

Paul Sturges*

Can There be Too Many Information Science Journals?

DOI 10.1515/opis-2017-0001

Of course there can be too many of almost anything – mangoes in May in India, cars on the roads in big cities, or songs written by hopeful new bands from all over the world. So, a commonsense answer to the question in the title should probably be ‘Yes, there can be too many Information Science journals’. But common sense also suggests that in 2016 there is no threat of too many IS journals being launched. In fact, IS needs new journals for a variety of reasons and we are confident that our journal Open Information Science will be an important addition to the range available. Let’s look at the reasons why we need new journals. The obvious answer is that we need the agility that electronic publication brings in comparison with print. Electronic journals can publish content as soon as it has been approved as ready, distribute it instantly to more or less anywhere, and do so with a publishing model which is open in a way that print alone could never offer. So we need electronic journals (and the electronic versions of print journals) but the need for new journals is more than just a response to technology.

There is a need for new outlets for content because content is changing. The established print journals, from the magisterial Journal of the American Society of Information Science and Technology (JASIST) to the humblest national magazine for librarians in a small developing country, have built a character defined by their editorial boards, pools of reviewers, subscription lists, and the message given out by the accumulated content that they have published over the years. Authors and readers know a journal and have certain expectations as to what it will publish in terms of subject matter, research, practical narrative or opinion, and other defining characteristics of content. It is extremely difficult to alter this character even with visionary editorial input and imaginative publishers. If the field changes, a journal is like a big ship in the ocean: it can be steered along a new course, but not as swiftly as might be hoped. And the field is definitely changing.

We have only to look at the output of good new articles to see significant change in progress. This includes both change in research and practice which leads to change in the subject content of new articles, and also geographical change in the sources of academic and professional activity. The limited growth, or even decline, in the amount of work being done on many areas of traditional librarianship is a strong indicator of a major shift in progress. A journal that, for instance, specialises in articles on national libraries, or research library practice, is unlikely to be receiving the same flow of high quality articles as it did a decade ago. Such a journal is now probably accepting a broader definition of its field, contemplating publishing fewer pages and maybe even revising its ideas on quality.

In contrast, a journal which is welcoming to an eclectic mix of topics has no problem in filling its pages. There is a wonderful flow of papers on topics that include knowledge management, e-commerce, online services, IT applications, information needs and information literacy, and e-government. Their openness to these and other emerging, or recently emerged, topics has transformed the position of journals that welcome diverse content from a barely adequate flow each year to an embarrassment of riches. Waiting lists for accepted articles to appear in print now often stretch not merely for months, but for years. A good consequence is that material which is scheduled to appear in print is made available on subscription via the Web. This type of pressure carries a simple message publish electronically with an open access model!

*Corresponding author: Paul Sturges, Loughborough University, UK E-mail: r.p.sturges@lboro.ac.uk

What is almost as interesting is the shift in the geographical source of articles, mentioned earlier. For example, one journal that has responded to the increased flow of good material by the temporary expedient of three enormous special issues in 2016 has also observed that the flood of articles comes from new sources. At least half of the publishable articles come from Asia – South Korea, China, and Taiwan particularly – and publishable articles from Africa tend to outnumber those from Europe, the Americas and elsewhere. Whilst this one example shouldn't be taken as necessarily representative of the total flow (for instance, the USA is still producing good numbers of excellent articles that appear in a big spread of journals) the sheer scale of change in that and some other journals is extremely suggestive. In fact, research is definitely needed on the current patterns of research activity, and that research will be very publishable.

At the same time, a fresh response to the many articles on new topics from new sources that are being submitted to journals is clearly appropriate. We feel that Open Information Science will be a significant part of that response. The range of topics from twenty first century LIS that we seek is as wide as possible and material on media studies is also actively welcomed. There is, quite simply, no genuine intellectual barrier between the two areas. Readers will have unrestricted access to the journal's content, and although eventually publishing costs will be met by Article Processing Charges, for the first two years these charges will be waived. This generous, proactive approach will be backed by services to writers including help with language and editorial problems, in addition to the benefits of a sophisticated online hosting platform and long-term preservation based on the Portico system. What is more, the journal will have strong links to De Gruyter's books programme, thus offering authors a range of options as to how they publish their material. In what might at first glance seem to be an overcrowded LIS journal market, we believe that Open Information Science will be a strong and very distinct brand. We have no hesitation in offering it up to writers and readers in the field.