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Redirecting Library Budgets in Support of Open Access

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Redirecting Library Budgets in Support of Open Access

Intro from Ken Wachsberger: In my last post I reproduced the talk that I gave at the "Women's History in the Digital World 2015" conference that was held at Bryn Mawr College on May 21-22. Today I am honored to publish the talk given by one of my fellow panelists, Andrée Rathemacher, head of acquisitions at University of Rhode Island. If you are a librarian or anyone interested in how library dollars are spent, especially why so few dollars are being spent on books nowadays, you will find this guest blog to be a major eye opener.

Introduction

As my introduction noted, I'm the head of acquisitions at the University of Rhode Island Libraries. It is the Acquisitions Unit that expends the library's annual materials budget of about $4 million. I've been in this role since 2009; before that, from 2003 to 2009, I was the serials librarian, managing the library's thousands of print and online journal subscriptions.

Perhaps it is this personal involvement with channeling $4 million a year to various publishers that has turned me into an open access advocate.

Before I tell my story, let me share with you a definition of open access from open access leader Peter Suber, philosophy scholar and current director of the Harvard Office for Scholarly Communication. Suber provides this definition: "Open-access or OA literature is digital, online, free of charge, and free of most copyright and licensing restrictions."

Thus, open access removes *price barriers* (like subscription fees and licensing fees), and open access removes *permissions barriers* (that is, restrictions on how material can be reused).

We'll return to this definition later.

What I'm going to share with you today is the story of how I came to support open access and to believe that libraries should show *their* support of open access with their collection dollars.

Scene One — Journal Cancellations

I started working as an academic librarian in November 1995. Not too many months after I started my job, the library embarked upon what was one in a long series of serials cancellations: In 1996 we canceled 169 titles that cost $216,000.

Incidentally, I was assigned as liaison to departments in the College of Business Administration, and in this role I was expected to meet with each department chairperson and share with them the list of journal titles in their area that the library did not plan on renewing. During the meeting with the chair of the Accounting Department, a senior accounting professor sitting in on the meeting began yelling at me in a classic case of shooting the messenger. After several minutes of this, I decided that I'd had enough, so I got up to leave. This faculty member followed me down the hall, shouting, "You come back here, young lady. I'm not finished talking to you." Eyes straight ahead, I continued my walk back to the library and went straight

to the office of our collection manager, where I promptly burst into tears and told him I was never going to go back to the College of Business ever again. He started laughing. It was a formative experience.

Such cuts had been commonplace, and they kept coming.

- There had been cuts in 1976 (683 titles), 1983 (142 titles), 1988 (210 titles), 1991 (906 titles), and 1994 (131 titles).
- After the tears incident, there followed more cuts in 1998 (237 titles), 1999 (196 titles), and 2003 (274 titles).

Then, after the financial crisis, in 2008 *and* 2009 (two years in a row), we cut a total of 1,212 titles worth $646,000.

This time, as serials librarian, these were my cuts. *I* was the one responsible for carrying them out.

Hey, after the fact, I even got two book chapters published on the topic.

Though it did occur to me that someday when I looked back on my professional career and how I made my mark, however small, it was kind of bleak that because of these circumstances the expertise I had developed was "how to cancel stuff." (Incidentally, my next article, co-authored with a colleague with whom I led a project to dispose of almost a mile of bound periodicals from the library collection in order to make room for a "learning commons," revealed my expertise in "how to throw stuff out." Not the most inspiring legacy.)

This experience of journal cancellations was not unique to the University of Rhode Island. As many of you have probably heard, price increases for journals have far outpaced the rate of inflation since the mid-1980s. From 1986 to 2012, the cost of library materials in general has risen 322%. Continuing resources (that is, serials) have increased by 456%! During this time period, the general rate of inflation measured by the CPI only rose 109%.

In concrete terms, this means that in 2015 URI pays (in rounded numbers):

- $106,000 for journals published by Sage;
- $118,000 for journals published by Springer, now "Springer Nature" following Springer's recent acquisition of Macmillan Science and Education).

Add to that

- $36,000 for a *small* handful of journals published by Nature;
- $85,000 for journals published by Taylor and Francis;
- $283,000 for journals published by Wiley;
- $77,000 for journals from the American Chemical Society;

And, everyone's favorite…

- $703,000 for journals published by Elsevier.

To name a few examples.

Together, expenditures on journal subscriptions make up 66% of our materials budget. If you include journals plus other subscription-based electronic resources, the total climbs to *85%.* This leaves just 15% for books and media.

This is typical (actually, a little worse than typical).

According to statistics from the Association of Research Libraries (which represents the largest academic libraries in North America), in 2011-2012 expenditures on ongoing resources of all kinds comprised, on average, *69%* of total library materials expenditures.

Where is all this money going? Of course there are legitimate costs to publishing, but, in the case of journals, most of the work (writing articles, editing, peer reviewing) is done by academics on a voluntary basis. Much of the staggering prices of these resources go, quite simply, to publisher profit.

For example:

- In 2013, Elsevier's profit margin was 39%.
- In 2010, Springer's profit margin was 33.9%.
- In 2011, Wiley's profit margin was 42%.
- In the first half of 2011, Taylor & Francis's profit rate was 32.4%.

For those of us not so into business, is this even high? Yes, it is high.

For comparison:

- Apple's current profit margin is 23%.
- Google's is 21%.
- ExxonMobil's current profit margin is 7%.
- Wal-Mart? Their profit margin is 4%.

So why is this relevant, other than illustrating how I became an open access advocate?

Why is it relevant to you, women's history scholars, who don't deal all that much with journals, especially expensive science journals?

