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Collaborative Transition to Open Access Publishing by Scholarly Societies

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Abstract:

For decades, universities, researchers, and libraries have sought a system-wide transition of scholarly publishing to open access (OA) but progress has been slow. There is now potential for more rapid and impactful change, as new collaborative OA publishing models have taken shape. Cooperative publishing arrangements represent a viable path forward for society publishers to transition to OA as the default standard for disseminating research. The traditional article processing charge (APC) OA model has introduced sometimes unnavigable financial roadblocks, but cooperative arrangements premised on collective action principles can help to secure long-term stability and prevent the risk of free riding. Investment in cooperative arrangements does not require that cash-strapped libraries discover a new influx of money as their collection budgets continue to shrink, but rather that they purposefully redirect traditional subscription funds toward publishing support. These cooperative arrangements will require a two-way demonstration of trust: On one hand, libraries working together to provide assurances of sustained financial support, and on the other, societies' willingness to experiment with discarding subscriptions. Organizations like Society Publishers Coalition and Transitioning Society Publications to Open Access are committed to education about and further development of scalable and cooperative OA publishing models.

Text:

On June 11th 2020, evidence of the new front in the conflict for scientific communication's future came into view. One of the world's most prominent research institutions, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), announced that it would be ending negotiations with one of the world's largest publishers of scientific journals, the Dutch commercial publisher Elsevier. According to MIT, Elsevier was unable to present a proposal that aligned with the principles outlined in the MIT Framework for Publisher Contracts, that is premised on the values "that openly sharing research and educational materials is key to the Institute's mission of advancing knowledge and bringing that knowledge to bear on the world's greatest challenges." (MIT, 2020). With the cancellation of their Elsevier deal, MIT joined an increasingly vocal chorus of universities, researchers, and libraries[1] who — recognizing the alignment of Open Access (OA) with the fundamental values of scholarship — are calling for a system-wide transition of scholarly publishing to open and are prepared to walk away from publishing agreements that fail to make progress toward it (Barber, 2020; University of California, 2020).

This movement seeking to regain control of scholarly publishing, particularly from commercial — in some cases, oligopolistic (Lariviere et al., 2015) — forces is not new. Libraries, scholars, and activists have practically been calling for this shift since academic journals were wholly transitioned to online: questioning the validity of the centuries-old subscription model for the digital age in which scientific research could be more rapidly produced and broadly disseminated. Although

1 For instance, the University of California which similarly terminated journal negotiations with Elsevier in 2019.

formalized with a series of Declarations in 2002/2003[2] advocating for the systemic transition of scientific research to open dissemination, more than 15 years later OA has only reached approximately 31% of published literature (Piwowar et al., 2019), and progress towards a systemic transformation remains slow. Yet what is new is the potential for more rapid and impactful change, as new collaborative OA publishing models have taken shape.

To date, much of the growth of OA in scholarship has been propelled by the Author Processing Charge (APC) model, in which authors (or their institutions/libraries or research funders) pay a fee to publishers (ranging between several hundred dollars to more than $6000) on acceptance of a manuscript to cover the costs of publication and replace revenue the publishers would have derived from subscription sales. The APC model, or a variation of it, is likely to remain an efficient and viable path to OA in the biomedical and other well-funded sciences, where funder mandates (such as Plan S) may be applicable. Yet the APC model introduces sometimes unnavigable roadblocks for scholars and institutions: a financial barrier to publishing affordable to few; perverse incentives for publishers to release larger numbers of articles; and a potential new revenue stream from which publishers could "double-dip"[3] alongside historically lucrative library subscriptions. But scholarship is much broader than the biomedical sciences, and there is an imperative to find effective means for sustaining OA publishing in the lesser-funded sciences, social sciences and humanities.

2 Declarations include, e.g., the Budapest Open Access Initiative https://www.budapestopenaccessinitiative.org/read; and the Bethesda Statement on Open Access Publishing http://dx.doi.org/10.4403/jlis.it-8628.

3 Double dipping can take place in some hybrid OA models in which subscription journals also publish some articles OA through payments of APCs, without issuing commensurate subscription reductions/discounts. The practice of reducing or discounting subscriptions based on APCs that have been paid is called offsetting.

A number of alternative models to support OA publishing have begun to materialize — ones in which scholarly publishers are entering into cooperative arrangements with academic libraries (Wise and Estelle, 2019). Although currently limited by discipline and content type, models such as SCOAP3[4], the Open Library of the Humanities[5], and Knowledge Unlatched[6] are already providing important empirical examples of effective cooperation. Also of particular appeal is Subscribe to Open (S2O), which has already demonstrated success (Annual Reviews, 2020) and is being piloted by a rapidly growing number of societies (American Society Cell Biology, 2020; International Water Association, 2020). S2O allows publishers to transition from gated access to OA one year at a time by offering a journal's current subscribers continued access at a regular subscription discount (Crow et al. 2020). If current subscribers participate, content covered by that year's subscription is made OA. If participation is insufficient – for example, if some subscribers delay renewing in the expectation that they can gain access without participating – then the content remains paywalled. Because the publisher does not guarantee that the content will be OA unless all subscribers participate in the offer, institutions that value access must either subscribe conventionally (at full price) or participate in S2O (at a discount) to ensure continued access.The offer is repeated yearly, with the opening of each year's content contingent on sufficient participation.

