Quality communication: is there a best practice for all library publishing programs?

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Abstract

Communication with editors and journal managers in a library publishing program looks different across all institutions. Each library publishing program differs in the amount of staff and support they have, so the amount of time available to spend overseeing each journal publication and communicating with their editors also varies. Library publishers have the additional challenge of working with both traditional publications and bespoke or otherwise explorative publications with less defined measurements of success and quality. Student-run journals or faculty journals that do not publish on a specific schedule, for example, are important for library publishing programs to support, but they pose specific challenges when it comes to editor communication and discussions of quality. At Penn State, our solution is to publish with two levels for our journal publications, a “Supported” and “Imprint” level, which allows us to differentiate between these publication types. With these levels, new journals are able to move up in support after we discern their publishing quality and timeliness. Other library programs do not differentiate between these publications and support all of them in similar ways. However, neither framework defines how often communication with each editor should be made, and thus editors are often only communicated with when a problem arises on their end, rather than with consistent follow up and guidance from the library publisher. I would like to suggest that a method of consistent communication is necessary for all types of publications, even if the application looks different across library publishing programs with different levels of staff and support. This paper and the discussion at the IFLA SIG on Library Publishing highlights some important differences between library and commercial publishers, and identifies some questions that library publishers should be asking to help formulate a method and model for communicating with editors, which can be adapted to work for all types of library publisher.

Keywords: Quality communication; Library publishing; Best practice.

Background

The main question that sparked this discussion and paper has to do with communication between those running a library publishing program and the editors that they serve. How much is enough, and what content should be covered? The landscape of library publishing is quite diverse, and the amount of resources that each can devote to this varies quite a bit. However, the need to communicate and receive feedback from editors remains an important aspect of library publishing, and is in need of further discussion for best ways that this communication can be carried out in all library publishing programs.
To provide further background, library publishing as a profession is still new to me. I joined Penn State University Libraries just over two years ago as the Open Publishing Program Specialist. Prior to that, I spent over two and a half years working for Springer Nature, overseeing four to six of their review journals over that time. Prior to that, I worked an additional two and a half years with a small publishing company in Hershey, Pennsylvania. At both publishers, communication with editors focused around the fact that the publisher owned those journals, and it was my responsibility to make sure that every journal had enough content and met their publication deadlines. It was also my job to focus on maintaining peer review integrity, running content through plagiarism checkers, and so on, but the main goal was that all journals had enough content to fill our issues so we could sell our subscriptions.

At Springer Nature, the publisher owns all of the journal titles and their content, and essentially “employs” the Editors in Chief and Section Editors, which is the norm for almost all of the larger publishers. Because of this, the publisher’s focus is on meeting the goals for each journal every year – growing the size of the publication and pulling in more content so subscription prices can rise due to more content, thus making more money. We were required to hold Editorial Board Meetings every year, to discuss how the journal needs to grow, whether we made our journal article count goals or not, and what new sections or areas of research we should be trying to expand into to get greater impact. As a Springer employee, I had communication with my editors and section editors, as well as the authors, on a monthly to weekly basis.

At Penn State, our Open Publishing program provides services for open access journals, bibliographies, monographs, and a handful of digital humanities projects. Like many library publishing programs, Penn State Libraries provides the infrastructure and support to host journals and gives consultations to editors and journal managers. However, we do not control the content that is published by each publication. Each of these publications has at least one editor and potentially more, as well as journal managers and others involved in the journal publishing process. Our program’s staff support consists of 1.5 FTE; with 10 journals to oversee there is understandably not much time to spend on establishing new communication standards for all of them.

In contrast to commercial publishers, library publishing programs do not own the content and are not generally driven by profit, so the motivations for communication are different. At Penn State, we provide two levels of services for our journal publications, which require different types of communication. Our lower, supported level journals require support as they establish a peer review process, obtain an ISSN, begin using DOIs, and generally establish themselves as a publication. The communication with these editors generally focuses around keeping them moving forward with their publication, assisting in keeping them on a publication schedule, and troubleshooting issues with the publishing software. For our imprint publications (those
that are already established and fully endorsed by our publishing program), the communications revolve more around minor troubleshooting, indexing and promotion support, and consultations in expanding the reputation and readership of the publication. Overall, communication with this higher level of support publications is far less frequent, and many times we may not communicate with the editors for months at a time.

Considering the differences in communication needs between these types of publications, it can be difficult for a library publishing program to establish a communication model to follow, and can sometimes allow for follow-up with the more established publications to fall by the wayside. However, nearly every publishing program agrees that communication, feedback, and follow-up is necessary. So, is there a best practice, or can one be created, that can be adopted and adapted by any library publishing program? The participants in this discussion considered questions like the following: What are the general guidelines or practices in your publishing program? What are the goals and challenges of your program? How much control or direct input do we really have into our editors’ publishing practices outside of ethics, peer review, etc., since we do not control their content? If they are successfully meeting our standards, what else is there to discuss?

Many participants suggested that an end of year review survey for their editors has been helpful, especially in maintaining contact with all editors regardless of support levels and the publication’s independence within the program. We additionally discussed that, even as library publishers that do not own the content of the journals we support, it is in our best interest to maintain a consistent communication line with our editors. It was also suggested that we use our services as leverage to help guide and mould the consistency, ethics, peer review, and more for the publications we support. Because we are providing infrastructure, the publishing software, hosting, many times DOI registering services, and more, we can also require journals to communicate on a somewhat regular basis and ensure they maintain the requirements we set for them. Participants also agreed that there is a lot of ambiguity regarding what best practices look like for communication in a library publishing program, and what specific role the communication should fill. After this discussion, I came away understanding that it is not only our library publishing program that sees a strong need for regular editor communication, but is unsure of what some best practices may be.

My recommendation is that communication with journal editors is necessary, and all library publishers should establish a communication schedule that remains somewhat consistent across publications. What the exact guidelines or best practices might be are still up for debate and should be explored more fully by those in library publishing,
because establishing these would be beneficial to the whole library publishing community.

References

See the Penn State Libraries Open Publishing Program website for more info: https://openpublishing.psu.edu