Making Open Access Work in the Social Sciences

Hob Brooks
SAGE Publications, robert.brooks@sagepub.com

Eric Moran
SAGE Publications

Jeffrey Carroll
Columbia University

Deborah Ludwig
University of Kansas

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Hob Brooks (Moderator), Senior Library Sales Manager, SAGE
Eric Moran, Executive Editor, Social Science Journals, SAGE
Jeffrey Carroll, Assistant Director of Collection Development, Columbia University
Deborah Ludwig, Assistant Dean for Collections and Scholar Services, University of Kansas

Abstract:
As open access gains a strong foothold in medical publishing, social science scholars increasingly are looking for outlets to make their own research open access. In STM, publication fees of the major open access journals start at $1,350, with payment often covered as part of grants received from pharmaceutical companies, government, and other organized entities. In contrast, limited grant funding in the social sciences doesn't typically include publication support, so the question remains, "How can the open access model work for the social sciences?" This moderated panel discussion included representatives from libraries, university administration, and publishers to gain a full view of the current open access funding and publishing landscape and what might lie ahead. The conversation particularly focused on the librarian's role in facilitating the open access funding and publishing processes and how the role of a social science librarian may change in an open access world.

The open-access movement in academic and scholarly publishing has grown steadily over the last few years, gaining particular prominence in medical publishing through venues such as *PLoS ONE* and *BMJ Open*. Government and university open-access mandates, however, have increasingly spread interest in open access to social scientists. In 2011, this interest has only deepened as the launch of *SAGE Open* brought to the social sciences the broad-scope, open access mega-journal model already popular in STM publishing. When examined in the context of stagnant or shrinking serials budgets, limited grant and publication funding in the social sciences, and the ongoing wedding of tenure in many social science disciplines to publication in prestigious traditional journals, the burgeoning support for a new model raises many questions for librarians, faculty, and publishers alike. This panel discussion, moderated by Mr. Robert Brooks, sought to trace the librarian's changing role and offered recommendations regarding how librarians and publishers can collaborate to ease the transition of social science faculty to a publishing landscape in which new open access outlets share space with traditional journals.

Panelists began by outlining their current interactions with open access and their personal impressions of the challenges in bringing this new model to the social sciences. Mr. Jeffrey Carroll described the increasing need for librarians to reach out proactively to faculty to educate them about evolving policies and publishing options. He placed the librarian-as-advocate in the context of the larger transition of libraries from providers of hard-copy research materials to providers of content and information services that no longer necessarily take the form of discrete books and journals. Indeed, the theme of educating faculty and building awareness proved a common thread among all three discussants. Ms. Deborah Ludwig stated that part of her role consists of implementing policies made by administrators. With respect to the open access policy adopted by the University of Kansas, implementation has meant respecting the different attitudes of different faculty segments toward open access, such as heavier resistance among humanities faculty, and educating them according to their respective needs, making particular use of faculty champions and providing meaningful incentives to use the institutional repository, such as recognition for highly-downloaded authors.[i] Similarly, Mr. Eric Moran shared that the most challenging aspect of helping SAGE pioneer the broad-scale open access model in the social sciences has been educating humanities and social science faculty. Like Ms. Ludwig, Mr. Moran mentioned the need to provide incentives to make open access publishing more accessible, such as the low introductory acceptance fee offered by *SAGE Open*.

Discussion then turned toward the fee structures associated with the open access business model. The publisher's perspective holds that librarians

seem to have a fuller grasp than faculty of the need to fund open access publications, that is, the fact that these publications, while free to use, are not free to produce. As such, the panelists were asked how librarians and publishers could collaborate to educate faculty on this sensitive topic, one that represents a significant philosophical obstacle to accepting open access for many social scientists. Ms. Ludwig acknowledged the tension inherent in the open access model between the economics of publishing and disseminating scholarship freely for the greater public good. In granting that librarians need to form a fuller understanding of the business to equip them to defend costs to faculty, she urged greater transparency from publishers. Mr. Carroll added that faculty needed to be assured that the peer-review process used in open access publications is sufficiently rigorous, a topic which many of the audience members' questions revisited, further illustrating the concern in the academic community about the quality of open access publications versus traditional publications and the need to ensure that the publication fee does not permit diminished quality of work.

Lastly, Mr. Brooks asked the panel about any direct impact recent government and university mandates have had on their roles. Ms. Ludwig responded that the new mandates have succeeded in raising awareness of institutional repositories that, in many cases, predate the policies. She also expressed excitement that the wider visibility has enabled her to revisit the open access conversation with the next generation of younger scholars, many of whom seem interested in open access for the increased exposure it can provide for their work. Whereas the new mandates have allowed Ms. Ludwig to revisit existing structures, Mr. Moran said that the mandates have forced publishers to think in completely new ways. He believes that offering an open access outlet like *SAGE Open* represents a positive response to a challenge that publishers have previously met with mixed emotions.

As mentioned above, audience questions focused largely on the need for publishers to validate the quality of open-access publications as a prerequisite for support from social science faculty. Mr. Moran acknowledged the need to install measures to extend quality-based peer review beyond publication and verified that it has been easier to gain support for *SAGE Open* now that it has started to publish real papers that illustrate the quality of the endeavor. The final audience question wondered whether the low acceptance fee offered by *SAGE Open* would endanger the perception of quality associated with higher-priced STM outlets, but Mr. Moran reiterated the need to provide an introductory rate to help social science and humanities faculty acclimate to a new model.

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[i] "Open Access Policy for University of Kansas Scholarship," accessed November 28, 2011, https://documents.ku.edu/policies/governance/OpenAccess.htm.