

October 19, 2016

An Open Letter to the Academic Community:

As a longtime university librarian and current chair of the Association of Research Libraries' advocacy and public policy committee, I am keenly aware of the ongoing challenges academic libraries face with scholarly journals. Subscription prices continue to rise at an ever-increasing rate, far outpacing the consumer price index as well as the ability of library budgets to keep pace. The number of journal titles also grows constantly, putting further pressure on already tight library budgets.

Open access (OA) efforts work to contain these costs while broadening access to journal literature and retaining the essential process of peer review. A number of journal titles are entirely OA or offer an OA option,¹ hundreds of academic institutions around the world have OA policies covering faculty- or staff-authored articles, and many U.S. and international funders have instituted OA requirements on journal articles resulting from funded research.

Yet progress toward achieving an ideal open access state has not been seamless or smooth, and OA advocates engage in vigorous ongoing discussions and explorations to create new models and approaches to reach their goal of making all scholarly journal articles publicly accessible to everyone. Two recent developments in this area have received a great deal of attention to date: the OA2020 initiative and the Pay-It-Forward study.

Background on OA2020

Spearheaded by the Max Planck Society, OA2020 proposes a large-scale international move to open up broad public access to scholarly journal articles by changing the journals' economic basis from subscription fees to article processing charges.

Its feasibility is based in large part on a 2015 white paper issued by the Max Planck Digital Library, which posits that this "flip" would be possible at no financial risk to research organizations. The "flip" would be achieved by taking all funds currently spent on journal licenses by research organizations including funders, universities, and libraries and instead spending them on article processing charges.

As of the date of this letter, sixty-seven organizations in twenty countries have signed the expression of interest. Thirteen of the twenty countries are in Europe. Countries in other parts of the world with one institutional signatory each are Bulgaria, Chile, India, Japan, Nigeria, and Turkey. No institutions in China have signed on, and the only U.S. institution to do so to date is California State University, Northridge.

¹ Many commercial journal publishers offer this as an option for a fee. Even where the library at an author's home institution already licenses access to the journal, the publisher receives an additional payment when the author chooses this option.

Background on Pay-It-Forward Study

The University of California, Davis and the California Digital Library conducted this study to evaluate the viability and sustainability of the “flipped” economic model from the perspective of large, research-intensive North American institutions. It involved both quantitative assessments of institutional publishing patterns, library subscription expenditures, extramural research funding, and publisher pricing patterns and qualitative assessments of selected user attitudes and likely behaviors.

The study’s authors reached several major conclusions. One is that the model could be financially feasible in broad concept; although library journal budgets alone would not be enough to cover article processing charges at the most research-intensive institutions,² other existing sources such as granting agencies could make up the difference. Another is that authors’ price sensitivity regarding publishing charges would serve as an effective brake on publishers’ price increases.

The study identified author behavior and academic rewards systems as an issue out of its scope. It also did not examine the costs that would be involved in the transition from the current system to a “flipped” mode or to administer authors’ article publishing charges on an ongoing basis.

Concerns Regarding the “Flipped” Model

Through conversations with peers throughout the academic library community, senior university administrators, and faculty in a number of disciplines, I have identified a number of concerns.

- Certain titles carry more prestige and have a higher impact factor, which allows them to set higher article processing charges. The model does nothing to resolve this disparity in pricing, nor to address the factors that drive authors to pursue publication in these journals, such as tenure and promotion processes. It remains an unknown, and possibly quite expensive, factor in determining what the model would actually cost.
- Given that their perceived status (or careers; see previous point) depend on it, authors will continue to be driven more by journals’ prestige than by the relative affordability of article processing charges. If a more prestigious journal costs more, authors – whether grant-funded or not – will find funds to cover those costs. Thus, the total cost to an institution of this model must include not only library journal subscriptions and grant funding allocated for article processing charges but also some unknown level of funding each author is likely to request from his/her department or take from his/her own discretionary funding.
- This model may well encourage further consolidation among the already largely monopolistic international publishing industry in order to better control, and increase, the level of article processing charges. Thus, assumptions that those charges will not increase exponentially over time, as journal licenses currently do, may not prove to be accurate.
- There is currently no definitive information about the true costs to publish a journal article. Though article processing charges vary widely, there is some evidence that many would need to be raised considerably to cover the actual costs of publication. Without reliable data, it is impossible to predict the true costs to research institutions of the “flipped” model.

