

At what cost closed? or shifting to the other foot in the name of scholarship

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So what's the problem?

In order to understand current issues that impact the current state of scholarly communication, we need to better understand the history of libraries, scholarly societies, and higher education. Since the late 1800s learned and professional societies have shouldered the role of facilitating communication among members and the rest of the intellectual world. This began with hosting meetings of the members with letters being sent between the members about the topics discussed in the meetings. These letters began to be collected and became the proceedings or journals of the society. These journals were subject to editorial processes and peer review that gave them special authoritative status. These authoritative journals were then collected by research libraries to serve a broader community of scholars. This scenario served the academy well for many, many years.

Following WWII the system started to get out of balance. During this time, higher education in the United States experienced a boom era. A growth in the availability of funding for research led to a growth in the output of scholarly publications from the nation's researchers and faculty. The scholarly societies who had to that time easily managed the editorial processes and publication of scholarly literature found themselves overwhelmed by the volume of scholarly articles being produced. Commercial publishers stepped in to offer assistance and provide venues for faculty to publish their work and to take the burden off of the scholarly societies. It was a deal almost too good to be true. The commercial publishers offered to take the burden from the scholarly societies and provide them with income. This opened the door to the commodification of information by the commercial publishers while providing wider venues for distribution of scholarship. This fundamentally changed the balanced model, however. Faculty willingly signed over copyright to their work because they needed to be published in the most prestigious journals, now managed by commercial entities. Faculty, supported by their universities, volunteered time to serve as peer reviewers and editors of these publications. The commercial publishers were now in an enviable position of selling a product and realizing great profits with little "skin in the game." The product they were selling had a guaranteed market in research libraries that would purchase the journals even as the prices increased. Large publishing houses such as Elsevier, Springer and Wiley began buying up scientific journals with purpose.

By the 1970s and early 1980s library budgets started feeling the pinch. Libraries began cutting subscriptions as prices escalated. Prices were raised even more by the publishers so that profit margins could be maintained. As the prices continued to rise, libraries began cutting not only serial subscriptions, but the number of monograph purchases as well. University presses that once had a guaranteed market of over 1000 libraries for the scholarly monographs written by the

faculty researchers began to see a continual decline in the number of books that they could sell. Academic libraries began limiting their purchases of humanities and social science monographs because rising serial budgets were displacing book budgets. Science journals are very expensive (a subscription to *Brain Research* is nearly \$20,000 per year). Thus began the vicious downward spiral with the amount libraries spend on serials continuing to rise and the amount left to spend on monographs continuing to decline. University libraries are now even forced to examine the amount spent on science serials because of budget shortfalls.

This has been a terrible situation for university presses. University presses continue to operate under increasing pressure. They have been forced to provide offerings that have a broader public appeal to offset the losses brought about by a decreasing market of academic libraries. Many presses are offering books with a local focus (regional cooking, heritage, gardening) that will help them stay afloat.¹ Many university presses receive significant funding from their parent institutions, but these funds are increasingly cut because of overall budget pressure in higher education.

Can things change?

So rather than spending a lot of time wringing our hands about how bad things are, what kind of things could be done to actually change things? In a perfect world, what kind of model could actually help promote scholarship? How can we get back to the original purpose of scholarly societies, that is to promote, vet, and discuss new ideas?

1. Most universities have institutional repositories to preserve and make available the intellectual capital of the academic enterprise. What if, rather than prohibit graduate students from putting their dissertations into the repositories or instead of enforcing a long embargo period, institutions require that all theses and dissertations be deposited into their repositories? Proper metadata can be assigned to make the scholarship discoverable through standard search engines.
2. If companies (such as ProQuest) want to text mine the dissertations to provide a value added service that could be commercialized, they can do so. It would be appropriate to compensate the universities for use of the content, because after all, the universities supported the scholarship by providing the institutional infrastructure (including salaries) that made the scholarship possible.
3. Scholarship deposited into open repositories contributes more to the flourishing of new ideas, just as was the foundational purpose of the scholarly societies in the first place.

¹ Sherman, S., (May 6, 2014) "University Presses Under Fire: *How the Internet and slashed budgets have endangered one of higher education's most important institutions.*," *The Nation*. Retrieved from <http://www.thenation.com/article/university-presses-under-fire/>

4. The impact of the scholarship can be determined and measured through services such as Altmetrics (<http://altmetric.com>)

With a model like this, scholars would benefit by receiving appropriate credit for the actual impact that they make on the scholarly discourse. Additionally, the end goal of furthering scholarship is supported by a model like this rather than the increasingly unsustainable model of publishing “two monographs in a university press.” To require junior faculty to publish two books with a university press to achieve tenure is unrealistic. Can academic achievement be better measured?

Shifting to the other foot

So what will it take, really, to turn this around? How will the academy insure that junior faculty have opportunities to disseminate their scholarship in ways that are not only feasible, but truly advance their work as they prepare for tenure. How do you change institutions that are seriously entrenched in the current system? What will it take to reach a tipping point that will force change?

The availability of open repositories and new ways to measure the impact of scholarship provides a chink in the armor of the current system. New open access journals, new forms of digital scholarship, and the growth of e-books and open educational resources are now providing new avenues outside of the traditional avenues through university presses.

University presses are also taking advantage of new ways to leverage their offerings electronically. Could new methods of delivering quality content via university presses take some of the pressure off and allow them to stem the loss of resources?

Increased focus on open resources for academic libraries has the potential to take the pressure off of library budgets (although librarians have been hoping for this shift for many years now).

Faculty need to support open access journals and retain the rights to their work rather than sign it away to commercial publishers. In order for this to happen and for this to make a real difference and to start that shift to the other foot university administrators and peer scholars (provosts, deans, chairs, and tenured faculty) must purposefully recognize the new methods of scholarship for what they are - significant contributions to the scholarly discourse that deserve recognition and the awarding of tenure.

So the *real* question is, what are you going to do to fix things?

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