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Library Subscriptions and Open Access: Highlights from the University of California Negotiations with Elsevier

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Executive Summary

On February 28, 2019, the University of California (UC) System announced the cancellation of their \$50 million journal subscription deal with Elsevier. The impetus behind the UC decision comes from two issues. Firstly, the increasing costs of journal subscriptions in a landscape where library budgets remain flat. Secondly, the effort to shift the journal publishing model away from subscriptions to a sustainable open access model. The following paper will provide background on issues with the scholarly communication process, academic library budgets and open access initiatives. Additional information will focus on the impact of journal subscription deals with large commercial publishers (including Elsevier) and highlight UNLV efforts to support open access.

Introduction

Recently, the University of California (UC) announced their decision to discontinue their subscription negotiations with Elsevier. Because the UC system is large and their actions impactful, the news of this break in negotiations generated significant coverage.^{1,2} This paper serves to update the UNLV community on what the UC system cancellation means for publishing, open access, and UNLV authors.

¹"University of California boycotts publishing giant Elsevier over - Science." 28 Feb. 2019, <https://www.sciencemag.org/news/2019/02/university-california-boycotts-publishing-giant-elsevier-over-journal-costs-and-open>. Accessed 26 Apr. 2019.

²"U. of California System Cancels Elsevier Subscriptions, Calling Move" 28 Feb. 2019, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/U-of-California-System/245798>. Accessed 26 Apr. 2019.

Scholarly Communication and Scholarly Publishing

The Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) defines scholarly communication as “the system through which research and other scholarly writings are created, evaluated for quality, disseminated to the scholarly community, and preserved for future use.”³ Scholarly communication includes both formal published content such as books and peer-reviewed journals as well as more informal methods of communication including blogs, twitter feeds etc. At the center of this conversation are the formal channels of scholarly communication and the question of whether the current scholarly publishing model is acceptable and sustainable.

Fundamentally, scholarly research is created as a public good to facilitate inquiry and knowledge. Scholarly publishing has served as the mechanism that broadly disseminates the research in order to facilitate those goals of inquiry and further knowledge. Researchers generally do not receive financial remuneration when they submit their work to scholarly publishers. Publication and wide dissemination of their work has traditionally been viewed as an acceptable return. But in the last few decades this “gift exchange” model has changed. A growing number of for-profit publishers dominate the market and they are moving away from utilizing journal subscriptions to recoup publishing costs to a model that focuses on boosting profits through increasing journal subscription costs.

This shift has led libraries and researchers to question the effectiveness and values of the scholarly publishing model. The role of the publisher is to provide effective and wide dissemination of research through their publications. Yet, as subscription costs are increased, libraries are forced to cancel subscriptions and the dissemination and reach of the research is being limited. An additional and highly important concern is that most content published in academic journals is the result of publicly funded research, but the public cannot access that research as it is behind a subscription paywall. So libraries pay substantial subscription costs to provide access, and through this model, publishers such as Elsevier and Wiley are able to generate significant profits from publicly funded research. This seems antithetical to the purpose of research funded with public dollars and is a compelling reason to pursue alternative approaches to publication and dissemination of this research. As a result many funders, both public and private, now mandate that an open version of an article must be made available.

In this landscape it would seem that the motivators for change are obvious, but there are multiple factors at play that mean changes to the scholarly publishing system are slow. One such factor is the system of academic promotion and tenure. Publication in and editorships of high-rated/highly cited journals continues to be a measure of success in tenure and promotion reviews. Open access (OA) journals are an alternative to the traditional subscription model and provide a quality and rigorous venue for publication. But tenure track faculty can be concerned

³ “Principles and Strategies for the Reform of Scholarly Communication 1”, Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL) <http://www.ala.org/acrl/publications/whitepapers/principlesstrategies> Accessed 22 May 2019.

about publishing in an OA journal that has not been around long enough to have established prestige and name recognition with their P&T committee⁴. Consequently they may focus their efforts on traditional, established subscription titles until their tenure is secured. Additionally, authors publishing in commercial subscription journals may not be aware of the implications of the author copyright agreement they sign before publication. These standard agreements can strip the author of many rights to their work and limit their ability to post the article on their personal website, use the article in a coursepack, deposit the article in an institutional repository or have the ability to distribute copies of their article to colleagues. These agreements can be modified by the author to retain key rights and publishers are willing to accept those changes. But many faculty, under the pressure of tenure-track are concerned that modifying an agreement may result in publication being denied and this is a risk they are not willing to take as their tenure is dependent on publications.

