

# New models of Scholarly Writing

DH+ SIB contribution to OPERAS-P

A blog by **Elisa Nury**, DH+ (SIB)

The DH+ group at SIB is pleased to have been a part of the H2020 project [OPERAS-P](#) as DARIAH partner. Now that the adventure is coming to an end, it is time to reflect on the results from our survey into the future of scholarly writing.

Our team at DH+ included Vera Chiquet<sup>1</sup> and myself under the supervision of Claire Clivaz, Head of DH+. We worked on the task WP6.5 which focused on new models of scholarly writing. The objectives of WP6.5 were to identify and analyse innovative communication practices in SSH and make recommendations to improve their publication process. To understand better those new models of writing, we conducted a series of interviews with various stakeholders.

The WP6.5 partners involved several universities and institutions under the lead of Marta Błaszczńska and Maciej Maryl at the *Institute of Literary Research of the Polish Academy of Sciences* (IBL PAN): DARIAH-EU, with SIB Swiss Institute of Bioinformatics as partner, Max Weber Foundation, Open Book Publishers, University of Luxembourg and University of Zadar. Our workflow was shared with the WP6.6, which was focusing on quality assessment of innovative research.

Following a presentation by DH+ at the *2020 Swiss Research Data Day* (SRDD)<sup>2</sup>, our team has written an article on research data as a new model of scholarly writing, that will be published in the *Revue électronique suisse des sciences de l'information*<sup>3</sup>, including a complete state of the art. It was a successful collaborative writing experience that involved all the WP 6.5 institutions. In this blogpost, I will present the interviews with some visualizations, and dive more into the insights gained from the 16 interviews led at DH+.

## The Interviews and Interviewees

The interview process took place between April and July 2020: in close collaboration with the WP6.6, the group prepared a consent form and confidentiality agreement to guarantee the interviewee's data protection, as well as questions for an interview scenario.

The interview scenario was composed of two main parts, one focusing on the experience of the interviewees (their writing practices, following the publication process of a recent research

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<sup>1</sup> Vera Chiquet has joined DH+ SIB for two months supported by some money left in the project fund. We thank her warmly for her collaboration with three interviews.

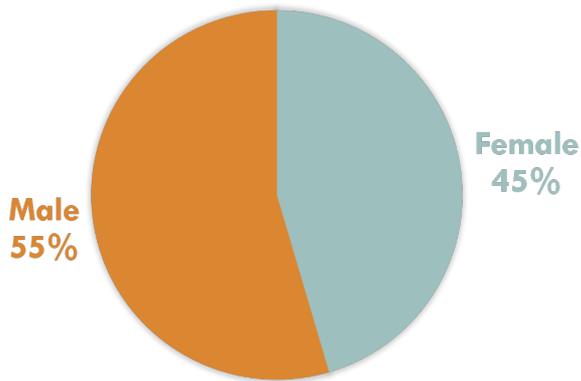
<sup>2</sup> See the slides and video of our presentation here: <https://doi.org/10.34847/nkl.f734kiqd>.

<sup>3</sup> Elisa Nury and Claire Clivaz, with Marta Błaszczńska, Michael Kaiser, Agata Morka, Valérie Schaefer, Jadranka Stojanovski and Erzsébet Tóth-Czifra, "Open Research Data and Innovative Scholarly Writing: OPERAS highlights", Proceedings of the Swiss Data Research Day 2020, Makhlof Shabou Basma et al. (eds.), *RESS!* 2021, *forthcoming* in CC BY SA licence.

output) and a second part on their understanding of what makes a scholarly text, what is innovation in academic writing and the purpose of peer-review, or how they perceive prestige and power structures in relation to scholarly communications.

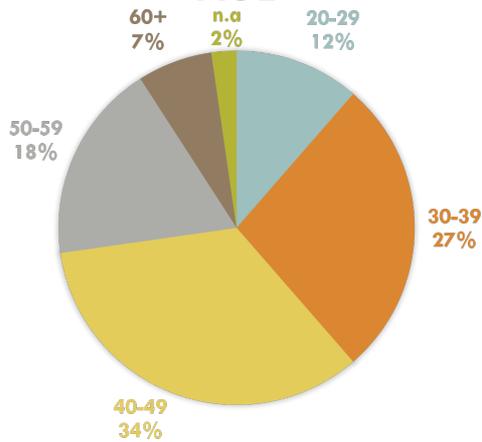
In total the WP6.5 and WP6.6 participants performed 42 interviews, with 44 stakeholders (two interviews had two interviewees). The figures below break down the respondents according to gender, age, career stage, country and role.