² These include California Institute of Technology, Carnegie Mellon University, Harvard University, Johns Hopkins University, University of Michigan, MIT, Princeton University, Purdue University, Stanford University, UCLA, UC San Diego, University of Virginia, and Yale University, among others.

- The model would not result in any fundamental changes to the current balance of power in journal publishing. In addition to controlling the mechanism by which articles become open access, publishers would maintain control of the intellectual content – both the article and the peer review process – as well as the format of the articles, reuse terms, and preservation.
- The model would require institutions to spend significant time and resources to coordinate and execute it, both during the transition from the current system to a “flipped” model, then afterward, to administer authors’ article publishing charges on an ongoing basis. These would increase the total costs for the model beyond simply the article processing charges.
- The majority of the support for the model to date comes from Europe, where more centralized research and funding environments and coordinating bodies already exist; that is not the case in the U.S. What works well there may not work well here, and vice versa.
- SCOAP3 (Sponsoring Consortium for Open Access Publishing in Particle Physics) could be considered as a pilot, or use case, for this model. This partnership of more than three thousand institutions in forty-seven countries started with ten journals in 2014; in its next phase (2017-19), only eight journals will continue to participate.
- The model is currently supported by very few organizations in the “global south”; paying article processing charges is difficult in those regions, where institutional budgets are extremely low. Thus, the model would further skew a scholarly publishing system that is already geographically unbalanced.
- The model would require that libraries permanently give up the portion of their collections budgets they currently spend on journals – up to eighty percent in some cases – and never regain it. That would eliminate their ability to take actions like cancelling subscriptions and negotiating price increases, then repurposing the money saved for other collections needs.

Conclusion

As one of the nation’s leading public research universities, UCLA takes very seriously its responsibility to serve the people of California, the U.S., and the world through its mission of education, research, and service. Integral to that mission is the dissemination of scholarly information and funded research as broadly as possible, which is essential to furthering scientific discoveries, creating innovative solutions to pressing problems, and improving the lives and well-being of individuals and of society.

In support of those goals, the UCLA Library builds, stewards, and provides access to collections, which we hold in trust for the public and which are in large part funded by the public through their taxes. UCLA was among the first American institutions to sign the Berlin Declaration on Open Access to Knowledge in the Sciences and the Humanities, and the UCLA Library has long been proactive in the open access movement. We advocate for OA policies, provide services to UCLA authors to enable them to retain reuse rights and make their scholarship widely accessible, offer public access to our print and digital collections as broadly as possible, and developed an initiative to create more open course materials.

I fully support the laudable goals of all members of the open access movement and am proud to count myself among them. However, I feel quite strongly that the mechanism OA2020 proposes to achieve those goals would not be workable across the broad international spectrum of research institutions, funding bodies, and publishers. Based on the limited amount of research that has been done to date, the model appears likely to cost more in both the short and longer term, making it as financially unsustainable as the current system.

Success is much more likely to result from a broad, international matrix of solutions, each of which might be defined by geographic region, research area, or major funding source. If all of these solutions begin with the same clear goal in mind – to make published journal articles accessible to and reusable by readers around the world and to ensure their permanent preservation – they are more likely to enlist broad support; drive permanent, productive change; and achieve long-term success in managing scholarly journal costs.

I look forward to hearing your thoughts. You can reach me at <vsteel@library.ucla.edu> or 310.825-1201.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Virginia Steel". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Virginia Steel
UCLA University Librarian