Economic Impacts

The subscription model of scholarly publishing is becoming economically unsustainable for academic libraries. According to the Periodicals Price Survey (PPS)⁹, journal pricing is increasing at an average of 6% - 7% a year. When compared with the Consumer Price Index (CPI), which was 2.5% for 2017, journal inflation continues to far exceed general inflationary pressures. Since 2010, journal prices have risen steadily. Contrary to stereotype, price increases are not driven only by science, technology, and medical (STM) disciplines. In fact, social science disciplines show the highest annual inflationary increases (6.2%). Library collections budgets have not been able to keep up with these price increases and libraries are forced to cancel subscriptions. The situation is exacerbated as commercial publishers expand their market control through acquisitions, mergers, and the purchase of individual journals from scholarly societies. As titles move from scholarly societies to commercial publishers, they are shifting from a non-profit organization to a for-profit one, and as a result the price of the journal can increase significantly.

The “Big Deal”

An additional stress factor is the increase in the number of journal titles being published. Academic Libraries strive to provide access to impactful and relevant scholarship and are under pressure to subscribe to more titles as journal publishing proliferates. This has led to the creation of the bundled or “big deal” subscription model. This model allows a library to purchase a bundle of journals at a discount from the aggregated list price and utilize their budgets in a more cost-effective way. Additional discounts and caps on annual increases may be available if a library enters into a multi-year deal. Publishers offer these deals because it provides a guaranteed revenue stream for them and easier management of their portfolio of titles.

⁴ Suber, P. (2008). Thoughts on prestige, quality and open access. *Logos*, 21(1–2), 115–128

Libraries have utilized big deals as long as they make fiscal sense but in recent years the value of the “big deal” has grown less clear. Prices have been raised by 5-15%, outpacing library budgets⁵. Publishers cite the addition of new specialized journal titles to the package as rationale for large increases. These new titles may not be relevant to a library and may be little used by its patrons but the structure of the big deal package means they become part of the library’s collection.

In an environment where library budgets remain flat or are decreasing, libraries cannot absorb these price increases and see no benefits to adding titles to the collection that are rarely used. As alternative publishing models become more prevalent, libraries are rethinking their big deals and the UC system is one such example.

Journal Cancellations and UC System Decision

Why are institutions canceling subscriptions to Elsevier and other publishers’ content? The UC system cancellation provides some insights. Citing their commitments to open access and fiscal responsibility,⁶ negotiations were called off in February 2019 when the UC negotiating team determined the offers received by Elsevier were unreasonable. The UC system attempted to implement a transformative agreement where the UC community would be able to access journals from Elsevier, as they normally would under a typical subscription agreement. In addition, the proposed agreement asked that any articles published by UC authors in Elsevier journals would be immediately available for the public to read at no cost (also known as gold open access). Although the specific terms are not available, a key effort of the UC negotiating team was to ensure that “research produced by UC’s 10 campuses — which accounts for nearly 10 percent of all U.S. publishing output — would be immediately available to the world, without cost to the reader.”⁷

UC is not the first “big deal” cancellation with Elsevier and Elsevier is not the only publisher finding themselves in this position. The Max Planck Society (Germany), FinELib (Finnish Academic Consortium), and Florida State University have all either canceled or significantly reduced their subscriptions with Elsevier in recent months, while Wiley, Taylor & Francis, and SpringerNature have also lost readership among subscribing institutions in recent years.⁸

⁵ Big Deal Cancellation Tracking, SPARC. <https://sparcopen.org/our-work/big-deal-cancellation-tracking/>. Accessed 22 May 2019.

⁶ "Open statement: Why UC cut ties with Elsevier | UC Berkeley Library" <https://news.lib.berkeley.edu/uc-elsevier-statement>. Accessed 26 Mar. 2019.

⁷ "UC terminates subscriptions with world's largest scientific publisher in" 28 Feb. 2019, <https://www.universityofcalifornia.edu/press-room/uc-terminates-subscriptions-worlds-largest-scientific-publisher-push-open-access-publicly>. Accessed 26 Mar. 2019.

⁸ "Big Deal Cancellation Tracking - SPARC." <https://sparcopen.org/our-work/big-deal-cancellation-tracking/>. Accessed 26 Mar. 2019.

How Does the UC System Decision Impact UNLV?

