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From the University Presses — Open Access Monographs and the Scholarly Communication Ecosystem

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When I was a child, my family was in Asbury Park, New Jersey, during a hurricane. We were not evacuated, and so I was able to watch the storm. The massive waves and the destruction wrought on the boardwalk impressed me mightily, my first lesson of nature's power. But my greatest thrill was the free ice cream handed out by boardwalk shop owners the day before the storm, an unloading of inventory in anticipation of the inevitable power outages they knew were coming. My entirely logical conclusion from this first experience — hurricanes provide wonderful theater and free ice cream. Let's have more of them!

My adult reaction to Sandy's devastation this past fall and to Katrina and other horrific storms in recent years was, of course, entirely different as I learned to view their effects through a much broader lens. Sometimes point of view is everything.

I've been thinking about point of view lately, especially as it relates to those of us who think about open access in terms of monograph distribution. We university press publishers see a grave threat to course adoption sales, our largest source of revenue. We also — if we think about it a bit — see that OA has the potential to resolve the free rider problem inherent in the current system, where those universities with presses indirectly underwrite the costs to those who don't through the subventions they provide to their presses.

Librarians tend to articulate their open access positions in terms of ideology — the societal benefit of making scholarship available to all at no direct cost. But I think their advocacy stems at least as much from economic concerns created by the ever-increasing serials costs and the concomitant decline in their budgets as a percentage of overall university expenditures.

Faculty, because they rarely directly pay to access scholarship, seem mostly to support OA, but while a core few actively promote it, most do not engage it as actively as librarians or university press staff. The need for faculty to publish their own research in outlets that promise both the widest dissemination and maximum prestige via brand association, thereby enhancing their chances for tenure and promotion, frequently takes precedence over their desire to promote the common good. (My sense is that faculty see institutional repositories as a way to have their cake and eat it, too. But unless I'm misinformed, their relatively low compliance with institutional repository deposit mandates indicates a certain apathy in the matter.)

I'm not quite sure where administrators stand, but my overall impression is that they tend to see scholarly communication through small windows pointing in different directions. Library acquisitions budgets are seen through

one pane whose view lends itself toward support of open access. The pane yielding a view of university presses, however, strongly suggests the need to generate revenue when distributing scholarship. Few administrators have the opportunity to consider the scholarly communications ecosystem as an integrated whole.

It seems worthwhile, then, to spend a little time first on bringing all of us scholarly communication constituents to a window focused on the specific question of cost and how it opens up the need to consider the full-window view of the entire ecosystem and one idea that full view suggests.

For a moment I'll narrow the cost window even further, sticking to the cost of publishing monographs. This is practical because a) I know monographs far better than I do serials and b) most university presses are more focused on the long-form argument book than the journal-based article.

No recent study I know has quantified the "first-copy" costs of scholarly monographs — everything involved in production up to printing and binding of physical books and the creation of the various files needed for digital publication. Costs vary depending on length, number of illustrations, complexity of design, permissions (university press publishers are as scrupulous about copyright when buying as they are when selling rights), how soon the book is needed, and other factors. Based on some recent conversations with other press directors and industry experts plus the data at my own press, it's not unreasonable to suggest that the cost per title, counting marketing and overheads — staff salaries, the cost of running an office, research and development, Website and platform updating, new post-publication formats, etc. — is \$20,000 per title.

The traditional "sale-to-end-user" model has generally recovered 75% to 80% of cost, including the additional printing, binding, and distribution costs. Figure that the average press publishes 60 annual monographs (by which I mean books whose primary market is libraries and students enrolled in courses), and a press faces an annual shortfall in the neighborhood of \$250,000. Going open access without designing alternative cost recovery systems would raise that deficit to about \$1.2 million.

Traditionally, the home university of a press fills the gap between recovered and unrecovered costs by providing a subvention to its press. Some universities have presses while most don't, and those that do have, in essence, long subsidized the entire monograph publishing system by supporting this income gap at their press. Those who don't have supported the system only by paying for those books they actually purchase — and because in the aggregate their purchases, even count-

ing course adoptions and individual faculty members buying a book, don't total full-cost recovery needs, they are free-riding the system.

Such a free-rider system was never ideal, and with university budgets increasingly squeezed in places with and without presses, it's getting worse. The old model is now clearly broken. Whatever a new model might be, simply invoking the use of new "digital strategies" represents a hope more than an actual model.

