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Scholarly Communication Reading Response

Prior to my engagement with the assigned readings on scholarly communication, besides knowing that peer review is important in the process, I had little idea of how scholarly journals are published. In fact, I was somewhat skeptical of why something that seemed as narrowly focused as academic publishing needed a week's worth of our attention in this class. Thanks to these readings, though, that skepticism is gone. While I don't have a firm or expert grasp on the economics and mechanics of scholarly publishing, I know enough now to realize that there are winners and losers in this game and the situation could (and should) be a lot better.

Before the Internet became the dominant system for the creation, storage, and spread of information, scholarly activity was shared in print journals stored and stewarded in academic libraries (Wenzler 183). These libraries owned the copies of the journals on their shelves and interested readers could access the information contained in them by physically entering the library. Today, with the Internet, the access picture has changed. Digital networks are, of course, a "more efficient method of sharing scholarly ideas," but it's also more efficient, and cost-effective, for publishers to "organize, store, and track scholarly publications" on their own digital infrastructure, removing these responsibilities from libraries in the process (Wenzler 183, 187). Nowadays, association with an institution's library grants interested readers the credentials necessary to access journal articles not by going to the library but by logging into subscription

services purchased and managed by the library to read articles stored on servers controlled by the companies that publish them.

The Holley, Katz, and Wenzler readings make clear that a variety of labor goes into the production of scholarly communication, and this labor, of course, has associated costs. With publishers controlling nearly every aspect of this publication process, costs have grown exorbitantly. Most journal publishers are for-profit companies, and as such, their purpose, whatever the “About” page on their website may say, is to increase their profits. Wenzler tells us that “Journal prices continue to rise faster than the rate of inflation and absorb an increasing percentage of academic library budgets” (184). Because of this, “less of the library’s resources are going to staff, space, or other initiatives because more of its funding is going directly to the publishers” (Wenzler 188). Could Open Access (OA) be a solution to these costs? How hard could Open Access be to understand? Isn’t the idea that anyone can access any scholarly information they want in any quantity? What could go wrong with such an equitable, democratic vision for knowledge creation, publication, and dissemination? As it turns out, the answers to these questions are complex and involve a range of institutions, stakeholders, motivations, and power structures, especially when agreeing on just what Open Access means.

In addition to publishers, the major institutional players involved in scholarly communication are universities and libraries, specifically, academic libraries governed by universities. Universities employ the researchers whose scholarship fills the pages of the journals produced by the publishers. Libraries, and by extension the universities they belong to, are the publishers’ customers, that is, the ones spending larger and larger portions of their budgets on the publishers’ subscriptions services. Universities don’t create scholarship and libraries don’t consume it; people do. On the knowledge creation side of this arrangement, in addition to the

researchers whose work is published in journals, universities also employ the scholars who serve on the editorial boards of the journals and the scholars who review the researchers' work (Doctorow). On the knowledge consumption side, library staff negotiate with publishers on prices for their subscription services so that they can create access to scholarship for their patrons. In terms of motivations, the production of research benefits universities by raising their profiles, thus augmenting key revenue streams (tuition, donations, and grants). Researchers are expected to publish in prestigious journals to advance their careers (Doctorow); Holley states that "formal peer review is an assumed requirement for tenure and promotion" and even holds universities responsible "for much of the scholarly communication crisis that led to open access because of the increasing demands upon faculty members for research publications" (220). So, not only are researchers beholden to journal publishers for the advancement of their careers, but they also often lose out even more "because most academic authors usually transfer copyright" to the publishers (Wenzler 187). What's more, if these same authors publish in a Gold Open Access journal, they may need to pay an article processing charge since such journals are available without subscriptions (Wenzler 190, 217). As Jill Grogg, a Licensing Program Strategist with LYRASIS, said in her October 20 guest lecture on scholarly communication, "the open environment is not free."

