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Scott, Alison Marie

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# Article Processing Charges Threaten Academic Libraries: A Librarian's Opinion

Alison M. Scott

## KEYWORDS

open access, gold OA, article processing charges, academic libraries, librarianship

## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

As Associate University Librarian for Collection Management & Scholarly Communication, Alison Scott has strategic responsibility for the ways that University of California, Los Angeles Library's collections grow and change. She joined the UCLA Library in October 2017, following service as Associate University Librarian for Collections & Scholarly Communication at the University of California, Riverside, Head of Collection Development for The George Washington University Libraries, Charles Warren Bibliographer for American History at Harvard University, and Head of the Popular Culture Library at Bowling Green State University.

## ABSTRACT

The aim of Gold Open Access, funded by Article Processing Charges (APCs), is to fulfill the altruistic and vitally important goal of achieving free access to scholarly publication. However, if financed by academic library collections budgets, APC-funded open access will ultimately result in the abandonment of fundamental values of academic libraries and librarianship. This opinion paper derives from remarks delivered at the 2016 Charleston Conference. The author was invited to participate in the annual Hyde Park Debate in which she argued that APC-funded open access is antithetical to the values of librarianship.

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In the years since the open access movement began, a variety of approaches have been proposed to provide the financial infrastructure needed to support "the lofty ideals that seek to enact [the] democratizing effect in the scholarly realm" promised by open access:

Removing access barriers to this literature will accelerate research, enrich education, share the learning of the rich with the poor and the poor with the rich, make this literature as useful as it can be, and lay the foundation for uniting humanity in a common intellectual conversation and quest for knowledge.<sup>1</sup>

Mechanisms ranging from governmental subsidies to submission fees have been extensively discussed, but the "Gold Open Access" model based on Article Processing Charges (APCs) plays a significant and increasingly dominant role in the on-going debate.<sup>2</sup>

It is my belief that any funding model that would divert the budgets of academic libraries to pay the APCs needed to finance a full conversion to Gold OA publishing threatens the long-standing

mission of academic libraries. I also believe that APC-funded open access, if underwritten by libraries, is antithetical to two of the fundamental values that underpin librarianship and libraries.<sup>3</sup>

I define “open access” as online access to published research—the materials that contribute to and constitute the scholarly record—free of charge to readers and without financial, legal, or technical barriers to access, beyond those that are “inseparable from gaining access to the internet itself.”<sup>4</sup> I define the qualifier “APC-funded” as the payment of up-front fees that make it possible for a work of scholarship to be made available as an open access work. APCs are a means for publishers to generate the income needed to support the costs of open access publication, enabling free access to works by imposing pre-publication fees rather than post-publication fees such as subscriptions, document delivery charges, or pay walls. APCs are the “author pays costs” tint of Gold OA.

The laudable aims of open access include broadening the audience for research, maximizing the impact of research, promoting the growth of new knowledge, fostering open scholarly communication, and providing access to publicly funded research. For scholars, open access offers the promise of increasing both the transparency and impact of their research. For the average citizen, it means unrestricted access to the published results of research financed by public funds.<sup>5</sup> For librarians, there are practical opportunities: “open access promises to remove both the *price barriers* and the *permission barriers* that undermine library efforts to provide access to the scholarly record.”<sup>6</sup> It also entices us with hope for an end to the long-standing serials crisis.<sup>7</sup>

When I assert that APC-funded open access is antithetical to the values of librarianship and academic libraries, I do not dispute or intend to belittle the idealistic, aspirational aims of the open access movement. The utopian goals of open access are in concord with many of the “core academic values and principles associated with teaching, learning and research in higher Education” and the means by which academic librarians support the missions of colleges and universities.<sup>8</sup> This is because open access, as an ideal and as a set of aspirations, aligns with two of the central values of academic libraries and academic librarianship:

- Libraries are shared resources that are intended to serve—and are supported—as community goods.
- Academic libraries, as shared resources and community goods, support the creation of knowledge through the entire range of services, infrastructures for discovery and access, and collections that libraries provide to our communities of interest.

However, open access models based on library-funded APCs call for libraries to act against these foundational values.

In a blog entry for *The Scholarly Kitchen*, David Crotty asserted that “[o]ne of the core principles of Gold OA is that the costs shift from being spread broadly among consumers of the literature to being concentrated directly on producers of the literature.”<sup>9</sup> This statement can be read as

an anodyne summary of the business principle behind author-funded models of open access. A more critical reading suggests that this is a clear and precise statement of why APC-funded open access is antithetical to the values of academic librarianship. The issue is not simply shifting costs from one budget to another. Redirecting the budgets of academic libraries to support APC-funded open access redirects the attention, intentions, and priorities of academic libraries and librarians.