Building models such as S2O on the basis of collective action principles-- best described in Mancur Olson’s seminal work, the *Logic of Collective Action* (1965)— can help to secure long-term stability. Olsen describes how groups can support the provision of public goods through coordinated action, as the non-excludability and nonrivalry of benefits means that one person’s contribution automatically benefits

4 http://scoap3.org
5 www.openlibhums.org
6 www.knowledgeunlatched.org

other potential contributors (Olson, 1965). While recognizing that the risk of free-riding (i.e. benefiting from the good without contributing to its provision), Olsen contends that collective action can succeed with adequate coordinating mechanisms. Applying collective action theory and practice to the design of cooperative Open Access models between libraries and publishers can help to lower organizing costs, increase the resources available to fund open content, and reduced risk models through limiting free ridership (Crow, 2015).

Investment in cooperative arrangements does not require that cash-strapped libraries discover a new influx of money as their collection budgets continue to shrink, but rather that they purposefully redirect traditional subscription funds toward publishing support. Recent work (Naim, 2019) found that in entering into cooperative OA arrangements, libraries were more closely aligned with non-profit publishers (in particular scientific societies), where the two parties shared closer value alignment.

This finding should be positive and reassuring news for society publishers. Although many have inked agreements with commercial publishing partners to sustain revenue, they continue to uphold their respective missions, which remain well aligned with the values of the academy, and present appealing investment opportunities for universities, research institutions, and libraries. Scholarly societies in particular feel vulnerable in the current climate of commercial dominance of scholarly publishing, compounded by increasing demands from the funder community and scholars alike to explore sustainable OA strategies. The subscription model has enabled many society publishers to generate surpluses, which have become central to the support of society activities such as member education, research grants, and public engagement. Yet, libraries have indicated willingness to

engage in expenditure-neutral models with society publishers, effectively indicating that their publishing surpluses are not under scrutiny, provided there is some financial transparency, and that surpluses fund activities that advance the discipline (Naim, 2019; Brundy et al. 2019).

As society journal subscriptions have largely been bundled for libraries through aggregating intermediaries, libraries and societies have a rather nascent understanding of each others' needs. As such, these cooperative arrangements, at least for some time, may require a two-way demonstration of trust: On one hand, libraries working together to provide assurances of sustained financial support, and on the other, societies' willingness to experiment with discarding subscriptions. To forge bilateral trust, education about and further development of scalable and cooperative OA publishing models is needed.

That is precisely what organizations like Society Publishers' Coalition (SocPC) are trying to achieve. With over 85 member societies, SocPC is working to ensure an orderly and sustainable transition for non-profit learned societies to open scholarship. Through education about and development of new transitional publishing models, SocPC is working to support scale and efficiency in cooperative approaches, and help societies gain leverage in negotiating with libraries and consortia — thereby securing the focus and prioritization that is typically reserved only for commercial publishers. Members of SocPC, such as Biochemical Society, have already launched several open access pilots[7] and have successfully initiated dialog across the sector regarding the essential and precarious place of learned societies (Legge, 2020; Brainard, 2019).

7 Wise and Estelle (2019) provide a thorough overview of the open access models available to scholarly societies.

Another such group building trust between societies and libraries is Transitioning Society Publications to Open Access (TSPOA), co-chaired by the three authors. TSPOA largely focuses on bringing together stakeholders to catalyze and support society transitions. Members come from a range of library, academic, consortia, and publisher backgrounds and are united in their interest to see societies sustainably transition to an open world. TSPOA's work takes the form of direct consultations, advocacy, and education. For example, in the fall of 2019, TSPOA partnered with SocPC to present a three part webinar series examining issues facing learned societies as they seek to move their publications to open access as well as the emerging open business models that can be used (TSPOA, 2019). Consultations have taken place with a number of self-publishing societies, including smaller societies that may only have one publication, to larger societies with a large portfolio of publications. But consistent in TSPOA's approach is the desire to harness the good will that exists in the library community for mission focused society publishers while simultaneously recognizing the growing urgency to expand open access.

This urgency has only grown during the current public health crisis surrounding COVID-19. In the time of this pandemic, academic publishers have recognized OA as the optimal mechanism for achieving rapid progress towards solutions on many fronts, including vaccines, therapeutics, disease epidemiology, and others. Prompted by the Wellcome Trust, dozens of publishers and content providers (commercial and non-commercial alike) have agreed to making COVID-19-related research either immediately open access, or at least freely available for the duration of the outbreak (Wellcome, 2020). These gestures of access, funded primarily by research library subscriptions, acknowledge that the paywalled system

is not only suboptimal, but that open access to scientific articles and datasets is critical to solving global problems and saving lives. Cooperative publishing arrangements represent a viable path forward for society publishers to transition to OA as the default standard for disseminating research. This will not only equip the scientific community to better respond to future challenges, but will further accelerate the advancement of research and scholarship as a whole.

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