990s (and probably already before that), one aspect of online discourse had become obvious for nearly any user: online discourse can (and sometimes inevitably will) escalate rapidly into one that nobody would call 'civil' any more. Passionate debate is something scholars have been actively participating in and contributing to for centuries. From early rivalries of 'gentleman' scientists, via back-and-forth publications of journal articles, editorials or commentaries to later antagonism between authors, editors and reviewers, there have been numerous and varied occasions for learning how to pursue reasoned discourse in a productive, scholarly way. It is impossible to predict which direction online discourse would have taken, or which functionalities current social media would have implemented, had scholarly societies perceived

online discourse as an opportunity for their mission rather than a threat to their revenue. With scholarly communication far from being perfect, it is also not clear whether academics ever were in any position to claim superior knowledge. However, it also seems unlikely that early, systematic and competent engagement by scholarly communities with the goal to facilitate scholarly discourse in a way that minimizes the chances of escalation and radicalization could never have changed the course of history in any conceivable way.

Looking back 30 years, it is difficult the escape the impression that civic discourse has become less civil. The road from alternative facts to online mobs to death threats and real world political violence and bloodshed has shortened significantly. Radicalization of large sections of voters and a more general drifting apart of political positions over time is not specific to the internet age, but it appears to be facilitated by social media giving marginal groups or ideas an audience they lacked before. The capability of bringing marginal ideas to a broader audience cuts both ways: ideas that modern society benefits from can be amplified just as much as those it thought it had better left in the dustbin of history. Scholarly debate is all about deciding which hypotheses and theories should be kept and pursued and which should be abandoned. Sifting facts from alternative facts and how to bring the former to prominence and the latter into obscurity is a problem that could have tackled 30 years ago, if the new internet had been a focus of thought for the societies who claim to exist to foster scholarly communication, rather than use scholars to generate revenue to pay their staff. In order to be productive, all scholarly discussions need to be as passionate as necessary to be engaging and thought-provoking, but also as civil as possible to not provoke anger and aggression. Individual personalities vary and this topic comes up in various online discussions time and again, but collectively it appears there is a fairly broad Goldilocks zone of scholarly discourse where most scholars feel welcome, comfortable and discussions are productive.

So while nobody can know how civic discourse would look today had scholarly societies leaned less to the green, I'd argue that at least now, 30 years later, would be a good time to stop, take pause and think hard if the luddite path really is the one scholarly societies want to keep marching on. Personally, I'd go even further: I blame the majority of our scholarly societies that in these past three decades they have put their revenue before their mission. This perverse prioritization has not only hampered scholarly communication in general and the accessibility of scholarly articles specifically, it has also caused the scholarly community to miss a window of opportunity where it could have had an outsize influence on civic society at large by influencing the means and rules of communication. Some may argue that this paints an exaggerated picture of an actually very limited influence of the scholarly community beyond academia, but given the role these institutions played in developing the internet, I fear such arguments may be motivated by the desire to deflect responsibility. It is my impression that the collective digital torpor of academia, especially after it had implemented the internet, leaving the reins to corporations and political activists, is partly to blame for the way things are online today. In other words, is it possible that, if scholarly societies had not been so preoccupied with defending their revenue at all costs, they could have been able to assume a central role in the development of social technologies and help shape the way they operate?

This last aspect deserves a final paragraph. The large, influential societies have traditionally replied that their revenue is important either for their mission in general, or for their ECR services, their lobbyism or any of their other activities. Looking at the political situation in the leading scientific nations of the world today and beyond, it appears that very early investment of intellectual energy into the means and rules of public discourse and how to facilitate productive reasoning and rationality, at a time when they were still in their digital infancy, would possibly have accomplished more than all the dollars, euros and pounds poured into campaigns, political lobbyism or awareness weeks combined. As such, scholarly societies have not only failed their members and scholarship writ large, they have also missed a golden opportunity to maybe help make also the world outside of academia a little bit more evidence-based.