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Open Access and Professional Societies

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Publicity photo of Agnes Moorehead as Endora from the television program Bewitched. (Photo credit: Wikipedia)

What happens if open access publishing becomes the norm?

This question came to mind when I engaged in an exchange with Richard Poynder, which [took the form of an email interview](#). Poynder has been polling a number of people about the current state of OA and the responses have been interesting. [Here, for example, is a remark by Heather Joseph](#):

*"I think it is critical for us to understand that the moment is in our hands when we need to stop thinking of Open Access as fighting to **become** the norm for research and scholarship, and to begin acting in ways that acknowledge that Open Access is the norm."*

There is a bit of magical thinking in this statement, but trying to take the magic out of magical thinking is not the most productive use of anyone's time. It is more instructive, I think, to assume that the assertion is true, that a dominant OA paradigm will indeed come to pass, and to imagine what a world built around that paradigm would look like. It's instructive in that it reveals the fault lines of the current (wildly successful) paradigm and enables perspicacious publishers to anticipate challenges to their enterprise. Or to put this another way, traditional publishers can let the "storm the barricades" branch of OA advocates do their strategic planning for them.

With that in mind I would point to a particular widening fault line and remark that professional societies have a tough slog ahead.

Before trying to sketch the future of professional societies, let's review how the current practices of such societies and scholarly communications actually work.

Professional societies, of course, are not all of one type. They differ in size, discipline, their relationship to the academy, the role of publication for professional advancement, and many other things. But one very large segment of professional societies has a business model that essentially

rests on three items: membership dues, income from conferences, and revenue from publications. Membership dues can be moved up or down, but higher dues can result in many people leaving the society, so the tendency is to keep dues as low as possible, the better to build a large organization. Conferences suffer from a similar problem: raise the registration cost and many people simply won't attend. But publications are different. Members typically get access to their society's publications for free or at a discount or through a library subscription. Raising the prices of publications *to libraries* is thus an expedient way to increase a society's income. While not-for-profit societies are for the most part not the price leaders in their categories, many societies look to their publications to generate a surplus.

Societies use that surplus in many different ways. It is used to subsidize membership dues and the cost of conference registration, provide support services for young scientists who are just starting out, to lobby in Washington, and for a host of other things. I recently saw a fascinating membership survey in which one of the most highly ranked benefits was subsidized child care at the society's annual conference. I doubt that many people who took advantage of that service knew that libraries were paying for it.

Universal OA would break up this cozy situation by eliminating much, perhaps all of that surplus from publications. As Andrew Odlyzko has noted, the average revenue per article in the traditional model is about \$5,000—that is, if you divide the total number of articles published in a year into the gross publishing revenue of journals publishers, you get a figure of \$5,000. But under a gold OA regime, the income per article is likely to be under \$2,000 (PLoS ONE charges \$1,350), and in that \$3,000-plus difference all the funding for special member services get thrown out. No more Washington lobbyists, no more support for young scholars, no more child care.

Gold OA, in other words, represents something of an existential threat to many professional societies. With reduced membership benefits, membership may drop, further weakening the society. With reduced activity in Washington, there may be downward pressure on funding for scientific research, which would ripple through the entire scientific enterprise. Professional societies, of course, will not simply sit back and contemplate their own extinction. They will look for ways to increase revenues by other means and for ways to reduce overhead. Many of them will seek to “bulk up” through partnerships of various kinds.

Is it any better with Green OA? Yes, I think it is, at least if there is an embargo attached to it. While Gold OA pretty much puts an end to the traditional subscription model—which is based on the utterly discredited notion that the people who benefit from a service should be the ones who pay for it—Green OA permits the traditional model to proceed, albeit under certain economic constraints. What the Green model does is more or less wipe out all the revenue streams that do not derive from library subscriptions, leaving the library subscriptions in place. These subscriptions continue to rise in price and generate a surplus for the lucky publishers that happen to have the most desired journals.

And here we return to what has become known as “the serials crisis.” Since prices of subscriptions rise and library budgets do not and cannot keep pace, some publications get dropped. How does a professional society avoid having its subscriptions cancelled? The most common route is to create a publishing arrangement with one of the larger publishers, who in

turn sell larger and larger collections or Big Deals to libraries at higher and higher prices. This can't go on forever, of course, but over the next 3-5 years it looks like a pretty safe bet. (I have described this process in greater detail [here](#).)

A comprehensive OA paradigm, in other words, is pretty much a frontal assault on professional societies, which can be expected to respond in ways that speak to their own interests. Perhaps, paraphrasing Joseph, it is time to acknowledge the twilight of the professional society, though, oddly, none of the leaders of the professional societies with which I am acquainted like that idea one bit.

About Joseph Esposito

I am a management consultant working primarily in the world of digital media, software, and publishing. My clients include both for-profits and not-for-profits. A good deal of my activity concerns research publishing, especially when the matter at issue has to do with the migration to digital services from a print background. Prior to setting up my consulting business, I served as CEO of three companies (Encyclopaedia Britannica, Tribal Voice, and SRI Consulting), all of which I led to successful exits. Typically I work on strategy issues, advising CEOs and Boards of Directors on direction; I also have managed a number of sticky turnarounds. Among other things, I have been the recipient of grants from the Mellon, MacArthur, and Hewlett Foundations, all concerning research into new aspects of publishing.

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Discussion

93 thoughts on “Open Access and Professional Societies”

1. Scholarly societies have been around a long time, I believe they started appearing around 350 years ago approximately the same time as scholarly journals. Up until 60 years or so ago, these societies and their members actually subsidized journals rather than lived off their income.

It may be an end of an era of societies with large professional staffs, fancy receptions at the annual meeting and broad agendas but I doubt it is the end of societies.