THE SCHOLARLY
kitchen

Plum Goes Orange – Elsevier Acquires Plum Analytics

By **TODD A CARPENTER | FEB 2, 2017**

METRICS AND ANALYTICS

Nearly three years to the day after Plum Analytics (http://plumanalytics.com/) was acquired by EBSCO (https://www.ebsco.com/news-center/press-releases/plum-analytics-becomes-part-of-ebsco-information-services), Elsevier announced this morning that it has acquired the altmetric data aggregator's brand, tools, data, and the team working on the project. The deal reinforces Elsevier's collection of metrics offerings. It also provides some insight into the state of alternative metrics and their relationship to the multi-stakeholder academic community.

(https://3spxpi1radr22mzge33bla91-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/iStock-157682002.jpg)

Rather than portending something amiss in the altmetrics space, this deal appears to signal a developing understanding of where altmetrics sit in academia and who is most interested in them and why. EBSCO Information Services has deep roots in the library world, having been founded in the 1940s as a subscription agency. As the company has grown and expanded, it has added discovery and abstracting and indexing services, e-books, audiobooks, and now even ILS systems, remaining deeply focused on the library and its market segment. Providing a robust suite of library services allows EBSCO to serve a diverse library market, including public and special libraries well outside the academic world. The publisher Elsevier, meanwhile, has been expanding its suite of products and services to include the entire academic research lifecycle, rather than simply creating and providing subscribed journal content to users via the library as it did in the past. The company's range of services to academia has grown to include software and data-management, instruction, and assessment tools. While serving the library market broadly has been EBSCO's goal, serving the academic market deeply has been Elsevier's. Within this framework, one can see that Plum Analytics is simply a better fit strategically for Elsevier than for EBSCO.

This move also reinforces the distinction between metrics of and for the library space and metrics reconceived to serve the specific goals of the researcher. Traditional bibliometrics have studied the use and application of library resources. How frequently is a book circulated or a digital resource accessed? How often is an average article in a journal cited over the space of a few years? How many searches are run on discovery platforms? All of these are valuable questions for the library to ask about the use of its collection and the return on its investment in published resources. EBSCO has long supported these types of data collection and information management tools for librarians.

Altmetrics aim to provide both a more granular and a more research-based set of information: How has this particular article been received? Across all publications, how often has this researcher's work been accessed? What are the impacts of the nontraditional outputs that scholars produce and how can those be measured? Are there methods, apart from citations, that could be valuable in assessing the impact of a researcher's work and how can those approaches be quantified? Rather than using journals and journal-focused measures of quality (such as the Impact Factor), the altmetrics community sought to de-tether assessments of quality from the venues in which authors chose to publish their results. With this acquisition, we might now be able to infer that altmetrics are even further detached from libraries and more suitably tied to other elements of the academic community, such as the research office or individually with the faculty. This isn't exactly to toll the death-knell for "traditional" metrics — these will likely remain entrenched for decades, or even permanently, in the academic sphere of activity — but it does signal that there is an important distinction between the two.

Plum Analytics, founded in 2012 by Andrea Michalek and Mike Buschman, was one of the first altmetrics data aggregators in the community. Prior to founding Plum Analytics, both Michalek and Buschman worked on the product development team at Serials Solutions (the company was subsequently integrated into ProQuest) that launched Summon®. Michalek was Director of Technology for the Summon web-scale discovery service and Buschman was Director, Product Management. Buschman left Plum Analytics early in 2016, but Michalek has remained as President and will continue to lead the group following the acquisition. Since the launch of Plum Analytics, Michalek had grander visions for Plum Analytics than simply setting it up as a profitable analytics operation. She long said she was driven by a goal was to improve the pace and quality of science guided by her experience seeking medical information as she dealt with a illness in her family. She sought to combine the quality signals of citations with the rapid reaction of other less-traditional metrics.