Funding for the acquisition of materials is always one of the largest budget categories in academic libraries, exceeded only by salaries; within acquisitions budgets, spending on serial subscriptions typically far exceeds every other category of expenditure. Library spending on serial subscriptions underpins the economy of the marketplace of ideas. Therefore, ideas for transforming the marketplace from toll-access to open-access publication often look to library acquisitions budgets as the essential resource for engineering the flip to open access, by changing the economic basis of scholarly publication from subscription fees to article processing charges, and by diverting libraries' budgets from collections to the direct support of local authors' publication fees.

In one scenario, the funds could continue to be managed by academic libraries. Libraries would then be responsible for covering the cost of the APCs generated by their campus' authors--the same way libraries cover the cost of subscriptions for their campuses.

In a different scenario, the funds could go directly to faculty and other campus researchers who would then have discretionary control over their allocated publication funds.<sup>10</sup>

In any case, the Max Planck Digital Library's "OA 2020 Roadmap" argues that "[o]pen access cannot become a reality on a larger scale without utilizing and re-purposing the massive resources that are spent on journal subscriptions, year after year."<sup>11</sup> In the 2015 Max Planck Digital Library open access policy white paper titled "Disrupting the Subscription Journals' Business Model for the Necessary Large-Scale Transformation to Open Access," the authors state that

the final breakthrough to a comprehensive open access publishing system cannot be achieved unless library acquisition budgets are re-purposed so as to consolidate the system's two current streams into a single undertaking to provide the best possible publishing services for the patron researchers.<sup>12</sup>

More specifically, librarian/economist Jeffrey Mackie-Mason invokes *homo economicus*: if authors were engaged "in the economic decision about where to publish," the market-based obstacles to open access will disappear as price competition is created. Thus, he believes that the solution to open-access transformation is "'merely' one of getting money from subscription budgets into APC budgets."<sup>13</sup>

Funding APC-based open access by appropriating libraries' subscription budgets involves a fundamental paradox: to attain the altruistic goal of promoting the free flow of scholarly information, community resources are diverted to the exclusive support of "the producers of the literature" and are, in effect, privatized. Librarians will become agents acting for knowledge producers and documenting past accomplishment.

The foundation of being—mission, purpose, reason to exist at all—for any academic library is as a community endeavor to support learning. Learning, as an endeavor, activity or vocation, ultimately rests on the intention to extend knowledge; as a shared commitment, the community endeavor of learning has been founded upon, and bounded by, the means and tools through which knowledge can be generated, extended, documented and conveyed. Libraries were created and have evolved as one of the primary locations for the managerial and financial structures necessary to acquire and preserve the tools of scholarship, provide the services that make these tools available and useful, and offer facilities to enhance aspects of the learning community itself. Whether called information scientists, content managers, support staff, aiders of scholarship, or just librarians, academic librarians are contributors to the communal work of scholarship, and participants in the fundamental goal of generating knowledge.

APC-funded open access turns the community-based role of librarians, and the future-based goal of generating knowledge, on their heads.

APC-funded open access is focused on promulgating the work products of researchers, and the means by which the results of research, primarily in the form of scholarly articles, enter the cycle of scholarly communication. Library-backed APC mechanisms for attaining the greater good of open access mean that, practically speaking, the attention of libraries and librarians must be turned from meeting the needs of our academic communities' learners, teachers, and researchers toward the functional support of article producers. Academic and research libraries have a responsibility for the documentation and preservation of the record of scholarship, and individual academic libraries bear a responsibility for documenting the work produced by their own institution's scholars. Nevertheless, academic libraries collect and make the records of scholarship discoverable and accessible with the primary intention of promoting the use of that scholarly record for the creation of knowledge.

There are, of course, many things that libraries and librarians are called upon to do that may seem unrelated or tangential to learning and knowledge creation. As a set of practical tasks, managing APCs for the benefit of authors could be as significant to the success of the learning enterprise and knowledge creation as the tasks required to manage the restrictions to access to digital content imposed by content providers' licensing terms. The difference between the two lies in the intention: doing our best to provide access to community-supported resources versus supporting the self-interested economic decisions of individual article producers. The latter may, in the end, serve a greater good—democratizing scientific information, for instance. But it does ask us to accept the means, whereby the resources of a local learning community are, in essence, privatized.

In scenarios in which APCs are paid for by grants, by the agencies that fund research, by private sources, or even from institutional resources meant to support faculty development and research (akin, perhaps, to the ways that laboratories and office space are provided), I see no threat to libraries or librarianship.