### GENDER



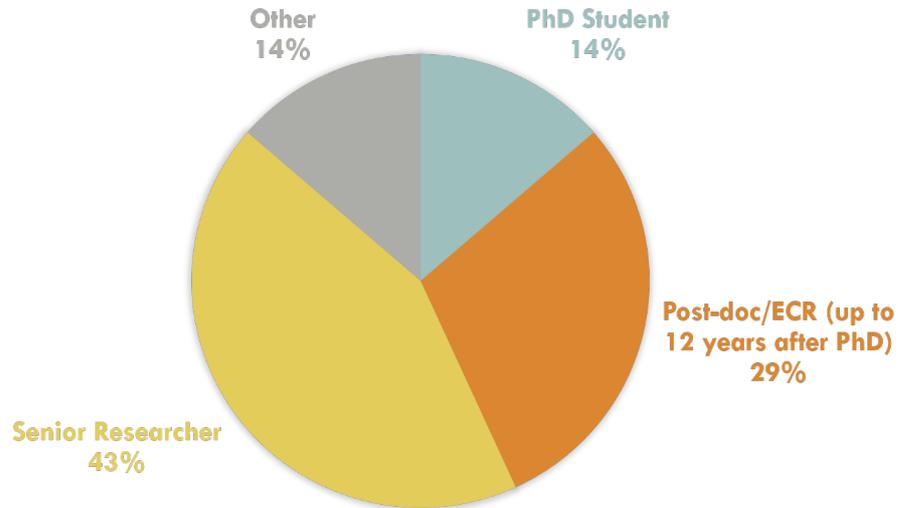
[Fig. 1: interviews by gender]

### AGE



[Fig. 2: interviews by age]

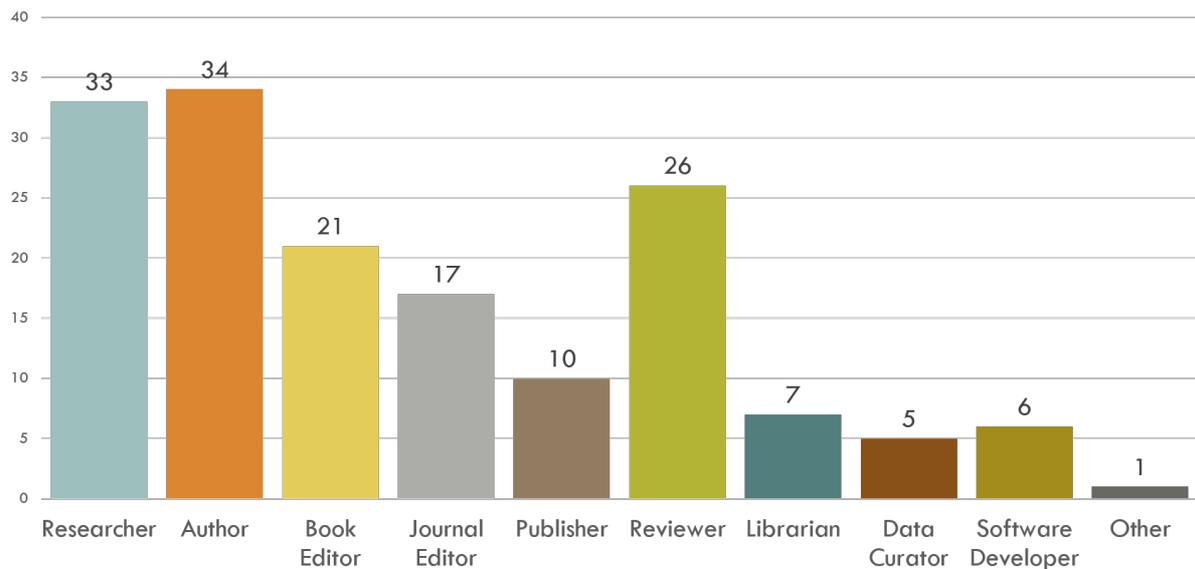
## CAREER STAGE



[Fig. 3: interviews by career stage]

