The Royal Society and the circulation of scientific knowledge in print, c1700-1900

Drawing upon our current research on the Royal Society’s *Philosophical Transactions*, this paper will examine the Royal Society’s approach to the circulation of knowledge in the 18th and 19th centuries, and its remarkable disinterest in copyright. Throughout this period, the journal itself (either as issues or as volumes) was the least likely means for most audiences to encounter its contents. The circulation of knowledge from meetings of the Society depended instead on a host of other printed forms, including abridgements and compilations, meeting reports in magazines, translations, excerpts, and offprints. Some of these (unlike the *Transactions* itself) were remarkable commercial successes, though they benefited neither the Society nor the authors of contributions. While the Society was concerned to assert both its moral ownership of research reported to it and its literal ownership of the physical papers submitted, it appears to have paid little attention to copyright. We suggest that this was partly because the concept and practice of copyright was ill-adapted to a periodical with hundreds of authors, collective editorial responsibility, and an unusual ownership and licensing history – and that the Society’s occasional experiences with copyright infringement added a pragmatic element to its principled non-commercial approach to circulating knowledge.

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