

## Embracing open access

In an ideal world, one might imagine that publishers and librarians would view each other as partners with common interests, sharing the same goal of getting information to the people who can use it to advance knowledge. But it isn't like that. During the twenty years of my library career, the relationship between publishers and librarians has gotten increasingly contentious, and the ire has increased dramatically over the past five years. Librarians have been unhappy about pricing issues for decades—for longer than I have been trying to manage library budgets, the costs of periodicals have increased at a rate greater than general inflation and certainly at a rate greater than the general increase in library budgets.

Now, in addition to dealing with ever-escalating prices, we have to cope with all of the complexities of the various licensing schemes that publishers have developed to deal with electronic journals. This licensing has dramatically increased the workload of librarians, and the learning curve has been steep as we have attempted to gain the necessary negotiating skills to thread our way through this murky terrain. For many librarians, the complexities of licensing have simply fueled their belief that publishers are rapacious, predatory entities, determined to squeeze the last dollar from libraries, no matter what the cost to society.

As I have written previously, it is a grave mistake on the part of librarians to think of all publishers as the same. It is an equally grave mistake to criticize the practices of publishers without fully understanding why they make the choices that they do [1].

The open access movement promises, to many librarians, a very positive shift in the publishing dynamic. BioMed Central debuted its suite of open access journals several years ago, and now librarians are looking glowingly at the Public Library of Science (PLOS),

which launched their first publication, *PLoS Biology*, in October. Of course, PLOS and BioMed Central are publishers, too. But they are the good guys.

Why is that? Why do we look favorably on PLOS or BioMed Central while continuing to demonize Elsevier? Elsevier publishes extremely high-quality journals. (Yes, they publish some mediocre ones as well, but no one can deny that they publish many journals that are, currently, indispensable in their fields). We gnash our teeth and curse them for their 30% profit margins. But if each of us were running a small business on the side, we would be as proud as we could be to have that kind of success. As long as the customers kept flocking to us, we probably would not spend much time worrying that we were overcharging them.

An article last summer in *The Independent* praises Elsevier as the "unsung hero of the Internet" because of how fabulously successful they have been in an environment that has put so many people out of business [2]. They are very good at what they do. Why are we so angry with them for that?

A while back, I got a phone call from a publishing consultant who was working with a professional society to come up with a new institutional licensing plan. The previous year, when the society had initially launched their institutional plan, it had gone badly. They had announced the pricing late in the year, long after most libraries could adjust their budgets to account for it, and they ended up with few takers and quite a number of complaints. I was one of the complainers, and when, the following spring, they hired a consultant to try to straighten things out, I was one of the people she called.

She asked me, "If we set the price at \$400, would you pay that?"

"For an institutional license? Probably."

"What about \$1,000? Would you think that was fair?"

"Fair? That's an entirely different question."

I went on to say that for me to decide if the price was "fair," I would need to know a lot more about the economy of the society than I did. What was the total revenue they were currently getting from my institution? How many individual subscriptions did they expect to lose, and what was the basis of that projection? If I paid \$1,000 for an institutional subscription, did they expect that this was going to increase their overall revenue (and if so, what were the attendant costs that they were trying to recover) or were they still taking a substantial risk of a loss? Until I knew these things, I could not make a judgment as to whether or not the price was fair.

She said that in talking to other not-for-profit publishers who had increased their prices for institutional subscriptions, part of the rationale was that the institutional subscription would have so many more readers . . .

I interrupted her. "From my standpoint that is irrelevant. If you are operating a not-for-profit, then I can accept that you need to generate enough revenue to cover your costs and make something extra to invest back into your publication program and member services. If you can do that and increase your readership that's just fine. But why should I pay more just because you have got more readers, if there is no accompanying increase in your costs?"

We had a fine discussion. I have no idea if I had any impact on her thinking, or if she came away from the conversation with the impression that I was simply another cranky librarian; but I recount the conversation here to try to make the point that in the radically new environment in which we operate, the notion of a "fair" price has become much more complicated than just looking at the rate of increase.

Take Elsevier again. We know from *The Independent* article re-

ferred to above (as well as from a great deal of other financial news about Elsevier that is readily available) that one of the reasons for their great success recently is the fact that they have been doing a good job of reducing their costs. They are putting in a lot of efficiencies, making smart business decisions (like not investing heavily in customer service in a business where customer service has relatively little impact on purchasing behavior), getting great economies of scale, and so on. And yet they have the effrontery to tell me that in my next ScienceDirect contract they may be willing to put a cap on price increases of 6.5% annually. Their costs are going down, and they still want to increase the price to me? How can this be fair? But Elsevier is a for-profit company, and the question of "fairness" is the wrong question.

I recently gave a presentation in which I pointed out that *Brain Research* was going to cost me some \$21,000 this year. There were the usual gasps of astonishment in the audience. I use it for just this effect. "Is it worth it?" I asked rhetorically. "I don't even know how to answer that question." I told them that I was going to go ahead and pay it without hesitation, because at my institution it was an essential resource. And if it costs \$21,000, then that is what I am going to pay. And if I am willing to pay it, then market theory says I must believe it is worth it. "Fairness" is a completely irrelevant concept in this context.

I fear that we often use the word "fair" simply as a substitute for "a price that is so low that I am happy to pay it." If the price pinches, or if the annual increase is more than our budget increase, so that we have to make difficult choices, we squawk, "unfair!" But I do not think the word really means anything when we use it that way. I do not know what a "fair" price is—I just know that I, like every other librarian, am finding my budget squeezed beyond what I can bear. I am being forced to make choices that I do not think are in the best

interests of my institution, and it is wearing me out.