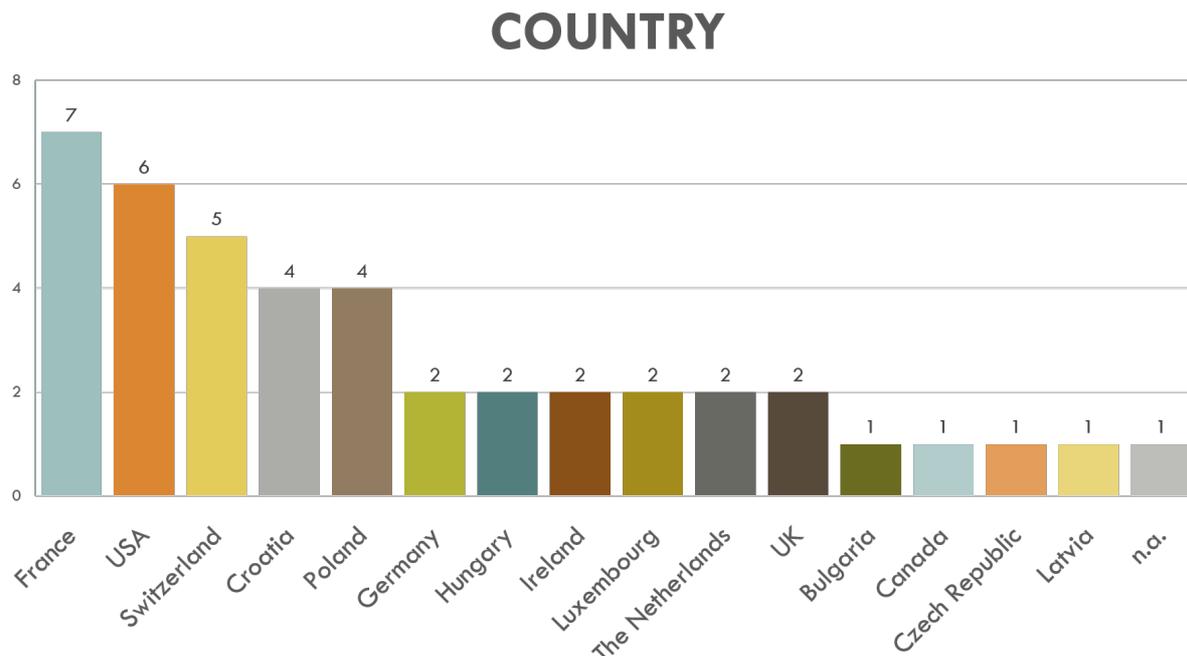
As we can see, the gender balance was fairly equal, with a proportion of men slightly higher than women. Many respondents were rather established researchers, with a majority of senior researchers followed by post-docs or early career researchers, and a few PhD students. However, the stakeholders were not confined to researchers. We also welcomed the participation of publishers and librarians, and one person whose role was to be a liaison between researchers and publishers. Most of the interviewees combined more than one role. In this H2020 project, European countries<sup>4</sup> have been particularly solicited: 13 are represented, plus USA and Canada.

## ROLE



[Fig. 4: distribution of interviewees' roles]

<sup>4</sup> "European" is understood here in its geographical meaning.



[Fig. 5: distribution of interviewees by country]

## Harvest for future thoughts

In this part, I present some results harvested in the interviews performed by the DH+SIB team.

### Scholarly texts and innovation in scholarly writing

What makes a scholarly text? Our interviewees agreed that the text should make an argument or answer a question based on data or evidence. Moreover, it is not an isolated discourse but part of a community. It should cite sources and be aware of existing research on the topic, it must follow the methodology developed to its particular field of study (SIBDARIAH01, SIBDARIAH02, SIBDARIAH06, SIBDARIAH07, SIBDARIAH08). SIBDARIAH01 (p. 7) also makes a distinction between a scholarly text and a scholarly publication: any text can be a scholarly text, but the publication must be peer-reviewed. The peer review marks the research as valid in the scientific community, instead of a personal opinion (SIBDARIAH07, p. 7).

On the other hand, innovation in scholarly writing can take many forms:

- **Method** - “taking traditional problems and looking at them in a different way” possibly with digital methods but not necessarily (SIBDARIAH07, p. 10), or the tools used to produce research such as Zotero, and manuscript transcription ecosystems (SIBDARIAH18, p. 3).
- **Content** - everything that is not only text-centric, but includes images, sound, or video can be innovative (SIBDARIAH01, p. 7; SIBDARIAH07, p. 10), as well as publishing primary sources such as manuscripts or epigraphic inscriptions (SIBDARIAH09, p. 3), or data (SIBDARIAH12, p. 3).

