From Paying to Read to Paying to Publish: Is the Shift Inevitable?

Kevin S. Hawkins
University of North Texas Libraries
@KevinSHawkins

An epigraph

Making copies and distributing them used to be expensive, and publishers, librarians, and tenure review committees were happy. Now it's cheap to make copies and distribute them, and everyone is miserable. What's wrong with this picture?

—Paul Courant (personal communication, October 31, 2007)

While I'm not usually one to begin my writing—or much less my presentations—with an epigraph, I'm going to make an exception today. Paul Courant, an economist who has served as both dean of libraries and provost at the University of Michigan, has said …

This is a witty aphorism about the changes we've seen in the digital age, and while many of us will immediately grasp what he's getting at, I want to expand a bit on why "everyone is miserable". If you're a researcher, librarian, or publisher, you will have your own reasons for being miserable but may be less aware of the pressures on others.

How are we unhappy?

- **Researchers (readers)**
  - Inconvenience of using library-based systems for online access
- **Librarians**
  - Prices increasing faster than inflation
  - Perceived position of weakness in relation to publishers
- **Publishers**
  - Readers expect things to be cheaper in the digital age, but the costs of publishing haven't gone away.
  - Unauthorized copying is rampant.

(expand on each point)

And so, while the cost to make copies of documents (electronically, but also in print) has decreased, the cost to acquire legal copies often has not. But our unhappiness isn't all about costs and business models …

publishers as gatekeepers

Back when it cost a lot to publish, the high barrier to entry to the market meant that a publisher could only afford to invest in publishing content that, when sold, would allow the publisher to recover its investment. This limited the growth of the publishing industry. In the North American context, this allowed tenure-review committees to rely on the publisher's brand as a proxy for the quality of the work—because if you got published by a publisher that people had heard of, it was clear that your work had been scrutinized and judged to be solid.
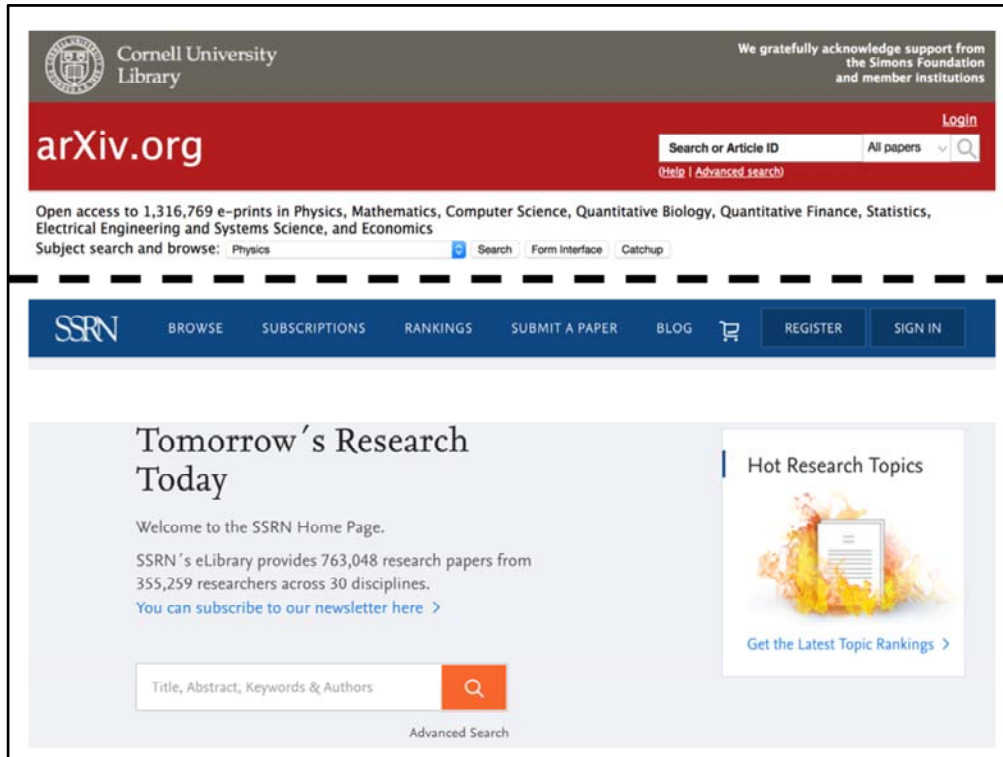
But then the internet came along, and researchers started circulating preprints among themselves by email. The exchange got formalized and made public through preprint services such as arXiv and SSRN, which make works free to read online and do not charge researchers to post them.

