

Scholarly societies: like a cat chasing the laser dot



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You may have seen a neutered version of this post over at the [LSE blog](#). This post below, however, puts the tiger in the tank, as it was enhanced by CatGPT:

Maybe scholarly societies have taken “the instruction “follow the money!” a tad too literally? There now are [societies](#) that make 83% of their nearly US\$ 700 million in revenue from publishing (American Chemical Society). Or 88% of US\$130 million (American Psychological Association). Or 91% of US\$5 million (Biochemical Society). In essence, societies like these (there are hundreds, especially in STEM fields) are publishers first and societies second (or fifth). One could be forgiven if one imagined their business meetings involved chanting, “Publish or Perish” while stacking green taller than a Himalayan cat tower. But wait, there’s more! Some of these organizations even side with corporate publishers against scholarship, e.g., when [litigating against](#) organizations or individuals striving to make research more accessible, or when [begging](#) wannabe-authoritarian rulers to protect their archaic, parasitic business models. Can it still be considered ethical to charge multiples of the publication costs of an article in order to finance executive salaries, subsidize member dues, sponsor prizes, host all-you-can-drink receptions at annual meetings or pay lawyers to ensure nobody can read the works of your scholars? Who needs scholarly integrity when you can have lucrative deals and lawyers on speed dial?

This cat-astrophic prioritization becomes even more absurd if one researches the role such societies have played in purr-suing their primary mission as ‘societies’: supporting scholars in making connections to like-minded individuals, exchanging ideas and promoting their respective fields of scholarly interest – in short ‘socializing’. For some of these ‘societies’ their mission apparently involves as much of such scholarly socializing as a hermit cat on a deserted island. There is a reason these organizations were called “societies” before they became publishers. The root of their names contains their essential function, as [described](#) in 1660 for one of the first such societies, the Royal Society: “Their first purpose was no more, then onely the satisfaction of breathing a freer air, and of conversing in quiet one with another, without being ingag’d in the passions, and madness of that dismal Age”. And isn’t it ironic that these very *societies*, born in an era of intellectual enlightenment, seem to have missed the memo about social media’s advent over 15 years ago? Were they chasing cash like a cat the laser dot or were they too busy debating the financial advantages of ink and parchment versus parchment and ink?

Is it possible that maybe one reason these scholarly societies missed the social media boat, is that their noses were buried too deep in financial spreadsheets to realize that there was a technology in the making that not only was about to transform the way their mission was going to be supported, but even shared the root of their names? Shouldn’t these bastions of scholarship, if they truly cared, have embraced FriendFeed or Facebook in their kittenhood back then? But why stir the litterbox, when there’s a chance it might disrupt the cash flow? Maybe many felt the threat such [#icanhazpdf](#)-technology may pose to their bottom line so acutely, they failed to envisage the opportunities it provided for their members? Was one reason why there was no huge movement from within the scholarly societies to be involved in the development of technology so central to the *raison d’être* of societies, that not enough of them

actually cared sufficiently about scholarship any more? Each scholarly society is different and many have more or less belatedly embraced social technologies in one way or another now. However, it appears as if this engagement has only rarely exceeded the use of corporate platforms as broadcasting tools, rather than as a social technology that encourages, promotes and protects social interactions among scholars and with the general public.

Today, we have technology that allows scholarly societies to make good on past mistakes and show their true colors: the ‘fediverse’ provides tools and technologies that are ideally suited to finally bring scholarly societies out of their digital caves and into the 21st century. One of these is Mastodon, a decentralized social technology. While some scholarly institutions, including some societies, have started to implement their own Mastodon instances, the large majority still appear as as bewildered as a cat presented with a Rubik’s cube, struggling with their favorite corporate broadcasting platform formerly known as Twitter now having devolved into a racist misinformation cesspit.

Scholarly societies that take their mission and role for scholarship seriously have developed a keen understanding of social technologies, are using them not just for broadcasting but for scholarly exchange and to facilitate social interactions such as debate, discussion and critique among all persons interested in their research, not just their dues-paying members. The different local and federated timelines in Mastodon allow seamless interactions both within the society and outside of it, federation choices enable societies to choose which content perfectly matches their instance and they become the moderators of their own social media presence, instead of having to rely on the whims of billionaires. Where are the societies that see this opportunity in giving, e.g., marginalized groups within scholarship a voice in a town square protected by scholarly rules? Rather than being relegated to obedient mice for AdTech-based surveillance platforms, societies now have the opportunity (again!) to become the designers of a new kind of digital scholarship while at the same time contributing to protecting the privacy of scholars. Due to the open source nature of the Fediverse and the widespread digital competence in the scholarly community, there is ample potential for societies to take a central role in developing a new scholarly commons and integrate this social layer into the more formal literature as part of the “open, interoperable, not-for-profit infrastructures” the Council of the EU science ministers has [recently](#) called for.

Of course, their handling of social technology is just a litmus test for how seriously a learned society is taking its role in our modern world and what perspective it has taken with regard to scholarship more generally. It appears as if scholarly societies that are still genuinely interested in pursuing their core mission are as elusive as finding Schrödinger’s cat both inside and outside its box simultaneously. Instead, the majority seem more concerned with securing and protecting sufficient publication income to maintain five, six figure salaries for their execs.

So, to the scholarly societies out there, here’s a challenge: step up, embrace Mastodon (and any of the other cool fediverse options like peertube, owncast, writefreely, hubzilla, etc.), and give those faux-societies a run for their money. Show us you’re all about scholarship, not just financial catnip!

