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How We Pay for Publishing

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How did we get into this mess?

Higher education administrators, funding bodies, and librarians are unhappy with the cost to acquire and access scholarly literature, especially subscription-based journals from commercial publishers, whose price increases far outstrip the growth in library budgets. An outsider might ask how it can cost so much to get access to many leading scholarly publications in an age when it costs so little to produce copies of documents. After all, the retail prices of print books have been largely flat, despite inflation, and Amazon and Apple have driven down the prices for digital books and music.

Readers and authors are increasingly feeling the system's dysfunction as well, finding that they are unable to get access through their institution to the publications that they need for their work and that acquiring their own copy is ridiculously expensive. While the problem has been created by commercial publishers skimming the cream of academic publications and then charging handsomely for access to these prestige brands, it has been difficult to effect change in the system because scholars are the consumers of the content but only rarely the purchasers of it; as with health care and prescription drugs, the true costs of market consolidation and intellectual property protection are not borne by the consumers of the services and products.

How might we get out?

Many stakeholders in scholarly publishing want not only to see a more efficient market but also to make scholarly literature free to read and reproduce at the same time. The argument for this is strongest in the case of government-funded research, whether produced with support from a research grant or simply by virtue of the author's employment at a publicly supported or mission-driven non-profit institution (such as a state or private university, respectively)—which frankly covers nearly all authors of scholarly publications.

Proposed interventions in the system aimed at increasing open access to scholarly literature are, broadly speaking, of two types:

a) Publishers claim that if they made their publications free to read, their sales or subscriptions would no longer cover their costs. Therefore, the academy could find money to give subsidies to the publishers beyond what they already pay for subscriptions to cover the "first copy" costs (what it costs the publisher to select,

edit, and design the publication before producing copies to sell). This would free the publishers from the need to recover their investment through sale or subscription prices, allowing them to make their publications open-access.

b) The academy could find a way to redirect the money that libraries pay for subscriptions towards covering the first-copy costs for open access. Proposals vary in the extent to which they propose publishers remain involved in this reimagined system of scholarly communication, but this action would in any case come at the expense of the profit margins currently made by many publishers.

The most notable version of (a) is the use of grant or institutional funding to pay an article processing charge (APC), a fee charged by a publisher to make open-access an article that would normally be available only to subscribers. (This is sometimes referred to as “gold open access”, though “gold” can also refer to a journal whose content is entirely open access, rather than containing a hybrid of open-access and non-open-access articles.) But librarians and administrators are wary of paying such fees to publishers without a guarantee that they would save a corresponding amount on their existing purchases and subscriptions with these publishers. In our era of permanent fiscal austerity, there isn't extra money for this sort of thing. Some efforts, like the Compact for Open-Access Publishing Equity (COPE), are designed to keep APCs from going to hybrid OA journals, thereby preventing “double-dipping” by a publisher receiving both subscription revenue and APCs.ⁱ

Concern over double-dipping—and more generally a concern that if publishers are allowed to set the fees, institutions will not really correct the dysfunctional market—is leading to greater interest in variations on (b). Most strategies risk a “free rider” problem: if you could pay to make content open-access, why not let others do so instead and simply take advantage of what they do? While there is generally goodwill among libraries to effect change, those libraries feel powerless to do so alone and under pressure to achieve as much access to content as possible.

To get around this conundrum, and no doubt drawing inspiration from SCOAP³, schemes like Knowledge Unlatched,ⁱⁱ the proposal for a Library Partnership Subsidy (LPS) by the Open Library of the Humanities,ⁱⁱⁱ and the AAU/ARL Task Force on Scholarly Communication's “Prospectus for an Institutionally Funded First-book Subvention”^{iv} (which proposes that colleges and universities give a publication subvention for their faculty members' first books that are accepted by a reputable publisher) use assurance contracts, whereby the arrangement only goes into effect if enough institutions commit, making the investment affordable to all of them, with none left subsidizing a large number of free riders. Funders such as the Open Society Foundations and the Mellon Foundation have stepped in to help launch Knowledge Unlatched and the Open Library of the Humanities, bridging the funding gap during pilot periods in order to keep costs down till a large number of institutions have committed. There is optimism that libraries will be willing to participate, even with the risk of free-riders, if the commitment is modest.