The thing is, when you start circulating works of scholarship online, whether or not those works are later published in a conventional venue, the old proxy function breaks down. Today, given the proliferation of channels by which scholars disseminate their research, it's:
• Harder for established publishers to maintain their dominant market position (based on being a gatekeeper)
• Harder for librarians to decide what to acquire for their collections (because of the proliferation of new publishers of scholarly literature)
• Harder for tenure-review committees to decide whom to grant tenure to

At the same time, with the cost of scholarly literature rising at an unsustainable rate (due primarily to selective acquisitions by and consolidation among commercial scholarly publishers), librarians and funders are pushing back on publishers and on researchers, trying to move towards a system that is more financially sustainable and which uses the internet to facilitate broader dissemination of research.

gratis open access

What exactly do we mean by broader dissemination? The core that everyone agrees on is making works of scholarship free to read online—what is called *gratis* open access. However, many of the main figures in the open access movement define open access not just as making work free to read but also free to reuse.

libre open access

Freedom to reproduce and modify a work as long as the creator is attributed is called *libre* open access. It is usually put into effect through use a Creative Commons license, which lets the creator specify in what ways someone can use the work without needing to ask for permission.

Creative Commons licenses
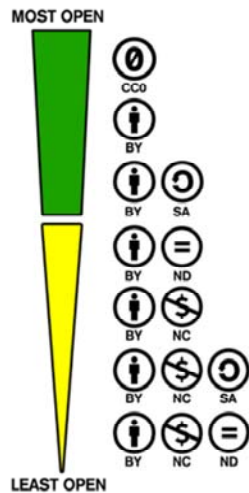
From "Understanding Free Cultural Works" by Creative Commons (licensed under CC BY 4.0 International)

(explain the sorts of conditions available)

(explain how I'm using an image licensed under a CC license and didn't have to ask permission to do so (and didn't have to make a fair use argument))

For our discussion today, there's no need to get too far into different types of open access. Let's just assume that we can get the stakeholders to agree that they want to make digital copies of some works of scholarship freely available in some form.

the cost of publishing

The problem, though, is that it still costs money to conduct peer review, to turn manuscripts into finished products, and to run infrastructure for publishing (ranging from office space to websites). These are things the publisher has to pay for in some fashion, even if they publish online only. While technology is helping us do certain things (like layout of a PDF) more efficiently, it can't all be automated.