Let's stay with the old cost recovery system for a moment. If universal adoption of open access comes about, how would cost recovery work in such a system? In short, who pays? The university whose name the press bears? As we just saw, that doesn't work any more even in the present system. Press subventions are shrinking, not growing, and no university can reasonably be expected to pay that much to support scholarship when so many others — all those colleges and universities that don't have presses — would pay nothing in full open access.

Should authors pay? How many faculty members have that kind of money at their disposal? We surely don't want them paying out of pocket — that would leave only peer review to distinguish their efforts from pure vanity publishing.

Should their departments then pay? That's a non-starter, since department budgets come from the university budget and we've already noted that in terms of scholarly communication the latter is shrinking, not expanding. One could imagine a new system where an institutional repository replaces a university press or stands in at places where presses never existed, but results with IRs to date suggest that true widespread participation and subsequent dissemination requires some very specific skills not currently found easily within the university.

Retaining the \$20,000 cost per monograph to be recovered in a full open-access model, we return to the question of how to recover costs. Contributions from faculty, departments, and universities won't work unless they can secure an infusion of new revenue to cover the lost end-user revenue. Student fees represent an option. But does that not result in students picking up the cost of monographs while faculty and the library now get a free ride? A hybrid system involving students, libraries, and faculty? But isn't that what we already have? Would OA then be nothing more than shuffling deck chairs?

Ultimately, if we exclude student fees, the only sources of new revenue would seem to be

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foundations and government grants. It's hard to imagine foundations providing enough to make a major dent in costs, and that leaves government. One of the major rationales for open access in the journals world is that government-funded research should be freely available to those who fund the government, i.e., taxpayers. But for that to be true, the government funding has to include dissemination costs, an increase in fields where a grant is provided for research and an entirely new line of funding where, as is often the case for scholarly monographs, there has not been a research grant. We could embargo open access for books for a time, but because humanities and social science research does not age at anything close to the rate hard science research does, it's hard to envision an appropriate embargo that would not de facto return to an old end-user (or at least library) pays model.

Some readers feel that additional government expenditure is a fair trade for universal access and provides more value for money than lots of other government spending. But a significant proportion of our contemporary body politic is opposed on its own ideological grounds to "big government." Why would they advocate using tax dollars for distributing scholarship?

And now at last the intractable cost recovery question brings into view the scholarly communications ecosystem. We've just seen

how the system works for university press monographs. Commercial academic publishers cherry pick works that promise to sell more widely and often price books maximally. Serials publishing works this way: universities pay the salaries of faculty who conduct research, give it freely (actually even sometimes pay to give it) to commercial publishers outside the academic community or learned societies who represent disciplines but not universities as a whole, then buy it back, in refereed, edited, easily-searched formats — there is much added value here — at prices designed to generate profits, not maximize distribution. In the case of learned societies, there is concern for making dissemination to individuals in a given field affordable, but in practice that shifts the rest of cost recovery and now profit (surplus) recovery to libraries.

The "virtue" of the commercial system widely used in serials publishing is that it does not allow for free riders. The entire academic community pays to buy back its "raw" material in polished, vetted form. The price it pays, though, must now generate profit, and dissemination can be considered only to the extent that it doesn't interfere with profit. We're right back to the question of where universities can get the funds to pay for all this both in the current tight economy and over the long haul.

Hence a conclusion we might all consider. There is tremendous expertise in academic libraries, university presses, and various digital departments within universities. We know there have been some productive collaborations

among these groups (see the AAUP Task Force on Economic Models for Scholarly Publishing, 2011) in recent years, and more are coming. But these have tended to be *ad hoc* and more local than academic-community-wide. What's needed — and it isn't simple — is more big-picture thinking that draws on local successes to date and tries to accommodate the financial, career, and yes, the intellectual needs of a free society that wants to maximize the dissemination of research. Maybe, for example, there are ways to relieve some of the burden on universities that sponsor presses by addressing the free rider issue. Maybe we can find a way for university presses to help universities reclaim a significant portion of STM publishing and save a significant amount of money doing so. Whatever solutions we embrace, we must consider the broad picture above the narrow. Point of view matters.

Whether that broadened view will suggest that end users should not contribute to cost recovery isn't clear. Administrators, librarians, faculty, students, and presses may find that a sustainable model means settling for something less than the ideal. If we don't take a view broader than our own interests, the end result may be a system even more expensive than the one we have now, with some unprofitable scholarship (in terms of revenue) being abandoned altogether. We must be careful not to allow the pursuit of the great — unimpeded access to all research — to prevent the achievement of the good — a sustainable model with manageable cost for all. 🌱