While UC researchers will lose direct, immediate access to Elsevier journals, the repercussions may be felt far beyond California. For example:

- UC researchers may steer away from Elsevier journals, in part because they won't be able to access the content directly, but also due to the existing tension between Elsevier and UC. This may impact UC researchers' discovery and citation of works published in Elsevier' subscription journals - including those by UNLV researchers.
- UNLV researchers may find their UC coauthors reconsidering their own relationship with Elsevier and therefore unwilling to publish work in an Elsevier journal.⁹

Open Access

"Open-access (OA) literature is digital, online, free of charge, and free of most copyright and licensing restrictions."¹⁰

Open access is an alternative to a subscription-based model of access. Open access does not denote quality of a publication, OA is compatible with peer review, and is growing and gaining mainstream support by authors, funders, institutions, and governments. The source of the authoritative impact factor, Journal Citation Reports, now includes 1,298 open access journals in its ranking (or approximately 10% of the journals in the report). Additionally, the Directory of Open Access Repositories (OpenDOAR) states the number of open access repositories worldwide has grown from 87 to more than 4,000 since 2005.

Key OA Models

There are two primary ways in which research articles are made open access:

- By publishing in an open access journal (see doaj.org for examples) or partially open journals (hybrid journals).
- By publishing in ANY journal and utilizing the rights automatically granted by the publisher or negotiated by the author to post a version of the work online on a website such as PubMed Central, arXiv, or Digital Scholarship@UNLV.

These two models are sometimes referred to as Gold Open Access and Green Open Access respectively. Gold open access publishing sometimes requires payment by authors, referred to as an article processing charge (APC). In lieu of subscription fees, the APC supports the costs

⁹ "UCSF Faculty Launch Petition to Boycott Elsevier in Support of Open" <https://www.library.ucsf.edu/news/ucsf-faculty-launch-petition-to-boycott-elsevier-in-support-of-open-acce-ss/>. Accessed 12 Apr. 2019.

¹⁰ "Peter Suber, Open Access Overview (definition, introduction)." 5 Dec. 2015, <https://legacy.earlham.edu/~peters/fos/overview.htm>. Accessed 27 Mar. 2019.

of publishing. Open access journals that do not charge APCs may utilize sponsorships, grants, or volunteers (or a combination) for support.

Research Funders in the US

In 2013, the Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP) directed federal agencies with a budget of more than \$100 million to make the results of research publicly available after no more than a 12-month embargo. This came about in part after a “We the People” petition was signed by more than 65,000 people requesting access to the results of federally funded science.¹¹ Numerous agencies have implemented public access policies since then.

Foundations and non-profit organizations are also requiring open access to the research they support. In the United States, these include the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, MacArthur Foundation, Autism Speaks, and others.¹²

Plan S (Europe)

“cOAlition S aims to accelerate the transition to a scholarly publishing system that is characterised by immediate, free online access to and largely unrestricted use and re-use of scholarly publications.”¹³

cOAlition S (Plan S, <https://www.coalition-s.org/>) was introduced by research funders to accelerate widespread adoption of open access. The plan requires the research supported by participating funders to be made fully open access, in compliant journals, immediately upon publication. Plan S takes effect on January 1, 2021. Participating funders currently include 15 national funding bodies and four charitable organizations. Most of the funders are based in Europe, but there is representation from the Middle East, Africa, and North America among them. Neither the United States, nor any of its agencies, have signed on to Plan S. However, according to a Clarivate synthesis of the implications of the Plan, in 2017 the United States was “Europe’s most prolific collaborative partner...[with] 80,000 papers co-authored between European and American researchers and 20,000 (25%) of these listed a Plan S funder.”¹⁴

¹¹ “Expanding Public Access to the Results of Federally Funded Research.” 22 Feb. 2013, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2013/02/22/expanding-public-access-results-federally-funded-research>. Accessed 26 Apr. 2019.

¹² “Browse Funders - v2.sherpa - Sherpa Juliet.” http://v2.sherpa.ac.uk/view/funder_list/1.country.html. Accessed 12 Apr. 2019.

¹³ “Implementation | Plan S - cOAlition S.” <https://www.coalition-s.org/implementation/>. Accessed 12 Apr. 2019.

¹⁴ “The Plan S footprint: Implications for the scholarly ... - Clarivate Analytics.” <https://clarivate.com/g/plan-s-footprint/>. Accessed 12 Apr. 2019.

AmeliCA (Latin America and Global South)

“This is a new strategy configuration, in response to the international, regional, national and institutional context, which seeks a collaborative, sustainable, protected and non-commercial Open Access solution for Latin America and the Global South.”¹⁵

Getting much less press, but growing simultaneously with Plan S is AmeliCA (Open Knowledge for Latin America and the Global South, <http://www.amelica.org>). AmeliCA builds on existing long-standing open practices and networks in scholarly publishing where universities are frequently the primary publishers of open access academic journals. Supported in part by UNESCO, AmeliCA offers ten Principles and Values which include recognizing science as a public good, resisting monetizing scientific publications, rethinking research evaluation systems, and encouraging academic institutions to lead scientific publishing.

