US open access publishing for the humanities and social sciences

alex holzman
Alex Publishing Solutions, 2805 Brown ST, Philadelphia 19130, USA

doi:10.1057/eps.2015.85; published online 15 January 2016

Abstract
Open Access in the humanities and social sciences in the United States faces challenges in developing sustainable funding models. Begun in part to disseminate scholarship more widely and in part to solve an immediate budget problem faced by academic librarians, Open Access has evolved to include several 'flavours' that involve different funding schemes. Because the humanities and social sciences emphasize books more than STEM disciplines and because publication funding in humanities and social sciences is problematic, it will be necessary for publishers, librarians, faculty, and university administrators to cooperate to find sustainable solutions. This includes consideration of whether open access is always the model that best serves the audiences sought.

Keywords publishing; libraries; university presses; open access; social science; United States

The online version of this article is available Open Access

This article addresses the state of Open Access (OA) in the humanities and social sciences in the United States (US), although it is worth remembering that isolating the US from the rest of the world is difficult in a scholarly context, that is, for journal articles, books, data sets, and other forms of scholarship. There are somewhat different political climates for each of these forms, and humanities and social science (HSS) publishing operates in a very different climate to that of science, technology, engineering and medical scholarship (STEM). Additionally, the boundaries between the US and overseas are difficult to define when, for instance, the scholarship originates in the US but is published by Oxford, Cambridge, Elsevier, or Springer, to name a few. It is also difficult to discuss open

(177–182) © 2016 European Consortium for Political Research. 1680-4333/16 www.palgrave-journals.com/eps
https://doi.org/10.1057/eps.2015.85 Published online by Cambridge University Press

access as an isolated phenomenon. Or perhaps more accurately, doing so leads to distortions and a loss of the overall big picture. Open Access represents an evolution within a much larger scholarly communications ecosystem. And open access in the humanities and social sciences represents a subset of that. This article begins with an overview of Open Access before assessing the current state of open access publishing in the social sciences and humanities in the United States and then considering some possible ways forward.

OPEN ACCESS: AN OVERVIEW

The sustainability of the scholarly communications ecosystem has become progressively more problematic for some thirty years. The initial stresses were caused by long-term declines in library budgets as a percentage of overall university budgets and by a simultaneous rapid increase – far greater than the rate of inflation – in the price of serials publications. In short, decreasing budgets somehow were meant to buy rapidly increasing amounts of product, much of which also now carried a higher price tag per unit of scholarship.

The result was to some degree predictable. The number of subscriptions per journal decreased. The library acquisitions budget shifted increasingly towards journals and away from books, to the point that one Midwestern university today spends some 85 per cent of its acquisitions budget on journals. The sales of books – a much more prevalent form of scholarly expression in the humanities and social sciences – plummeted to the point where some scholars couldn't find outlets for perfectly fine work, a further stress on the overall ecosystem.[1]

Several ideas emerged that tried in various ways to fit the increasingly large package of scholarship into smaller and smaller library budget boxes. The two most prevalent were the big deal and open access. Librarians' desire to maximize the number of journals they could offer to faculty led, in the relatively early days of electronic journals, to the so-called big deal, which packaged whole swathes of first tier and lower tier journals being published by larger, especially commercial publishers. But though the big deal at first provided more journals for less money, the prices kept increasing each year, the usage of too many journals was low, and the bundles became sticky. Once committed to a package, libraries found it very difficult to go back to an *à la carte* menu that could actually reduce costs. Today librarians are loathe to sign any new big deals, even as they find it hard to eliminate old ones.

'… the movement's origins in university libraries were first and foremost attempts to address an economic problem.'

At roughly the same time the open access movement began. It is this author's belief that while a compelling ideal motivates open access – making scholarship freely available to anyone who wants to use it – the movement's origins in university libraries were first and foremost attempts to address an economic problem. Underlying the justification was a now mostly discarded thesis – that electronic circulation would so drastically decrease publishing costs that they could be recovered, and a surplus/profit generated, via sources other than paid subscriptions. The impact OA could have on library budgets was obvious – the negative impact it might have on learned societies, university presses, and even smaller for-profit academic publishers was not.

https://doi.org/10.1057/eps.2015.85 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Today OA comes in various colours – gold and green – and with various statuses – gratis and libre. It involves not just access to a scholarly work, but the ways in which the user may re-use copyrighted material. In fairness, discussions advocating the almost unrestricted re-use of open access scholarship date back to the movement's origins. Contemporary open access contains many other subtleties (for an excellent primer see Suber (2012) published by MIT Press with copyright held by SPARC; the electronic version is openly available from MIT Press).