- **Length** - in SSH there is a tendency to write longer texts with sometimes excessive narrativity, publishing short articles quickly (a sort of “breaking news of research”) that focus on the method instead of results would be interesting (SIBDARIAH08, p. 10).
- **Medium** - digital publications are “a real locus of emerging possibilities” for innovation, and in particular when linking them with physical resources (SIBDARIAH18, p. 3).
- **Form** - the design of a book can be innovative, as well as going beyond the article or monograph forms or using a non-linear narrative (SIBDARIAH12, p. 3). SIBDARIAH02 (p. 9) analysed websites about the history of WWI, and also identified new trends in narratives with a personalization around people or users.
- **Peer review** - publishers also innovate with open peer review, and other forms of review such as focus group review (SIBDARIAH03 and 04, see below for more details).
- **Access** - open access, i.e. moving beyond the paywall model to make research accessible (SIBDARIAH07, p. 10). The question of access was also raised by SIBDARIAH09 (p. 2), who would welcome improving access to articles on academic topics, for instance with more performant search interfaces.

Despite the many possible models of academic writing, SIBDARIAH08 (pp. 9-10) notes that, in his experience as a publisher, there is still a convergence towards the article or the monograph in practice. He adds that articles are not the same as they were fifty years ago, “but it is an unconscious, collective and very slow evolution that is not the subject of specific deliberation”. What is actually accepted as a scholarly output can also be a barrier to innovation (SIBDARIAH02, p. 9), as new formats are usually not well recognized (SIBDARIAH09, p. 3), or at least not as well as books in SSH which can deter younger scholars (SIBDARIAH05, p. 2).

## Examples

Some of the respondents themselves engaged in innovative models of writing. Notably, we discussed enhanced web books or living books (SIBDARIAH01, SIBDARIAH02, SIBDARIAH07), also from the point of view of SIBDARIAH12 who helps researchers with open access monographs; a digital textbook with hyperlinks instead of footnotes (SIBDARIAH08); an online exhibition (SIBDARIAH18); podcasts (SIBDARIAH02); linking several parts of a publication such as the research data with the article, or a paper output with digital resources (SIBDARIAH07, SIBDARIAH09, SIBDARIAH16, SIBDARIAH17). SIBDARIAH04 mentioned a new journal which innovates on the narrative, presenting different points of view on research such as the story, the analytics (how researchers got to the story) and the dataset.

## Benefits and Drawbacks

On the disadvantages of innovative models, one criticism that came up is that they are time-consuming (SIBDARIAH10, p. 2; SIBDARIAH13, p. 2). As they are not well recognized for an academic career, it means that researchers often have to do the work twice: once for the new model, and once for a traditional output (SIBDARIAH01, p. 9). Reviewing innovative formats is difficult and time-consuming as well, since a wider range of competencies may be needed to evaluate an output (SIBDARIAH17, p. 2), and there is no fixed set of criteria (SIBDARIAH09, p. 3): for instance, the evaluation of XML still has to be implemented in a comprehensive way (SIBDARIAH17, p. 3).

Among the benefits of innovative formats is that they “make the work more transparent, more open and collaborative” (SIBDARIAH10, p. 2). Digital publications have the potential to reach a much larger audience (SIBDARIAH18, p. 3). In particular, open access resources are more visible, and therefore get more citations (SIBDARIAH11, p. 5). They can present more information to the reader than would be possible on paper (SIBDARIAH09, p. 3), and make research available quickly instead of waiting for a whole book to be published (SIBDARIAH01, p. 3). This is a good way of getting credit, as it is a common fear in academia that someone might take advantage of your work (SIBDARIAH07, p. 8).

## Librarians & Publishers

As we have seen above, our interviewees comprised not only researchers, but also librarians (SIBDARIAH05, SIBDARIAH07, SIBDARIAH14, SIBDARIAH16) and publishers (SIBDARIAH03, SIBDARIAH04, SIBDARIAH08, SIBDARIAH11, SIBDARIAH14, SIBDARIAH15), and they discussed more in detail open access and peer review.