Any consideration of access must also consider control. What can an individual librarian, or a small institution, control when it comes to access to scholarly information? The pessimistic answer is not much. Nevertheless, though an individual or a single institution cannot change such a convoluted system alone, they can perhaps make choices on a smaller scale that meet the information needs of their own community while advocating with others for change by those in positions of power (those with control, specifically, the publishers). This, as both Wenzler and

Holley show, is much easier said than done, especially when it's not clear what the definition of success or improvement looks like.

After presenting the Budapest Open Access Initiative definition, Holley uses Suber's definition of Open Access while noting Anderson's comments on the implications of the definitional uncertainty surrounding the term (Holley 216). From Wenzler's perspective, "the fundamental hurdle that prevents academic libraries from enjoying the full economic benefits enabled by digital technology is the challenge of collaborating across traditional institutional boundaries" (184). In other words, to beat the publishers at their own game, universities, who are often competitors for revenue, must cooperate. But because getting institutions to cooperate is so challenging, the present Open Access landscape is fragmented and "the power structures and elites of the publishing world have monetized an initiative that was intended to make information freely available and to reduce their power" (Holley 224).

Of course, libraries' budgetary bottom lines are not the only aspect of Open Access that merits consideration. The point of all of this according to Cirasella is "not OA in and of itself but rather the opportunities OA presents for individuals, universities, fields of study, and global publics" (qtd. in Holley 234). As Holley says, "if the goal of open access is to provide more research for faculty and students, both green and gold [Open Access journals] have achieved some success" (235). Perhaps it is utopian or naïve, but I rather admire the Budapest Open Access Initiative definition:

By "open access" to this literature, we mean its free availability on the public internet, permitting any users to read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to the full texts of these articles, crawl them for indexing, pass them as data to software, or use them for any other lawful purpose, without financial, legal, or technical barriers other than

those inseparable from gaining access to the internet itself. The only constraint on reproduction and distribution, and the only role for copyright in this domain, should be to give authors control over the integrity of their work and the right to be properly acknowledged and cited. (qtd. in Holley 216).

Holley, on the other hand does not, saying

If the goal of “completely free and unrestricted access” were to be achieved, this open access would remove one of the main reasons why academic libraries exist—to provide information resources to faculty and students that they could otherwise not afford. While faculty and students might still need help in navigating the new structures, this free availability would lessen their dependence on the digital library in the same way that digital resources have reduced the need to come to the physical library. (236)

I certainly hope Holley does not think that the purpose of libraries is to get people to come to the library. I can’t imagine a world in which information seekers don’t need the assistance of information professionals for help navigating available resources, no matter the form they take or the means of publication. Libraries are about getting information to those who need it, not getting people in the door or on the website.

I save my discussion of Hathcock for last because in some ways it seems the most important of the readings for this topic and is the one I struggled with the most. Hathcock’s blog post was a helpful reminder of the human side of all of this, far more so than anything we read that was published in a scholarly journal. It challenged me and left me with questions that I almost feel silly asking and that point to my need to educate myself about colonialism and neoliberalism. In my reading notes on the piece, I ask “concretely, what have the west and the north done wrong?” The high school history answers to this are self-evident, but I admit I have

work to do when it comes to learning how to answer these questions for myself through the lens of scholarly communication and knowledge creation in the present day. As soon as I found myself wishing for more on these topics in Hathcock's piece, I realized her admonition to "Look it up!" and the blog post it linked to were speaking directly to me.

That I have barely scratched the surface in discussing the complexity of scholarly communication in the present day not only reflects my surface level understanding of it, but also the fact that the situation is vast, ever-changing, and requires a certain level of comfort with economics. But the basic facts are easy to understand: the publishers run the show and researchers and information professionals want the situation to be better, but because cooperation across institutional boundaries is hard, Open Access solutions are fragmented and sometimes coopted by the publishers. Unlike at least one of the authors we read, I am new enough to this to still hold out hope that genuinely open and inclusive scholarly communication can become a reality.

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