



## "DotComs to Watch": Scholarly Publishing's Tech-Company Beauty Pageant

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by John Sack, Founder

It struck me at the [STM Innovations](#) meeting in London in December 2015 that I was watching a type of panel session I had seen before: speakers from a handful of "dotcoms" were arranged in front of the audience like contestants in a beauty pageant. They each had five minutes to convince the audience of their *bona fides*: how they were going to change the world, or at least improve the lives of our research authors.

And then I recalled that I had been a pageant finalist a few months before, at the [ALPSP 2015 Annual Meeting](#) with four minutes to explain why my product, [Impact Vizor](#) was the most talented of the [contestants](#) in a [series of presentations](#).

And then I recalled a more recent 'pageant' at [APE 2016](#) in Berlin, and at [PSP 2016](#) in DC. I checked [Charleston 2015](#) and [SSP 2015](#), and sure enough there was the same (or in the case of SSP) something similar.

I'm not sure when this meme was born, or if it is in fact found in most industry conferences beyond publishing, whether digital media industries or not. Of course in technology there are whole conferences devoted to this kind of beauty contest,



though it is usually through in-booth events. I'm thinking of [Demo](#) and [SXSW Interactive](#). And the [Consumer Electronics Show](#) (CES) is in Las Vegas where everything is a pageant of one sort or another. Perhaps the model was launched by [Dragons' Den](#) and [Shark Tank](#).

The most diabolical form of the "dotcom to watch" talk is the clock-paced "flash talk". Eefke Smit of STM has a Powerpoint template which auto-advances through a speaker's slides, so the entire deck is viewed in five minutes and the speaker just has to be able to keep up. I tried this once to practice a presentation I was working



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on, and it certainly helped me cut slides quickly. (Eefke is glad to share the template as long as credit is given to its author; let me know if you want the template.)

Eefke also added a bit of *vox populi* to the [APE 2016 version of this dot com panel](#) [scroll/scrub to about 6 minutes in to the video to see the Q&A]. After the presentations she asked the audience a variety of questions, all answered with a show of hands:

- "which of these products do you like?",
- "which would you like to work with?"
- "which would you invest in?", and finally,
- "which of these products will be around in 5 years?"

These types of questions definitely added to the "beauty pageant" aspect, but did make it more fun and "crowdsourced".

I look forward to a kind of reckoning a year or two later, to see which companies actually *arestill* around, and what type of "pivot" some of them have had to make to thrive, or to stay alive. (Did you know that YouTube was originally a dating site? Now *that's* a pivot!) But the form in which some of these survive can also be interesting: were they an idea, a feature, a product, or a business? Joe Esposito wrote about the differences some time ago, and The Scholarly Kitchen just [reposted that piece](#) while I was writing this one.

Thinking back over the half-dozen 'pageants' I've seen in the last year, most all of the participants are new to the circuit. That is, I've only seen the same product a time or two ([Publons](#) and [Overleaf](#)). And it is great when a speaker is touting a product I haven't heard of before ([Zapnito](#)).

I asked colleagues on HighWire's Library Advisory Council whether this type of pageant is common in library conferences, or if this is something peculiar to publishing. So far, the answer is that it isn't *de rigueur* at library conferences, but versions are showing up, e.g., at Charleston 2015 - "[Think like a Start-up \(or an Upstart\)](#)" - and "Lightning Talks" highlighting an innovation or service. (*My thanks to Ann Okerson, Michael Levine-Clark, and Scott Plutchak for their holiday-weekend responses!*)

Why so popular in publishing? What might lead to these "thousand flowers" blooming particularly well in the publishing ecosystem? As an industry, we are fertile ground for new entrants because we have high quality data and metadata, thoroughly-implemented standards, and a bias towards open access to certain data and metadata. As Joe Esposito wrote, "bits are free." So the existing public infrastructure saves the startup a lot of data management cost and effort. In addition, there are a lot of (typically young) software-development-capable people who have to build tools for their own research, and then will release them "into the wild" for others to leverage, because that's what you do at a university. The potential user population - young people mostly - is ready to try something new that will save them time, or make something social. Social networks pick up a good idea and then a flower blooms! No capital to speak of is needed to scale by the first few orders of magnitude. And compared to doing another postdoc, the startup route seems a better lottery to play to those who are "[academic entrepreneurs](#)" or just have an entrepreneurial bent. I don't mean this to sound cynical at all! Our industry has so many startup founders with PhDs, compared with the typical dot com.

Perhaps this is why the pageant is so interesting to us in publishing: these are our users up there! (And here they are trying to sell **us** something.)

In my [APE 2016 keynote](#), I used the concept of "Friction in the Workflow" to describe the points in the research process where things don't work smoothly. I believe many tools, projects, and startups are born out of researcher frustration at these friction points. How many such are there?



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A team at Utrecht University has an answer: they have catalogued the startups and tools in "[101 Innovations in Scholarly Communication](#)". It is notable that they started as "101" innovations, and is now well over 600. A [recent poster](#) by this team categorizes the tools not only by workflow phases (discovery, analysis, writing, publication, outreach, assessment) but by what I'll call workflow "eras" (traditional, modern, innovative, experimental). For example, in the discovery phase we have Web of Science as "traditional" era, Google Scholar as "modern" era, Mendeley as "innovative" era, and Sparrho as "experimental" era.



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The group has recently fielded a survey (open for the past nine months, but after over 20,000 responses is now closed) to find out how tool usage varies by field, country, and position. (While the survey is closed, the [survey document is available](#) to understand what type of responses have been collected.) Survey findings will be presented at Force2016, and the survey data will be made public, in April 2016. I will be eagerly awaiting the results!

This is edited on August 29th

## Additional Reading

- [The Royal Society's "Future of Scholarly Scientific Communication" Meeting, Part 1](#)
- [Panel: "The Future of Platform Wars: Is this where STM Publishers should be focusing?" Part 1](#)