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## What Color is Your Paratext?

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## Vision Session: What Color is Your Paratext?<sup>1</sup>

GEOFFREY BILDER

*Presenter*

ANDRÉE J. RATHERMACHER

*Recorder*

*In the final vision session of the 2009 NASIG Annual Conference, Geoffrey Bilder from CrossRef discussed the problem of how to identify trustworthy scholarly information on the Internet. This problem is exacerbated by readers' growing distrust of intermediaries such as publishers and librarians, by the fact that the Internet lacks the traditions that have developed in scholarly communication to ensure trust, and by the sheer amount of information now readily available. Paratext is understood as anything outside of a text that sets expectations about that text. In the past, paratext, for example a publisher logo, provided important clues as to the trustworthiness of information. In the context of the Internet, Bilder suggested creating a meta-brand to serve as paratext. CrossRef is developing a meta-brand called CrossMark that would certify for the reader that the online content to which it is attached has been vetted by processes of scholarly review and is therefore trustworthy.*

**KEYWORDS** *CrossMark, Internet, meta-brand, paratext, scholarly communication, trust.*

Geoffrey Bilder is the Director of Strategic Initiatives at CrossRef, a non-profit membership association of publishers. Their mission is to improve access to published scholarship through cooperative technologies such as Digital Object Identifiers (DOIs). Bilder discussed problems in

identifying trustworthy scholarly content delivered via the Internet and proposed CrossRef's CrossMark service as one solution.

Bilder began by highlighting a problem that both publishers and librarians face: helping researchers identify trustworthy information in the online environment at a time of growing distrust of intermediaries. Publishers find their value proposition being questioned as their brands are hidden due to intermediation by Google, their content is cloistered behind pay walls, and the editorial services they provide are not readily visible. Likewise, the value added by libraries through the selection and organization of quality information has been brought into question by the prevalence of free search engines and the shift from ownership to access, which often obscures the library's role as the provider of scholarly information.

Bilder next compared the nature of trust on the Internet with scholarly trust, using a framework developed by Kieron O'Hara in *Trust: from Socrates to Spin*.<sup>1</sup> There is a problem with trust on the Internet as users confront spam, viruses, phishing, urban legends, and questionable content. Trust on the Internet can be characterized as horizontal in that all users are equal and there is no way to enforce norms of behavior. It is also local; that is, it is based on personal knowledge of what sites are trustworthy. Scholarly trust, on the other hand, is highly vertical in that there are consequences for violating that trust, such as being denied tenure or being expelled from a professional society. Scholarly trust is also global, which means that it is distributed via proxy, such as from which institution a researcher graduated, where he or she teaches, and in what journals he or she is published. Given that Internet trust and scholarly trust are such polar opposites, how do they meet in the middle?

Within the context of the deprecation of publisher and librarian intermediaries and the problem of trust on the Internet, researchers as readers face a problem of their own. Researchers

are spending more time reading, yet they are reading less of each text. This problem is accelerating as readers encounter blogs, wikis, and Twitter feeds in addition to traditional scholarly content. After posing the question of how readers and researchers can differentiate scholarly, credible content from the growing volume of information produced, Bilder introduced the concept of “paratext.”

Paratext is anything outside of a text that sets expectations about that text, such as illustrations, cover design, or a publisher brand. When we interact with printed information we use deeply ingrained heuristics such as where we found the text—bargain bookstore or library, glossy magazine or scholarly journal—or if a book or article has footnotes. Many of these heuristics are not applicable in the online environment, yet in the context of too much information, heuristics are essential in filtering content and determining what is worth reading and what is not.

Publishers have known about the importance of paratext for a long time. In the early days of printing, anyone could pay a printer to print their text. There was a great deal being printed with minimal quality control or editing of content. Early publishers emerged in order to guarantee quality in the publishing process. Paratext in the form of publisher logos and journal brands became a proxy for trustworthy content.

To signify quality scholarly content on the Internet, Bilder proposed using paratext in the form of a “meta-brand.” Meta-brands are industry-sponsored marks that differentiate credible players in an industry from others, for example “USDA Organic,” “Fair Trade Certified,” and “Dolphin-Safe.” Meta-brands serve to certify the processes by which goods and services are produced.

As an example of a meta-brand certifying scholarly content, Bilder introduced CrossRef's "CrossMark" logo. As envisioned, a CrossMark logo on an online scholarly text would indicate that it is the version of record. By clicking on the CrossMark logo, the reader could access additional information about the text, such as the fact that it was peer-reviewed, edited, and checked for plagiarism. CrossMark information could also include funding sources, any errata, or even if an article or an article cited has been retracted. If publishers and librarians can create meta-brands such as CrossMark, we can reassert our roles in guaranteeing the trustworthiness of scholarly information, whether or not researchers access the material through a library gateway or publisher website. In addition, readers will be able to quickly and easily identify trustworthy scholarly content within the overwhelming volume of information available to them.

Bilder articulated well the value added by publishers in ensuring the trustworthiness of scholarly content. Thoughtful listeners likely emerged from his presentation pondering larger questions about scholarly communication, particularly how the quality and authenticity of scholarship will be verified as scholarly communication continues to move online, possibly away from traditional publishing outlets such as refereed journals, and potentially out of the hands of both publishers and librarians.

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## NOTE

1. Kieron O'Hara, *Trust: from Socrates to Spin* Cambridge, UK: Icon Books, 2004).

## CONTRIBUTOR NOTES

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