

“Stop, collaborate and listen” – Collaboration and communication across the scholarly community in a COVID-19 altered world

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Simon Bell, Bristol University Press



As the new academic year is about to start, I think it is safe to say that this is a new academic year like no other. It is no understatement that the current global pandemic has had a seismic impact on the scholarly community. The move to carry forward teaching and research in a practical and sustainable way is still very much an ongoing process, requiring the skills and ingenuity of all sectors of HE institutions.

For libraries and information services, the management and delivery of content (not forgetting the way it is consumed) has changed dramatically (possibly irrevocably).

As a result, collaboration has never been more important. The pandemic has made it all the more vital to embark on informed dialogue and meaningful action to support Higher Education (HE) Library and Information Services, university presses and the wider scholarly community in the face of a rapidly evolving and unpredictable landscape.

With collaboration can come opportunities. We have seen a variety of examples of this within the HE community including a greater emphasis on cross-institutional co-operation as described by President and Vice Chair of University of Manchester (and incoming Chair of the Russell Group), Dame Nancy Rothwell, in the recent BBC Radio 4 programme [Universities in Crisis](#) in which she highlighted that the pandemic has triggered much closer communication with the network of all HE institutions in Greater Manchester.

University Presses have also been playing their part on a collective and individual basis. Only this month the Association of University Presses launched the new [Ask UP](#) online resource developed not only to explain how university presses work and their integral role in scholarly communication, but also to facilitate further dialogue through enabling users to post questions direct to a panel of publishing professionals.

From our perspective our work in developing and launching our own Library Advisory Board has coincided with the huge changes brought about by COVID-19. As part of our ethos we foster partnerships and work closely with organisations around the world to develop work that makes an impact in the field and to ensure research and evidence we publish reaches the people who can use it. Integral to this is our commitment to engaging proactively with our customers, especially the Library and Information Services community. Ed Fay, Chair of the Library Advisory Board and interim Director of University of Bristol Library said “We are delighted to convene the Library Advisory Board as a forum to explore issues of scholarly publishing and the role of university presses in partnership between the Bristol University Press and the wider library community. As well as the immediate turbulence in higher education, longer-term strategies for sustainability and accessibility of academic research require collaborative approaches and we are extremely grateful to members of the board for contributing their insights and expertise.”

With the cancellation of conferences and scholarly publishing meetings, the establishment of our inaugural Library Advisory Board has become even more of an invaluable channel. Through this we are able to foster dialogue with the library and wider scholarly community as we work together in navigating hitherto uncharted territory in this dramatically changing and challenging environment. We want to foster a mutual understanding of the challenges libraries and publishers face and the best way to navigate them in the unpredictable years ahead.

In forming the Board we have been able to bring together members of the library community from across the globe with a variety of skills and expertise. The idea of a more open approach to knowledge exchange has been a key factor in getting their engagement something reinforced by Board member Rebecca Gower (Development and Academic Liaison for Cambridge University Libraries)

“My hope is that the advisory board will be an opportunity both for knowledge sharing—it’s always useful to meet other librarians, and hear about their experiences—and for real dialogue: it can be all too easy sometimes to feel that librarians and publishers aren’t speaking the same language. In many ways, the problems that the COVID crisis have thrown up are ones that we were grappling with already; it’s just that these now feel much more pressing. An advisory board offers the chance for much greater understanding of each other’s perspectives.”

Our Library Advisory Board is very much in its early days but the inaugural Board members share our vision to be proactive in joining up the agendas and initiatives of the wider scholarly community in the face of huge challenges.

“The global COVID-19 situation has required the whole library community to adapt. Just as libraries and researchers suddenly became more nimble and responsive to the needs of their users, publishers faced the same need for speed. Library Advisory Boards can assist with this

flexibility and provide a direct link from the researchers on-the-ground to the publishing sources.”

John Furlong, Associate University Librarian for Research and Academic Collaboration Services at University of Washington in St Louis

While examining ways we can support the library community through long term sustainable initiatives we have also been turning our attention to the rapidly changing research agendas within universities.

Many universities have set up interdisciplinary research centres and are restructuring degree programmes - there has even been the setting up of the London Interdisciplinary School. They are looking more at their civic role and exploring co-creation of research; and they are increasingly addressing the power imbalances between research in the global North and South and exploring how to decolonise research. There are a range of reasons why these changes are taking place now, but they are largely driven by the need to address the global challenges society faces in the 21st century.

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In turn, as a university press we recognise the need to collaborate on this mission supporting institutions and scholars in their response to these changes including our acclaimed blogs ‘[Transforming Society](#)’ and ‘[Futures of Work](#)’ (“THIS is how you do digital engagement as a publisher, building platforms which amplify and consolidate existing research networks.” Mark Carrigan, University of Cambridge), our forthcoming Global Social Challenges open access journal and our [Rapid Response](#) series.



In conclusion I am going to return to a Scholarly Kitchen article from 2017 in which Rick Anderson (Librarian at Brigham Young University) was asked what one thing he would change about scholarly communication.

“Too many participants in our ecosystem are now afraid to speak up on issues that are centrally important to all of us. I’m afraid that we are losing the ability to deal productively with disagreement, and that it’s getting in the way of solving genuine problems in scholarly communication”

Now more than ever before it's vital that we take the opportunities, instigate those discussions and collaborate on solutions.

Bristol University Press Library Advisory Board

Ed Fay - Interim Director of Library Services at University of Bristol and Chair of Library Advisory Board

Debra Hiom - Assistant Director Research Services and Manager of the Research Data Service at University of Bristol Library

Rebecca Gower - Development and Academic Liaison at Cambridge University Libraries

John Furlong - Associate University Librarian for Research and Academic Collaboration Services at University of Washington in St Louis

Andrew Barker - Director of Library Services at Lancaster University and Chair of UKSG

Pete Maggs - Director of Library Services at Western Sydney University

Anthony Sinnott - Access and Procurement Development Manager at University of York Library

Pep Torn – Director of the European Union Institute Library

Nicola Wright – Director of London School of Economics Library

For more information on the our Library Advisory Board or our library engagement plans please contact [Simon Bell \(Institutional Key Account Manager\)](#) or visit our [Librarian Hub](#)

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Simon Bell Biography

Simon Bell joined Bristol University Press in November 2019 to take on the new role of Institutional Key Account Manager. He has worked in the scholarly and academic publishing

industry for the past 20 years at Publons (part of Clarivate Analytics), Emerald Publishing, Manchester University Press, Liverpool University Press and Hodder Education.

These are the views of the author and not necessarily UKSG.