The subscription model of funding scholarly publication has many, many problems, but it does have the conceptual advantage of solidly grounding academic libraries' financial conversations on the answers to questions about the value and utility of content for ongoing research, teaching, and learning. APC-funded open access, if backed by library budgets, would require libraries to focus managing the products of research, not continuing discovery, the future of research, or knowledge creation. Even if the ultimate aim of APC-funded open access is the fulfillment of the altruistic and vitally important goal of open access, APCs funded by libraries will ultimately result in the abandonment of fundamental values of academic libraries and academic librarianship.

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<sup>1</sup> Harrison W. Inefuku, "Globalization, Open Access, and the Democratization of Knowledge," *EDUCAUSEreview* 52, no. 4 (July/August 2017), <http://er.educause.edu/articles/2017/7/globalization-open-access-and-the-democratization-of-knowledge>; "Read the Budapest Open Access Initiative," February 14, 2002, [www.budapestopenaccessinitiative.org/read](http://www.budapestopenaccessinitiative.org/read).

<sup>2</sup> David Solomon, J. Mikael Laakso, and Bo-Christer Björk, authors; Peter Suber, editor, "Converting Scholarly Journals to Open Access: A Review of Approaches and Experiences," Harvard Library, 2016, <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:27803834>.

<sup>3</sup> This essay is adapted from remarks delivered at the 2016 Charleston Conference. For a video recording of the debate, see 'Hyde Park Debate – Resolved: APC-Funded Open Access Is Antithetical to the Values of Librarianship,' YouTube video, posted by CharlestonConference, February 16, 2017, <https://youtu.be/ufmJwzfyco4>.

<sup>4</sup> Max-Planck-Gesellschaft, 'Berlin Declaration on Open Access to Knowledge in the Sciences and Humanities,' October 22, 2003, <https://openaccess.mpg.de/Berlin-Declaration>.

<sup>5</sup> Donald Barclay, 'Could Subscriptions for Academic Journals Go the Way of Pay Phones?' *The Conversation* (blog), October 23, 2016, <https://theconversation.com/could-subscriptions-for-academic-journals-go-the-way-of-pay-phones-63575>.

<sup>6</sup> Emphasis in the original. "Open Access," Wikipedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Open\\_access](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Open_access), accessed October 14, 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Stephen Bosch and Kittie Henderson, "Fracking the Ecosystem: Periodicals Price Survey 2016," *Library Journal*, April 21, 2016, accessed July 24, 2017, <http://lj.libraryjournal.com/2016/04/publishing/fracking-the-ecosystem-periodicals-price-survey-2016/>; Albert N. Greco, "Academic Libraries and the Economics of Scholarly Publishing in

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the Twenty-First Century: Portfolio Theory, Product Differentiation, Economic Rent, Perfect Price Discrimination, and the Cost of Prestige," *Journal of Scholarly Publishing*, October 2015, DOI: 10.3138/jsp.47.1.01.

<sup>8</sup> Canadian Association of Professional Academic Librarians/L'Association Canadienne des Bibliothécaires Académiques Professionnels, "Foundational Documents," <http://capalibrarians.org/membership/>.

<sup>9</sup> David Crotty, 'The Pay It Forward Project: Confirming What We Already Knew About Open Access,' *The Scholarly Kitchen* (blog) August 9, 2016, <https://scholarlykitchen.sspnet.org/2016/08/09/the-pay-it-forward-project-confirming-what-we-already-knew-about-open-access/>.

<sup>10</sup> Donald A. Barclay, "Could subscriptions for academic journals go the way of pay phones?" *The Conversation* (blog), October 23, 2016. <https://theconversation.com/could-subscriptions-for-academic-journals-go-the-way-of-pay-phones-63575>.

<sup>11</sup> Max Planck Digital Library, "OA2020 Roadmap," March 21, 2016, <https://oa2020.org/roadmap/>.

<sup>12</sup> Ralf Schimmer, Kai Karin Geschuhn, and Andreas Vogler, "Disrupting the Subscription Journals' Business Model for the Necessary Large-Scale Transformation to Open Access: A Max Planck Digital Library Open Access Policy White Paper," April 28, 2015, DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17617/1.3>.

<sup>13</sup> Emphasis in the original. Jeffrey Mackie-Mason, "Economic Thoughts about 'Gold' Open Access," *madLibbing* (blog), April 23, 2016, <http://madlibbing.berkeley.edu/economic-thoughts-about-gold-open-access/>.