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# Changes in the digital scholarly environment and issues of trust: An exploratory, qualitative analysis

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ABSTRACT

The paper reports on some of the results of a research project into how changes in digital behaviour and services impacts on concepts of trust and authority held by researchers in the sciences and social sciences in the UK and the USA. Interviews were used in conjunction with a group of focus groups to establish the form and topic of questions put to a larger international sample in an online questionnaire. The results of these 87 interviews were analysed to determine whether or not attitudes have indeed changed in terms of sources of information used, citation behaviour in choosing references, and in dissemination practices. It was found that there was marked continuity in attitudes though an increased emphasis on personal judgement over established and new metrics. Journals (or books in some disciplines) were more highly respected than other sources and still the vehicle for formal scholarly communication. The interviews confirmed that though an open access model did not in most cases lead to mistrust of a journal, a substantial number of researchers were worried about the approaches from what are called predatory OA journals. Established researchers did not on the whole use social media in their professional lives but a question about outreach revealed that it was recognised as effective in reaching a wider audience. There was a

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remarkable similarity in practice across research attitudes in all the disciplines covered and in both the countries where interviews were held.

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Background

This paper constitutes an output of a research project commissioned by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, which sought to discover whether the digital transition had led to changes in the way academic researchers placed their trust in scholarly communications (Nicholas et al., 2014). We were especially interested in the impacts that open access publications and the various types of social media might have had on what researchers used and cited and where they published. In order to understand what and why researchers trusted in the digital age there was a need to obtain a deep and personal understanding of the context of their decision making. This meant that not only was it important to understand the research process, but in particular how the researchers themselves understood it. The interviews reported on in this paper represented a second phase in the overall project. The questions presented were intended to build on and complement what we had learnt in focus groups which were the starting point of the project and at the same time enable us to optimise the list of questions provided in the international questionnaire which was the culmination of the project. The central part of the interview enabled a quantitative analysis of citation behaviour based on a critical incident approach. Another output from the project provides a detailed analysis of reasons for citation and comments on the implications for citation theory (Thornley et al., 2015). This aspect of the interviews provided much information of a more general qualitative nature which was relevant to the broader questions which are the subject under discussion. The interviews also provided insights from the answers given to the first and last two questions (see Appendix A for the wording). These questions were phrased broadly and answers could in many cases be described as discussions related to and shedding light on the topics with which this paper is concerned. (For the results of the questionnaire phase of the study refer to Tenopir et al., 2015 and Jamali et al., 2014).

### 1.2. Aims

The project sought to discover:

(a) How academic researchers, in the digital age, assign and calibrate authority and trustworthiness to the sources and channels they use, cite and publish in.
(b) Whether this has changed, especially in the light of two major digital developments, open access publishing and social media.
(c) The scholarly context in which researchers make trustworthiness decisions.

In the analysis that follows there are some instances where assertions derived from the interviews are not specifically concerned with these aims. We included them because they represented general comments made or implied by the researchers themselves which had a bearing on and provided a context for those assertions which are more directly related to the aims set out.

### 1.3. Scope and definitions

(a) *Trust and trustworthiness*. If we were to achieve a full understanding of how the trustworthiness of some information source or channel is established, we needed to consider its attributes on two dimensions: its inherent attributes which, taken together, can be seen as specifying its objective quality, as well as its more extrinsic, user-attitude determined attributes, which, taken together, can be seen as specifying its subjective reliability. The approach we took saw the interplay between the inherent attributes of an information source/channel and its more extrinsic, user-attitude shaped attributes as the determinant of its trustworthiness, with quality and reliability thus becoming sub-constructs of trustworthiness. We used a schema to help us guide the study as a whole and as an aid to evaluating the data and this is provided in Table 1. However we have to explain that we explored the use of the schema particularly in the focus groups which preceded the interviews (with some slight overlap). In the focus groups we found that those taking part had a clear idea of trust and trustworthiness which incorporated the qualities set out in the table but did not respond well to attempts by those running the focus groups to analyse the concepts closely. They knew what trust in information sources meant to them. The questions on which the interviews were based were particularly concerned with the digital transition and did not lend themselves to a close analysis.
(b) *Type of academic*. The investigation was concerned with scholarly communication (researchers communicating with other researchers) and we were not concerned with academic researchers as teachers. However there was some discussion about outreach, reaching practitioners and indeed the general public. This discussion arose naturally from the later questions relating to social media.

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