It is relevant because this is where all the money in libraries is locked up. This is money that is not available for books, for primary source databases, for humanities materials, for innovative new services.

Scene Two — New Forms of Digital Scholarship

Ryan Cordell is an assistant professor of English at Northeastern University and a digital humanist. One of his areas of study is viral texts in nineteenth-century newspapers. I heard him speak about his research at a [workshop for librarians in April 2013](#).

In the nineteenth century, newspapers and periodicals published short works of fiction, poetry, and other prose. At that time, before modern copyright law, it was common for editors to reprint these texts, originally published elsewhere. The texts moved around the country through this network, resulting in a shared print culture.

Cordell's research seeks to identify these shared texts, to examine which were reprinted and why, and to map how they traveled and changed as they passed from publication to publication. Cordell's primary source for his research is the Library of Congress's website [Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers](#). The site contains the full text and page images of many American newspapers between 1836 and 1922.

Cordell and his colleague David Smith, a professor of computer and information science, "scraped" the full text of all newspapers published before 1860 in Chronicling America and performed a computational analysis using algorithms they developed to identify matching texts. Thus far, the team has identified thousands of viral texts, including minor pieces by major authors that were far more influential than previously realized. They have also mashed up their data with other open data to reveal connections between viral texts and the expansion of railroads, the establishment of political boundaries, and local population characteristics.

Yet, [according to Cordell](#), there are "glaring holes" in his research. His data includes no content from Massachusetts—and Boston was a major publishing center of the time. There is also very little available to him from New York or Philadelphia, also vital to the period. He lacks this content because it is locked up in commercial databases of archival newspaper content, such as those published by Gale, Readex, and ProQuest. *Although his institution subscribes to a number of these databases*, the ability to download the text for analysis (which his research requires) is not available.

Hearing Ryan speak that day really deepened my understanding of the need for open access. Remember that the definition of open access refers to material that is not just free to read, without cost, but free to *re-use*.

Ryan found that innovative re-use of the content of these databases was either not possible at all, or was possible only by special arrangement, under limited conditions, for a financial cost.

Even though many of the sources in archival, primary-source databases are themselves in the public domain, once the content is digitized, vendors assert intellectual property rights over it and sell it for a profit. Thus, they are not readily willing to openly release the full text.

Due to pressure from libraries, some vendors of primary-source databases are beginning to include text and data-mining rights in their licenses with libraries. (Gale was the first in a [license pioneered by Darby Orcutt at North Carolina State University](#).) But this is still

awkward, involving hard drives arriving in the mail and very bad quality OCR, as scholar Paul Fyfe at NC State has discovered. And still, these arrangements, when available, are only available to researchers at institutions that subscribe to a given resource.

So, open access is not only for journals; and it is not only to make sure that material is "free to read." Open access applies to all types of scholarly materials, and re-use is a very important component.

This is why an open access model like Reveal Digital, as Ken outlined, is so important.

And it is important *now*, since even a casual perusal of the websites of Adam Matthew, Alexander Street Press, EBSCO, Gale, ProQuest, and Readex shows that they are working with libraries and other cultural heritage institutions to create newly digitized archival collections at a prolific rate. In fact, a 2015 press release from ProQuest boasted that, in 2014, the company digitized approximately 12 million pages of historical documents.

What Can Libraries Do?

Among the core values of librarianship are access to information, facilitating education and lifelong learning, social responsibility, and the public good. Open access aligns with all of these values. In fact, there are an increasing number of opportunities for libraries to support open access initiatives through crowd-funding and other models.

Here are the open access initiatives that we've supported so far at the University of Rhode Island:

- January 2014: SCOAP3, Cost: $364. SCOAP3 is a worldwide initiative coordinated by CERN, the European Organization for Nuclear Research, that converted key journals in the field of high-energy physics to open access. SCOAP3 centrally pays the article charges for articles in these journals from a common fund to which libraries contribute.

- January 2014: Knowledge Unlatched Pilot Collection, Cost: $1,196. This is a collection of 28 newly published, open access e-books in the humanities and social sciences from 13 well-known publishers; 297 libraries from 24 countries shared the cost of publishing these titles. As of April 2015, the titles had been downloaded almost 30,000 times from around the world.

- Reveal Digital:

  - March 2014: *Independent Voices*, Cost: $10,250.
  - October 2014: SNCC Archive, Cost: $4,000 (pledge).
  - October 2014: Liberation News Service Archive, Cost: $735 (pledge).
  - October 2014: Highlander Folk School Archive, Cost: $3,250 (pledge).

- February 2015: [Open Library of Humanities](#), Cost: $1,000 per year for 5 years. Open-access, peer-reviewed journal and book platform for the humanities funded by an international consortium of libraries.

As you can see, these costs are not at all expensive in comparison to overall library materials budgets and the costs of many library subscriptions. I encourage you to speak with your campus librarians and press them to support these and similar open access initiatives. And to remember that all open access is connected: whether for sciences or humanities, journals or books, or archives. Because OA in any of these areas has the potential to free up money in support of OA in another. And the more examples we have of successful OA initiatives, the easier it will be to advance open access publishing models in the future.

But, of course, open access is not just, or even primarily, about saving money. Initially, it might even cost more or require hard decisions about what to support or no longer to support.

Open access is primarily about *enhancing access* to scholarly content and *enabling creative re-use*.

So, I advocate for taking some portion of library budgets that currently are used to purchase the products of legacy, closed-access publishers in order to facilitate open access to scholarship and unique primary source material through new publishing models.

In Conclusion

I believe that librarians need to resist the enclosure of the scholarly and cultural commons that is the inevitable outcome of the traditional publication model and actively participate in experiments that seek alternatives.