The most dramatic version of (b) is found in a whitepaper by Rebecca Kennison and Lisa Norberg of K|N Consultants entitled “A Scalable and Sustainable Approach to Open Access Publishing and Archiving for Humanities and Social Sciences.” They propose that institutions pay into a central fund that is disbursed not only to publishers, as in SCOAP³, but to partnerships of publishers, scholarly societies, and libraries. They hope to avoid free-riding institutions through persuasion, without resorting to an assurance contract.^v

How does this all affect university presses and academic libraries?

We are beginning to look at the funding of scholarly communication more holistically, no longer thinking of funding for a library to acquire material and a subsidy to a university press to produce material as unrelated expenses with separate justifications. There is increasing acceptance that a university press is a mission-driven operation that cannot be expected to balance its books at the end of each fiscal year, which often falls just at the time when an investment in print runs is needed for the upcoming semester’s textbooks. Furthermore, presses are under pressure to reduce the costs of their publications—costs that harm individual scholar and library consumers.

Just as library consortia have negotiated over fees with journal publishers, there is some interest in doing the same for access to monographs. *A National Monograph Strategy Roadmap*, by Ben Showers at Jisc, proposes “a license negotiated [. . .] on behalf of the UK academic sector for access to digital scholarly monographs.”^{vi} While potentially leading to access for more users in the UK at a lower cost per user, such moves toward consortia “reinforce the ‘big deal,’” which “only reinforces the logic of mergers and acquisitions, further strengthening the position” of publishers.^{vii} In other words, we’d see cream-skimming and oligopolistic tendencies in monograph publishing, just as we have with journal publishing.

Still, these developments do not involve fundamental changes in a university press’s business model. Even Knowledge Unlatched and the plan in the AAU/ARL prospectus, if they gain traction, would simply allow presses to make the incremental change of treating more of their titles than usual as heavily subventioned.

The K|N Consultants proposal, on the other hand, would lead to a more dramatic rethinking of the roles played both by libraries and presses. Instead of small-scale collaborations in which, as is common practice today, a library offers services to the university press on campus in order to fill gaps in the press’s expertise and resources, we would see the development of larger-scale efforts that reimagine production, access, and preservation of scholarly literature. This would break the university press model of accounting for costs on a per-title basis—a change that would be quite disruptive to decision-making for allocation of resources at a press

but would also accelerate the reimagining of scholarly publishing as a core function of a university, much like a library. While some publishers warn against lessening financial incentives in publishing (which they claim spur them to do better work and help allocate resources toward demand), increasingly administrators, funding bodies, and librarians believe that today's dysfunctional market so poorly reflects demand that it requires a radical rethinking, even of the financial incentives.

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ⁱ See question in "What open access journals will be eligible for underwriting of their publication charges?" at the COPE FAQ:

<http://www.oacompact.org/faq/#whichjournals>.

ⁱⁱ Knowledge Unlatched, <http://www.knowledgeunlatched.org/>.

ⁱⁱⁱ "Library Partnership Subsidies (LPS)", *Open Library of the Humanities*, <http://www.openlibhums.org/2014/04/07/library-partnership-subsidies-lps/>.

^{iv} "Prospectus for an Institutionally Funded First-book Subvention," June 2014, <http://www.arl.org/publications-resources/3280-aau-arl-prospectus-for-an-institutionally-funded-first-book-subvention>.

^v Rebecca Kennison and Lisa Norberg, "A Scalable and Sustainable Approach to Open Access Publishing and Archiving for Humanities and Social Sciences: A White Paper," pp. 5, 40, 40–41.

^{vi} "A National Monograph Strategy Roadmap," Jisc, <http://www.jisc.ac.uk/reports/a-national-monograph-strategy-roadmap>.

^{vii} See Chris Armbruster, "Open Access in the Natural and Social Sciences: The Correspondence of Innovative Moves to Enhance Access, Inclusion and Impact in Scholarly Communication," *Policy Futures in Education*, vol. 6, no. 4 (2008), p. 428. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2304/pfie.2008.6.4.424>.