The tension between the early perceived cost reduction in shifting to an electronically based OA world and the reality of costs actually encountered by publishers led to conflict. Given some genuine overcharging by a handful of publishers, some found it easy to brand them all as money-grubbing capitalists unconcerned with expanding human knowledge. At the same time some publishers came to view some librarians and open access advocates as both hopelessly naïve and horribly inconsistent. To an extent, the two communities mimicked the ways Republicans and Democrats encounter each other in US politics. And as in politics, the voice of the middle grounders too often has been drowned out. Another way to look at it would be to view the entire open access movement as an example of interest group politics.

OA PUBLISHING IN THE SOCIAL AND POLITICAL SCIENCES IN THE US

What conditions currently pertain in US Open Access Publishing in the Social and Political Sciences? It is worth noting that first and foremost, the humanities and social sciences (HSS) get at best a 25 per cent slice of the library acquisitions pie. This, in and of itself, has contributed to sustainability problems among academic publishers. OA models proliferate as individual journals experiment with gold OA, a tolerance for green OA (though nobody can say with certainty what embargoes, if any, should accompany green OA), and with hybrid OA, a variation sometimes bitterly attacked by librarians as 'double-dipping', that is, maintaining subscription rates while charging authors page recovery costs.

Perhaps partly out of exasperation with publishers, especially commercial journals publishers, libraries, working with faculty, have to some degree taken matters into their own hands, primarily by building institutional repositories. The repositories have cost a lot of money and enjoyed only mixed success in attracting the work of local faculty, even where faculty mandates require deposit of their work into the repository. Their greatest success may lie in creating an accessible locus for unreviewed materials, including local conferences, data sets, primary source materials, and the like. Another problem has been the difficulty in publicizing the holdings of individual repositories, which involves creating robust, consistent metadata and raises questions about the need for the 'marketing' of repositories.

An interesting development has been the creation of library publishing programmes. This has mostly but not exclusively been journals-dominated, both in STEM and HSS. These tend to be small and locally produced journals, with the library providing an open access platform. But in some cases library publishing programs have evolved to full service publishing involving both intra- and inter-university items, especially when the libraries have largely incorporated the local university press into their own infrastructure, as in places like Michigan and Purdue. It is worth noting that some library publishing involves end-user payments and is not open access.

University press budget crises and various local events have caused an

https://doi.org/10.1057/eps.2015.85 Published online by Cambridge University Press

increasing number of presses – about 30 in 2015, or about a quarter of Association of American University Presses members – to report directly to libraries, though the degree to which the press is fully incorporated into the library varies widely. Library-university press cooperation, whether it includes folding the press into the library or not, may offer some real synergies and opportunities to experiment with new kinds of open access models. This is tempered, though, by a real lack of capital among the university presses and, to a lesser degree, among libraries. Insufficient capital lessens the possibility of risking failure in any given experiment.

Whether independent from or part of the library, university presses face a real crisis. Their home universities have often cut operating subsidies, requiring presses to try to recover all costs from other revenue sources, whether end user sales, open access author fees, grants, or other sources. A perhaps ironic partial contributor to the university press capital crisis has been the declining sales of university press books to libraries. Additionally, and perhaps in the category of unintended consequences, university presses (and other academic publishers) also face an unprecedented threat to their student course adoption sales if assigned monographs are available to unlimited simultaneous users on an open access basis via the library.

Author processing fees (APCs) might perhaps be considered a replacement for end-user sales, but funding for gold Open Access via author charges is considerably more difficult in the HSS communities than is the case in STEM publishing. And though the US government is moving towards demanding OA for government-funded research in the HSS realm, it is at the same time (a) reducing its funding of scholarly research in general and (b) has in some quarters openly expressed hostility toward the social sciences, in particular political science.

'Whether independent from or part of the library, university presses face a real crisis.'

'... the first copy costs of HSS books have been estimated to be anywhere from $10,000 to $50,000 per book.'

