

Editorial

Building a community of communicators

The massification and commodification of knowledge – the expansion of knowledge production to government agencies, firms and consultancies has broken the monopolies of the traditional university and knowledge systems, and has seen a number of competent researchers working outside the old systems. Alongside traditional disciplinary knowledge, a new broader trans-disciplinary and highly contextualised form of knowledge is emerging. Paradoxically, this has resulted in the ceaseless subdivision of knowledge of greater scientific sophistication, or the disintegration of science. The waning coherence of science is seen most clearly in the 40 000 to 50 000 scientific journals currently in print. These changing modes of knowledge production, which shifts the production of knowledge away from ivory tower science-based linear innovation to knowledge that is produced at the point of application, highlights the changing organisational context for knowledge production and consumption.

Knowledge in the fluid, networked environment can be said to have escaped in four different ways:

- Freed from traditional institutional constraints;
- Leaked out through the loss of specialised expertise;
- Liberated from specific locales through advances in information technology networks;
- Eluded attempts to appropriate it through conventional management control.

As a result it can be argued that scientific associations belong to another era, an era where problems were defined by the academic community, based on disciplinary knowledge and quality controlled by “the invisible colleague” in the form of a blind review. Consequently there may be no need for outdated institutional formats such as scientific associations. However, it should be noted that information technology is seen to be much less effective in creating rather than disseminating knowledge. Put simply, the IT network eradicates distance and duration at the expense of the intimacy and sense of the present moment that seems to characterise knowledge creation within informal and formal professional networks. Spender (1992) notes that while electronic networks may provide strong informational ties, knowledge ties are weak. Therefore information technology cannot replace the qualitatively different kind of involvement in knowledge innovation that socially based communities of scientists offer. Social professional networks, such as those offered by scientific associations, are characterised not only by the sharing of information, but also by the sharing of knowledge and the interpretive frameworks that make sense of such information.

The main thrust of knowledge creation is the creation of the kind of open exchange of knowledge and ideas facilitated by the reciprocal, trust-based ties of a social community of communication scientists. However, it is also evident that while the need for a wider community of communication scientist may provide a compelling reason for the existence of an entity such as a scientific association, a need also exists to adopt a more pragmatic approach to the positioning and marketing of such a scientific association. Changes in information technology and the increased connectivity that has resulted because of this, have forever altered the contexts in which information and knowledge is produced and disseminated. The societal trends resulting from these changes also hold implications for the key variables that would drive individual or institutional membership of a scientific association, and the options that are available for the redefinition and repositioning of a scientific association such as SACOMM. Disintermediation, which eliminates middlemen who simply expedite distribution without enhancing the value of what is transferred, is one such trend that must be considered. Disintermediation greatly democratises access to the means of communication and to information and knowledge. It takes the power conferred by the control of information away from a tiny elite and makes it available to many. Interactive communication allows people to completely sidestep institutions. Unless SACOMM can find a way to add value as an information intermediary in the production and dissemination of knowledge, it will be fossilised along with many other jobs in the private sector that have also failed to make the required transition. The failure of scientific associations in general to adapt in this regard may provide us with an understanding of why most, if not all, scientific associations in South Africa are struggling with declining membership and waning relevance in their scientific and societal contexts.

The trend towards cocooning and one-on-one relationships also extends to the academic context. Interactive communication is facilitating many of these changes, leading to promising new opportunities, but also eliminating patterns we once took for granted. The nature of human involvement has changed as well - ties tend to be less permanent, less engaged and with smaller groups of people. Increasingly, some individuals are escaping their reality (with its confusions and uncertainties) by transforming themselves into "ideal cyberpeople" within virtual communities. Although individuals may become stronger and more powerful, people will still crave the togetherness of communities. However, the problem with a culture of intense individualism is that it ends up being bereft of a sense of community. It is in this regard that I would argue for the existence of a strong scientific association - one that can make the transition and that could provide the sense of community that online relationships cannot.

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