There are all sorts of business models used for open access publishing—ways to recover costs that don't involve charging readers to read. Perhaps the best known of these is to charge authors a fee to publish. The fees vary greatly in amount, but we're seeing up to a few thousand dollars per journal article and many thousands for whole books.
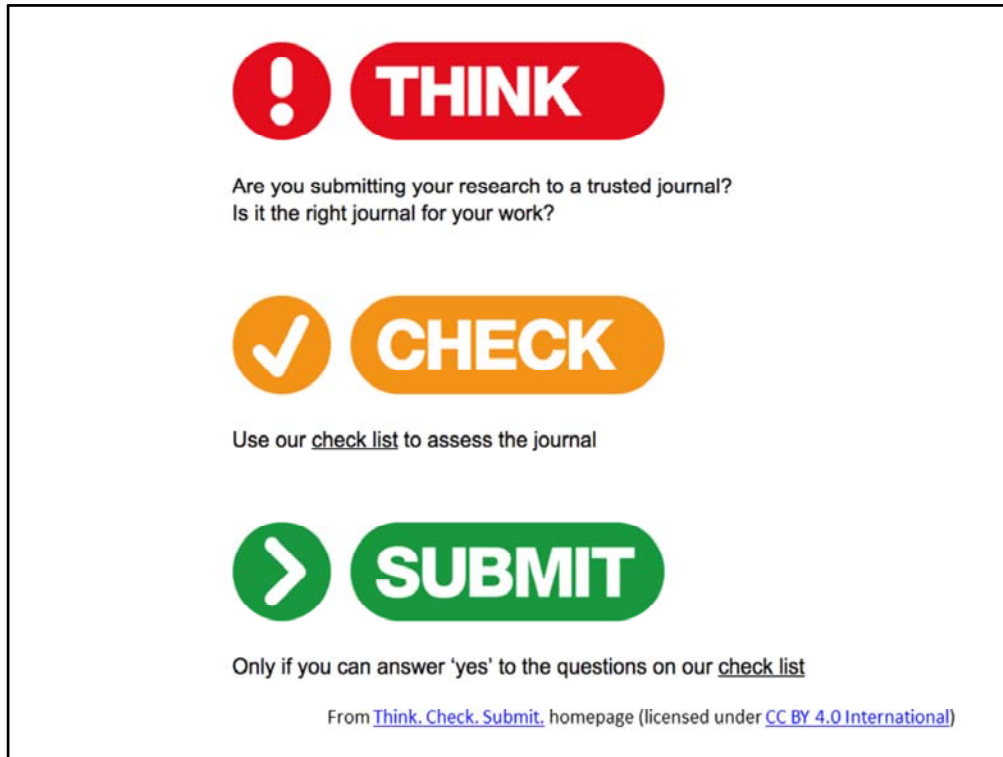
In the remainder of my presentation I'd like to review the many objections to this model that have been raised, consider the larger picture of how research and its dissemination is funded, and share with you some ways that institutions can be involved in supporting a transition to open-access publishing.

Objection #1

ISN'T IT VANITY PUBLISHING?

If you're paying the publisher to publish your work, isn't that vanity publishing? Well, not exactly. A true vanity publisher will publish anything as long as it's not libelous or otherwise illegal, whereas a proper open-access publisher will still conduct peer review.

How can you know if the publisher is proper? This gets tricky.

THINK

Are you submitting your research to a trusted journal?
Is it the right journal for your work?

CHECK

Use our check list to assess the journal

SUBMIT

Only if you can answer 'yes' to the questions on our check list

From Think. Check. Submit. homepage (licensed under CC BY 4.0 International)

(explain what Think. Check. Submit. is)

Librarians are well positioned to help researchers evaluate potential publishing venues. It's really an extension of our work in information and media literacy more generally. Please keep in mind that there were untrustworthy sources in the pre-digital era as well, but the difference is that back then librarians were generally filtering sources at the point of acquiring material for the library collection, whereas today researchers are doing research directly online, rather than in the constraints of their library's collection.

Objection #2

HOW WILL AUTHORS AFFORD THIS?

I mentioned before that author fees run into the thousands of dollars. Graduate students, adjuncts, and independent scholars rarely have such money lying around, and even full-time faculty are rarely in a position to pay such fees out of pocket. More established researchers may have research funds from past grants, but some fields, like the humanities, do very little grant-funded research. And what about researchers in less developed countries?

Publishers that charge author fees sometimes have tiers of funding (just like membership in professional societies), and they often have an option to waive fees entirely for eligible researchers. But we don't want to recreate the system of financial aid for higher education US, where the sticker price is a deterrent to someone even considering attending and where there's an administrative burden to demonstrating your need.

Some say that we shouldn't expect researchers to pay these fees out of their own pockets. Instead, we should have the library pay such fees, redirecting funds that would otherwise go towards a subscription.

Objection #3

BUT LIBRARIES CAN'T AFFORD THIS!

If the library paid thousands of dollars for each publication by faculty at the institution, that would be a lot of money. On the other hand, libraries pay a lot of money for journals and books as it is. If, hypothetically, every academic library stopped buying things all at once and instead paid author fees, would the libraries save money?

The "Pay It Forward" project, a recent study led by the University of California Davis and the California Digital Library, worked out what would happen if the total figure for journal subscriptions by a library were divided among all the articles published by affiliated faculty members. At the current industry average for author fees, the most research-intensive institutions would not be able to cover costs from library funds alone, but the difference is small enough that researcher grant funds should be able to cover the remainder.