So, here come the open access journals, promising to deliver superb content without my having to pay for it. Their aims seem so noble, compared to the image of the publishers we vilify. We imagine a world in which the pressures on our budgets disappear and we can focus our energies on all of the other things we do that are so important. We think that the open access movement could bring us to a new golden age for libraries. We need to think a lot more.

The reason to embrace the open access movement is that it promises to be a very good thing for society, not that it will be a good thing for libraries. PLoS has been very successful in generating press about what they are attempting to do [3]. They have promoted the notion that traditional publishing practices "lock up" science and prevent the general public from getting access to information that may be of value to them.

Actually, though, I do not worry as much about the general public's access as I do about the doctor in rural northwest Alabama who is running a hospital on a shoestring, trying to give the best quality care that he can, knowing that digital publishing is promising to make clinical research more and more available—and he cannot get at any of it. For decades, the major resource libraries have supplied those practitioners with information in the form of interlibrary loans—an inefficient system, to be sure, because the practitioners have to know exactly what they are looking for, but it was the best we could do in the print world. Now, however, because of the restrictions that many licenses put on interlibrary loan, just at the point when technology promises to eliminate the barriers of time and space that print publications are subject to, the rural practitioner finds access to material becoming even more difficult, rather than less.

Some of the society publishers respond to this by pointing out that they already make their publica-

tions freely available after six months or a year. Highwire Press certainly deserves the "Award for Service to Not-For-Profit Publishing" that it recently received from the Association of Learned and Professional Society Publishers (ALPSP) [4]. They have amassed a splendid archive of material, much of which is freely available after a period of time.

But too much of the literature is still controlled by the big for-profit companies, and they are not giving anything away. And, to tell you the truth, I am not satisfied with a year or six months anyway. Do you want your mother being treated by a clinician who is always six months out of date? Or is that just the price she has to pay for not living in a city with a major academic medical center?

So, as a member of the public, I embrace the open access movement, because I think it will improve the quality of health care to the same degree that it turns out to be successful. But, as a librarian, I find it a little more difficult to sort through.

Quality publishing, even in this age of efficiencies brought about by sophisticated information technology, costs money. And there is no reason to think that open access publishing will be any cheaper than traditional subscription-based publishing. (There certainly are ways to make publishing more economically efficient, but moving to open access, in and of itself, is not one of them.)

Consider the situation of a typical clinical research journal—call it the *Journal of Hypothetical Clinical Sciences*. In the subscription world, say that it gets \$1,000,000 in revenue annually from a mix of institutional subscribers and individual subscriptions. Over the course of its twelve monthly issues, it publishes about 250 articles, so that each article represents \$4,000 in revenue. Now, suppose that subscription base includes some 1,000 institutions and a similar number of individuals. All of the major research institutions have a couple of subscriptions, and many commu-

nity hospitals have subscriptions as well. The costs are fairly evenly distributed across those subscribers.

But now consider the authors of those articles (and remember that in the open access model, the authors pay the costs of publication). Most of those authors come from the 200 research institutions. The journal still needs to come up with \$1,000,000 in revenue if it is going to publish the same number and quality of articles. But instead of that cost being distributed among 1,000 institutions and 1,000 individuals, it is all going to have to come from 200 institutions.

The proponents of open access argue that these costs can be included in the grants that funded the research in the first place, so there will not be any impact on the institution's budget. This may be the case (although there is now \$1,000,000 less available for funding other research grants). Suppose that it is. What is going to be the likely impact on libraries? Does the administrator in charge say, "Isn't it a good thing that we do not have to pay for this journal anymore so that you can now devote your budget to other things that still charge?" Or do we hear, "We are getting so much good research through open access publications these days, that I am going to cut your acquisitions budget another 25%?" Or suppose that the grants *do not* cover all of the research costs (note that most institutions that have become BioMed Central members have paid those membership fees from their institutional budgets). Do we hear, "We need to come up with additional funds to pay for all of the research that we

are publishing in these great open access journals. It has to come out of the library's budget"?

I do not raise these scenarios to cast doubt on the promise of open access publishing. I only want to make the point that if we look with favor on open access because we think it is going to reduce the pressure on our library budgets, we are taking a very shortsighted view. I do not expect that all, or perhaps even a majority, of biomedical research will be published in open access journals at any point in the foreseeable future. But I am optimistic that a significant portion will in a relatively short time. This year marks the first year that some of the BioMed Central journals received ISI impact factor ratings, and several of them did quite well (e.g., *Breast Cancer Research* ranks 38 out of the 114 journals listed in the oncology category, and *Arthritis Research & Therapy* is #4 out of the 22 journals listed under rheumatology). As I write this, we are just weeks away from the debut of *PLoS Biology*, and *PLoS Medicine* will debut not long after this editorial is published. Many "traditional" publishers (e.g., the American Physiological Society and Oxford University Press) are experimenting with various open access models.

As I write this, the major library organizations, along with a number of other public interest groups, are about to issue a public statement of strong support for PLoS and the open access movement. The Howard Hughes Medical Institute and the Wellcome Trust have already done so. The movement is gathering steam, and, for this, librarians

should rejoice. The impacts of the open access movement will be very profound and will fundamentally alter the way we manage our libraries and the role that we as librarians play in our institutions. I do not think we can underestimate how radical these shifts will be.

The more successful open access becomes, the more irrelevant our traditional view of library budgets will be. This is an issue of institutional economics, not library economics, and we need to engage our institutional leaders at that level if we are to continue to play our crucial role in information management. Now, more than ever, librarians have to position themselves as change agents for their institutions and be willing to advance into a very uncertain future. It would be truly unfortunate if the open access movement passed librarians by because we were too busy worrying about the library's bottom line.

T. Scott Plutchak, Editor  
tscott@uab.edu  
University of Alabama at  
Birmingham  
Birmingham, Alabama

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