### Open access

SIBDARIAH11 is developing a publisher’s open access offer and strategy. They are trying to focus on models such as “transformative agreements” where the author is not the one paying, but a consortium of libraries pay a subscription that includes open access publication of articles (SIBDARIAH11, p. 2). For books, which are more important in SSH, there is the potential to turn to crowdfunding with initiatives such as [Knowledge Unlatched](#) (SIBDARIAH11, p. 4).

SIBDARIAH16 does a lot of outreach work from the library to promote open access. She explains how the HAL portal was adopted to host researchers’ publications. HAL was particularly well suited for Humanities as opposed to Nakala which seemed a more generic tool. HAL allows for highlighting a lab’s achievement by linking a publication directly to the lab, which is helpful for getting funding. One of the difficulties in this process is that “promoting HAL and the open access culture relies on the shoulders of benevolent engagement” (SIBDARIAH16, p. 3).

We also asked how librarians envision the future of libraries, now that more and more publications are in digital formats and no longer physically kept inside a library. SIBDARIAH07 (p. 9) reckons that libraries could take on a curatorial role: as there is so much information online, a library could have the authority to mark resources as legitimate scholarship, as it were, putting a stamp of approval.

### Peer review

Peer review<sup>5</sup> is a large topic, and I will only focus on aspects that came up during our interviews. The interviewees admit that peer review is not always a guarantee of quality

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<sup>5</sup> For a detailed analysis on peer review and its varied issues, see the WP6.6 report, as well as Erzsébet Tóth-Czifra, “Rethinking text, techne and tenure: evaluation and peer-review challenges around Virtual Research Environments in the Arts and Humanities”, in C. Clivaz – G. V. Allen (eds.), “Ancient Manuscripts and Virtual Research Environments”, *Classics@ 18* [N. p.], *forthcoming*.

(SIBDARIAH09, p. 2; SIBDARIAH17, p. 2), but they can still trust more something that was peer reviewed, for example if it is not in their area of expertise (SIBDARIAH01, p. 6), or because they know how peer review can have a real positive effect on the writing (SIBDARIAH18, p. 2).

Publishers have experimented with innovative forms of peer review. SIBDARIAH03 and 04 for instance describe the focus group review, where the author and a collective of experts get together to discuss a manuscript. It is usually a positive and collaborative experience. They also implemented open peer review, with mixed results: some publications have received a lot of engagement, while for others there were not many comments. There is again the problem of doing twice the work, as some publications first need a double-blind peer review to be accepted by institutions and included on a CV. Experienced researchers may lack time, while early career researchers could be hesitant for fear of a negative backlash.

Although some interviewees also think that open peer review would be a positive development (SIBDARIAH05, p. 3; SIBDARIAH17, p. 3), and either have or would be happy to participate in open peer review (SIBDARIAH01, p. 11; SIBDARIAH02, p. 13; SIBDARIAH06, p. 3; SIBDARIAH18, p. 4), others would be more reluctant to have their reviews fully open (SIBDARIAH09, p. 3). SIBDARIAH08 (p. 6) is of the opinion that the review should stay private between the reviewer and the publisher, so that the reviewers do not censor themselves. On the other hand, SIBDARIAH14 and SIBDARIAH15 recount how difficult it has been in their field to get innovative, online publications accepted. Anonymous peer review was a real barrier to publication and recognition: once reviewers authoritatively dismissed the work, there was no way for the author to respond. This lack of accountability for reviewers, along with favourable circumstances, led them to implement open peer review: “what we wanted to do a peer review that was responsible and accountable, not people hiding behind anonymity” (SIBDARIAH15, p. 4).

Publishers and researchers alike in general agreed that a major innovation needed is the recognition of peer review work in the academic career. For that, open peer review may be a good solution: as comments can be cited by others (for instance in the system described by SIBDARIAH14 and 15, p. 7), it is a way to value peer review.

## Conclusion

Finally, I would like to thank all the persons who agreed to be interviewed for this project and gave us so many interesting insights into their experience with scholarly writing and publication, and innovative forms of scholarly writing.

This blog post only touches briefly on these topics, and I would encourage the reader to peruse the interview summaries and transcripts, as they are full of precious information and sometimes deep analyses of the scholarly publication ecosystem.

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SIBDARIAH10: Chiquet, V. (2020). Summary Interview SIBDARIAH 10 (H2020 OPERAS-P). *[Text]* Nakala. <https://doi.org/11280/ac0ffef5>

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