For libraries, it is important to find a way to keep from paying both subscriptions and author fees—what librarians call "double dipping" by publishers. This is common in the model of "hybrid open access", whereby a journal is generally available only by subscription but with select articles made open access if the author pays a fee. It's a bad deal for the academy to be paying both for subscriptions and for author fees on such publications. This points to the importance for academic libraries to think about collection development and open-access–related initiatives holistically—perhaps even by following the lead of MIT and combining these activities into a single department.

Corollary to objection #3

LIBRARIES SHOULDN'T HAVE TO BEAR THIS ALONE!

Since we're unlikely to find a way to get libraries and publishers to do a mass switch to the author-pays model for existing subscription publications, maybe we should focus instead on how to pay for publications that are already available in open access but which charge author fees (but aren't hybrid open-access publications). Should the library absorb the cost of author fees for just authors affiliated with their institution? That would be hard to do given today's budgets if we're continuing to subscribe to non–open-access journals. You could ask researchers to use grant funding to pay these fees and to write author fees into future grant proposals, but both of things are ultimately the responsibility of the researcher.

Maybe the institution's research office and academic units should support these fees, sharing the burden with the library? That would give other parts of the university besides the library a stake in having a sustainable system for funding the publication of research and keep us from the current situation, in which authors are like doctors prescribing prescription drugs and readers are like patients with prescription-drug coverage: neither party has much of a sense of the true cost of medication.

Still, we'd end up funding only publications from researchers affiliated with wealthy institutions, and we'd continue to rely on fee waivers to support independent scholars and researchers in developing countries.

One way out of this is to have funders step up and agree to fund author fees for work resulting from research that they fund. The Wellcome Trust and Gates Foundation have

adopted such policies. Unfortunately, this simply moves the barrier to publish from one's institutional affiliation to one's funder.

I hope that all of this points to the bigger picture of scholarly communication: it's an ecosystem that all stakeholders need to help maintain, and all stakeholders need to contribute to helping the system evolve to meet the realities of the digital age.

Objection #4

THE STATE SHOULDN'T CONTROL SPEECH

There's also a philosophical objection to the author-pays model that I heard raised once which I'm surprised doesn't get raised more often. It goes like this …

If we expect institutions or grants—both of which are largely supported by public funds—to pay author fees, then we are opening the door to control of the dissemination of academic research by the government. The state could suppress research that it doesn't like simply by not funding its publication.

We see this play out in various ways not involving author fees, such as:
- The EPA not allowing its scientists to talk to the media or present at certain conferences
- Federal law prohibiting the NIH and CDC from funding research to "advocate or promote gun control"
- The Wisconsin legislature withholding funding from the University of Wisconsin over specific courses and research centers

So the problem isn't unique to author fees. Institutions that pay author fees already have procedures in place to make sure that funds are used only for legitimate publications, so we'd just need to make sure that the criteria for legitimate publications are established by researchers and based on objective criteria that don't relate to the subject matter of the research. It's similar to the safeguards we have in place for awarding grants from public funds: there are review panels of peer experts. In short, we need to be vigilant about political influence, but I don't think the risk for funding author fees is any greater than for other types of political interference.

Is the shift from paying to read to paying to publish inevitable?

I don't know. I can't envision a world where authors are expected to pay out of pocket, so there's no worry about that. But will we find another way to support the cost of publishing besides one based on paying for access to content? The transition is already far along in some fields, and it seems that it will eventually come in some form in most others.

How else can institutions can be involved in supporting a transition to open-access publishing?

Aside from needing to decide whether or how to support an author-pays model, there are some other things that an institution can do to support open access. These include:

- Faculty-adopted OA policy that set an expectation for sharing scholarship as widely as possible, with enforcement by only considering works that follow the policy (or for which the author has requested a waiver) in any sort of review and assessment activities.
- Provost and other senior administrators signing declarations in support of open scholarship and giving departments support in revising their guidelines to allow for alternative forms of scholarship.

Before I conclude, let me say that if you're interested in learning more about open access, I encourage you to attend UNT's annual open access symposium. The 2018 symposium June 6 and 7 at UNT's Health Science Center in Fort Worth, with the theme "Open Medical and Health Information". T will be held in conjunction with the Joint Conference on Digital Libraries, another event that draw attendees from around the world.

Questions and discussion!