What is going on at UNLV?

The University Libraries continues to subscribe to high quality, relevant scholarly resources from commercial and societal publishers with regular reviews of our subscriptions and subscription deals. The University Libraries also supports open access initiatives to encourage and facilitate the use of alternative publishing models and philosophies.

Support for Open Access at UNLV

The UNLV University Libraries support publishing open access in several ways.

→ *Institutional Repository*

Digital Scholarship@UNLV (digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/) hosts thousands of open access works by UNLV students and faculty. These include electronic theses, dissertations, professional papers, undergraduate research posters, peer-reviewed articles authored by faculty and students, recorded lectures by institutes and centers, conference papers, and more.

→ *Open Access Journal Hosting Platform*

In addition the publication types noted above, Digital Scholarship@UNLV serves as a journal publishing platform. As of this writing, the system hosts three active open access journals, two more getting ready for launch, and several in early discussions. The editors of these journals are all affiliated with UNLV, although authors from around the world contribute articles.

¹⁵ "What is AmeliCA? – AmeliCA." <http://www.amelica.org/en/index.php/que-es-ame/i/>. Accessed 12 Apr. 2019.

The library's collection budget pays for our subscription to the Elsevier bepress Digital Commons System on which Digital Scholarship@UNLV is based.

→ *UNLV Open Article Fund (Pilot)*

In July 2018, the University Libraries and the Libraries Advisory Board earmarked \$30,000 to fund open access journal article processing charges. This service is intended to encourage UNLV authors who do not have outside sources of funding to consider open access journals. As of April 2019, we've received 25 applications, with \$20,000 earmarked for numerous successful applications.

→ *Agreements with Publishers*

The University Libraries has partnered with two publishers to reduce costs and expedite payment of APCs for UNLV authors.

- MDPI -- 10% APC discount to all UNLV authors
- Taylor & Francis -- \$10,000 added to a pre-paid OA journal APC fund which results in a 5% discount on APCs (new as of Spring 2019)

→ *Consultation and Workshops on Open Access and Related Topics*

The Scholarly Communication Librarian provides expertise on topics such as identifying high-quality, open access journals, avoiding predatory publishers, authors' rights, the role of commercial hosting platforms such as ResearchGate in scholarly publishing, copyright, and more.

The Scholarly Communication Initiatives Department maintains library guides on topics such as copyright, open access publishing, authors' rights, and the use of Digital Scholarship@UNLV. Additionally, the department tracks the research output by UNLV faculty and regularly invites faculty to contribute these publications to the repository, thus making them openly accessible.

UNLV University Libraries Journal Budget

In fiscal year 2018, the total budget for the UNLV University Libraries was just over \$7.7 million. Out of the \$7.7 million, the amount of funds spent on subscriptions for the five largest publishers (Elsevier, SAGE, SpringerNature, Taylor & Francis, and Wiley) was more than \$2.2 million, accounting for 29% of the budget. For fiscal year 2019, it is projected that the subscriptions for the five publishers will account for 31-32%, and that number will continue to grow over the next few years. For fiscal year 2018, the cost-per-use for the subscriptions was \$3.41, which is significantly lower than the cost-per-use of other journal subscription packages and databases.

Conclusion

The University of California System's goals to ensure the widest dissemination for UC research provide insights into broader changes occurring within scholarly publishing on a global scale. Specifically, open access is mainstream and is here to stay, which is exemplified by the widespread interest in the UC efforts with Elsevier.¹⁶ Open access is worth negotiating for whether you represent the interests of a large research network, or whether you are a single author negotiating to share your own scholarship as widely as possible.

Reasons for moving toward open access are plentiful. OA publishing is embedded in the research process both through a broad range of mechanisms available for open sharing and philosophically through demand by many in varied roles across disciplines, campuses, and funders. Rising subscription costs, growing philosophical and technological support for open research practices, and mandates by funders are other key forces driving open access.

For UNLV and other scholars not affiliated with the University of California, there could be impacts to consider in regard to Elsevier journals as a venue for publication, whether it be UC system losing access to UNLV-authored research or co-authors suggesting alternate publishers for collaborative works. UNLV researchers are encouraged to reach out to the University Libraries to learn about the issues presented in this paper and the services that are in place to support open access to UNLV research.

¹⁶ "Negotiating with scholarly journal publishers: A toolkit from the"
<https://osc.universityofcalifornia.edu/open-access-at-uc/publisher-negotiations/negotiating-with-scholarly-journal-publishers-a-toolkit/>. Accessed 10 Jun. 2019.