INSIGHTS INTO OPEN PRACTICES:
A SERIES OF INTERVIEWS

SETTING UP SCI|POST, AN OPEN ONLINE-BASED SCIENTIFIC PUBLICATION PORTAL

An interview with
Prof. dr Jean-Sébastien Caux

OPEN SCIENCE INSIGHTS

OPEN SCIENCE INSIGHTS

INTERVIEW

Prof. dr Jean-Sébastien Caux

Professor in theoretical condensed matter physics at the Institute for Theoretical Physics (ITFA), part of the Institute of Physics within the Faculty of Science of the University of Amsterdam

SciPost is a non-profit foundation dedicated to developing, implementing and maintaining innovative forms of electronic scientific communication and publishing. The online-based SciPost publication portal offers freely, openly, globally and perpetually accessible science. Being managed by professional scientists, and making use of editor-solicited and contributed reviews, its journals aim at the highest achievable standards of refereeing. The SciPost Commentaries option allows contributors to seamlessly comment on all existing literature.

CAN YOU GIVE EXAMPLES OF OPEN WORKING METHODS THAT HAVE BEEN APPLIED DURING THE DEVELOPMENT AND WHEN RUNNING THE PLATFORM?

'One can answer this at a number of different levels. Most importantly, open working methods are very prominent in the editorial processes at SciPost, as manifested for example by the 1) open refereeing process (the contents of reports being made openly accessible; referees can elect to remain anonymous, though signing their report is explicitly encouraged) and the 2) decision-making process, which involves discussion and voting by the fellows (members of our Editorial Colleges).

Another level at which open working methods were adopted is the development work for the infrastructure: all the codebase for the initiative is developed according to the free/open source software philosophy.'

LOOKING BACK ON THESE FOUR YEARS, IN THE LIGHT OP OPENNESS, WHICH SUCCESSES AND SETBACKS ARE MOST MEMORABLE TO YOU DEVELOPING THE PLATFORM?

'In terms of successes, the initiative has managed to demonstrate that a more open editorial process can lead to a more academically mature evaluation system, freed from secondary and academically irrelevant interests like profit-making. The fact that our flagship journal SciPost Physics has achieved such a high reputation from the get-go is a direct consequence of the professionality of all scientists involved: authors, referees and fellows. I'd like to view SciPost as providing the "vessels" which these academic "crews" can use to explore and reach new research destinations.

In terms of setbacks, and here I speak perhaps using a more personal voice, I admit that I had originally expected to be more successful at attracting support and funding for the initiative, to enable more rapid upscaling. SciPost proposes a cost-slashing business model which too few people are familiar with, and which therefore lags in take-off speed. My heart has repeatedly sank in the last few years when reading about yet more "deals" being struck with traditional publishers, guaranteeing them ever-increasing slices of the money flow. My personal opinion is that the academic side has been systematically outsmarted in the negotiations with profit-making publishers, leading to a

Photo: Jeroen Oerlemans

Prof. dr Jean-Sébastien Caux

Professor in theoretical condensed matter physics at the Institute for Theoretical Physics (ITFA), part of the Institute of Physics within the Faculty of Science of the University of Amsterdam

situation where the Open Access movement's opportunity to improve on academic publishing is being deflected into installing something even less desirable than the "old" system was. So, the setback here is that I wish I had started SciPost five years earlier, and had been able to scale it up much, much more rapidly, in order to be able to make a real difference here, going beyond what cynics would call a simple and negligibly small-scale proof of principle.'

HAS SCIPOST INFLUENCED YOUR UNDERSTANDING OF OPEN SCIENCE / SCHOLARSHIP?

'In many senses it has: having to learn all the ins and outs of publishing has led me to carefully reflect on all aspects of the creation, evaluation, publication, maintenance and preservation of the research record. When I compare current workflows with the ideal picture in my mind of how things should or could be, I feel a mixture of despair, sorrow and anger, which typically sees me react by rolling up my sleeves and trying to make things better. One of the things which I think needs urgent improvement is how we train young researchers to think about and do science in an open fashion. Another crucial thing is of course to have proper reward systems for those that do so. Unfortunately, the current evaluation systems are such that young researchers are still shackled by the old ways, and if they want a follow-up position, are compelled to prioritize thinking about their glossy papers and h-index instead of about that dataset they could polish up and make publicly available.'

CAN YOU GIVE EXAMPLES OF HOW OPEN WORKING WITH SCIPOST HAS INCREASED THE VISIBILITY OF THE PUBLISHED RESEARCH WITHIN AND / OR OUTSIDE THE ACADEMIC WORLD?

From the start, SciPost focused on the higher quality end (following a "from high quality/small scale" to "mainstream/larger scale" growth model) so I'm not sure the initiative has increased the visibility of research within the academic world. The papers which survived our tough evaluation processes would most certainly have been accepted in alternative venues. Also, for visibility outside the academic world, I would even dare to say that SciPost might have even toned things down a bit: I have a personal aversion to the "socialmediatization" of research (and fear its nefarious influence on quality evaluation), and also dislike the overly sensationalistic way some journals artificially prop up the importance and visibility of the research they publish. Science that matters is not the same as science that makes good headlines; conversely, good headlines don't make science that matters. By being a bit reserved on social media, journalism and popularization, SciPost will not turn many heads on the streets, but will remain focused on its core mission of serving and honouring the things that really matter: researchers and their research results.'

Links

SciPost
scipost.org

Prof. dr Jean-Sébastien Caux
jscaux.org

This interview is part of the outputs of the Accelerate Open Science project, a project within the scope of the National Programme Open Science. Aim of this project is to foster initiatives that promote Open Science in the Netherlands.

DOI http://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4497727