In recent years, Elsevier has built and released a variety of tools related to assessment. As a company, Elsevier captures a tremendous amount of data, in various forms, about scholarly research endeavors, and its suite of products can create a picture of the research landscape for assessment purposes. The products in this assessment offering include SciVal and Pure, with Pure a researcher or institutionally-focused aggregation tool and SciVal a benchmarking tool that helps compare activities of client institutions with those of other institutions. Scopus recently announced the availability of CiteScore (https://www.elsevier.com/reviewers-update/story/impact-metrics/citescore-a-new-metric-to-help-you-choose-the-right-journal), an Elsevier-developed variant of the Impact Factor® (created and owned by the newly-renamed Clarivate Analytics (http://clarivate.com/)). This variant of citation analysis is based on an average citation ranking, but includes all references to a publication over a three-year period, whereas the Impact Factor is derived only from research articles and only from selected sources over two years. Various kinds of altmetrics data were also slated to be included in SciVal and Pure, according to their development roadmaps for 2017. The Plum almetrics data will now be incorporated to enhance these products. Existing customers of Plum Analytics products will experience no service disruption, but it is expected that Plum will benefit from the depth of information from which assessments can be drawn from Elsevier's vast pool of usage information. Additionally, there are significant subject expertise and programming resources that the Plum Analytics team will be able to draw from and derive other useful measures of quality or impact.

Another outlet for altmetric data will be to include supplying Plum Analytics metrics to individual users by incorporating Plum Analytics data into Mendeley profiles. Users will be able to see the impact of their research outputs regardless of whether their institution subscribes to Plum Analytics' services or not. Mendeley previously supported a feature by which institutional subscribers of Plum Analytics could plug assessment data into their profiles, but now all Mendeley users profiles' will display Plum Analytics metrics. This increased visibility of alternative metrics will likely enhance the recognition and use of different types of metrics, if users deem them reliable and useful.

One concern about the development of altmetrics has been possible business alignments between altmetrics aggregators and pools of publishers. This alignment might eventually lead to altmetrics for a particular publication or a collection of works being available only from the altmetrics aggregator who has a specific contract or relationship with the publisher of that content, with no easy way to aggregate data across providers. So for example one might envision a scenario where coverage of a title from a particular publisher's list is only and exclusively covered by a certain altmetrics data aggregator. This might limit altmetrics users to viewing only that portion of the scholarly record that is available from the user's chosen altmetrics provider, or force well-resourced institutions to subscribe to all of the various metrics providers to get complete industry coverage.

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Another concern has been that sources for other altmetrics data aggregators would be walled off as well. Now, with Plum Analytics within the Elsevier portfolio, could sharing of other parties' usage or reference data be curtailed? For example, Mendeley has long been a source of citation management data (i.e., it offers data that a particular number of people have added a particular article to their reference managers) for altmetric providers. After acquiring Plum Analytics, however, Elsevier may decide it is no longer in its interests to share data to the broader community from its reference management system. Could the openness upon which the altmetrics community relies and the importance of data sharing among data providers be at greater risk now that major publishers are aligning with altmetrics data aggregators? If certain types of usage data were to be limited to business partners, to the exclusion of competitors, many of the core types of impact assessments could be diminished. Elsevier's leadership said that there are no planned changes in its data availability policy as a result of this acquisition. Time will tell if that policy stands long term. In this regard, though, it should be noted that it has been four years since Elsevier acquired Mendeley (https://scholarlykitchen.sspnet.org/2013/04/08/a-matter-of-perspective-elsevier-acquires-mendeley-or-mendeley-sells-itself-to-elsevier/) and in that time, there has been no significant change in the data sharing practices of that service. Another reason to think this might not come to pass is the data sharing ecosystem that enables Scopus and the mutual benefit that publishers see by supplying Elsevier with data for indexing in that product.

Openness and transparency, principles that are core to NISO's Recommended Practice, *Outputs of the NISO Alternative Assessment Project*, are critical elements of trusted metrics. The NISO Recommended Practice includes a Code of Conduct for data aggregators such as Plum Analytics, Altmetric, and FigShare and data providers such as Mendeley, PLOS ALM, or ImpactStory. Plum Analytics was an early adopter of the Code of Conduct and posted its self-reporting (http://plumanalytics.com/niso-altmetrics-working-group-on-data-quality/) on conformance coincident with the publication of the Recommended Practice. One can expect because of the deep engagement with the NISO initiative that Plum will continue to comply with the voluntary recommendations NISO set forth.

The metrics landscape has been rapidly evolving over the past decade, and this acquisition signals that altmetrics are still finding their appropriate place in that landscape. By partnering with Elsevier, Plum Analytics appears to have found its niche.

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Discussion

2 THOUGHTS ON "PLUM GOES ORANGE – ELSEVIER ACQUIRES PLUM ANALYTICS"
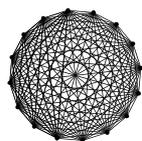
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