Importantly, HSS OA increasingly involves ebooks as well as journal articles. Cost recovery from authors alone is hopeless in this realm – the first copy costs of HSS books have been estimated to be anywhere from $10,000 to $50,000 per book. And while there are some schemes that try to mitigate this problem – Knowledge Unlatched, for example, tries to recover first-copy costs via library advance purchase – their sustainability remains unproven at this point.[2]

There has also been some stirring around the idea of providing subventions for at least first books, as in a recent joint paper published by the Association of American Universities and the Association of Research Libraries.[3] While it is likely that startup costs for such programmes can be funded in part by foundation money, it is uncertain whether universities, faced with enrolment and other financial pressures, can sustain it.[4]

WHAT WAYS FORWARD?

So what are some possible ways forward? It seems to this author that faculty – perhaps by way of their learned societies – must become much more aware of the economic stress predominant in the scholarly publishing ecosystem and must then play a role in resolving it. At present too

https://doi.org/10.1057/eps.2015.85 Published online by Cambridge University Press

many faculty have no idea what the process of publishing costs or what the materials their libraries provide cost. In the US, faculty also seem utterly uninterested in the subject. As one anecdotal example, the panel where an earlier version of this paper was first presented was attended by perhaps a dozen people, 75 per cent of whom were publishers or librarians; this despite the fact that the American Political Science Association annual meeting is dominated by faculty and graduate student attendees.

In the end, librarians and university presses will have to work more closely together and with faculty to see if there are ways, using the professionalism found in all three places, to reduce and redistribute costs. At the same time commercial publishers must start thinking of the long-term and recognize that restoring the health of the scholarly communications ecosystem, even if that involves sacrificing some short-term revenues, is in their long-term interest. This is a classic case of the need to preserve the commons.

University administrators – provosts and presidents – must play their role, too, primarily in recognizing that scholarship which is not disseminated is largely irrelevant scholarship. They, along with librarians and publishers, who too often know less about this than they should, must learn what serves the faculty best. How do faculty need to access scholarship, how do they use it, what new forms of it are they producing and how can we best disseminate those forms?

It is also time to raise a largely ignored question: in considering business models, must OA be binary? Should OA advocates hold out for end-user free scholarship in all fields and to all people? Or would less expensive – but not free – scholarship actually enable the maximum number of scholars to find the maximum audience for their work?

Finally, everybody, including politicians, should think hard about who actually wants pure OA. Is the public really clamouring for it or does the public largely see scholarship, other than perhaps medical scholarship, as something for professors and students? Might the public really want – and be willing to pay for – works that *translate* scholarship into a layperson's terms. Not dumb it down, but make it accessible. Before we head irretrievably down the OA path, let us stop and think about who needs what and how we can most affordably meet everyone's needs. Answering that question may help solve the riddle of how best to achieve a healthy, sustainable scholarly communications ecosystem.

Notes

1 Incidentally, that same university spends 80 per cent of that 85 per cent journals share on STEM journals, another stressor on HSS scholarly dissemination.

2 knowledgeunlatched.org

3 http://www.arl.org/storage/documents/publications/aau-arl-prospectus-for-institutionally-funded-first-book-subvention-june2014.pdf

4 A publisher cannot help noting the irony of universities striving to lower the cost of scholarship to students while simultaneously demanding that university presses operate with reduced or eliminated subsidies.

Reference

Suber, P. (2012) *Open Access*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, https://mitpress.mit.edu/sites/default/files/titles/content/9780262517638_Open_Access_PDF_Version.pdf, accessed 15 December 2015.

https://doi.org/10.1057/eps.2015.85 Published online by Cambridge University Press

About the Author

Alex Holzman is President of Alex Publishing Solutions. Prior to this he was director at Temple University Press and worked at several presses over a forty-year period, including Cambridge University Press, Ohio State University Press, and Charles Scribners' Sons. He served as president of the Association of American University Presses, 2008–2009. In 2016 he will become coeditor of the *Journal of Scholarly Publishing.*



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Unported License. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in the credit line; if the material is not included under the Creative Commons license, users will need to obtain permission from the license holder to reproduce the material. To view a copy of this license, visit http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/

https://doi.org/10.1057/eps.2015.85 Published online by Cambridge University Press