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The Crisis in Scholarly Publishing

Background

Production, dissemination, and preservation of knowledge is fundamental to all fields of research. Scholarly publishing, in the form of journal articles, conference proceedings and monographs, is a primary means by which knowledge is distributed to professors, researchers, graduate students and the public.

Unfortunately, scholarly publishing has in recent years entered a period of crisis. While the proliferation of research information has encouraged a rapid increase in the number of scholarly journals (from 103,700 world-wide in 1986 to 161,000 in 1999), the capacity of academic institutions to acquire scholarly publications has declined. For example, monograph acquisitions by university libraries have actually dropped by about 26% since the mid-1980s. The Association of Research Libraries (ARL) estimates that member libraries were spending 170% more in 1999 to buy 6% fewer journals than they had in 1986.

Government cuts to post-secondary education funding, which have led to reduced budgets for university library acquisitions, have played a major role in this crisis. However, other factors, such as increasing journal prices, have also had a detrimental effect on scholarly publishing. Journal subscription prices have risen dramatically in recent years, especially in scientific and medical fields. Between 1986 and 1999, the cost of journals increased by 175%. In Canada, this situation is exacerbated by an unfavourable exchange rate, as about 80% of journal subscriptions are priced in US dollars. A study conducted in 2002 found that even though Canadian library expenditures have increased, purchasing power for libraries dropped between 21.6 and 32.7%. The rising cost of "core" subscriptions means that researchers in all fields often have less access to material in their fields.

The increased cost of journal subscriptions is largely the result of commercial publishing companies recognising profit potential in certain areas of scholarly publishing, acquiring prestigious journal titles in those areas, and then raising prices in order to realise increased profits. Because the prestige associated with high profile publications is an important factor in evaluation and promotion, many scholars feel obligated to continue publishing in such journals, despite the overall detrimental effect high journal prices have on access to knowledge.

High journal prices within particular academic fields have consequences for scholarly publishing as a whole. Rapidly escalating prices for science, technology, and medicine journals mean that more library funds are required to sustain subscriptions in those areas. This prevents acquisition growth in other fields, such as the humanities and social sciences, and even leads to subscription non-renewals and cancellations. As a result, scholars in the humanities and social sciences not only have access to fewer resources in their fields, but have fewer options for publishing their work as the monograph market shrinks. Because monographs traditionally serve as an important early publishing opportunity, this particularly disadvantages academics in the initial stages of their careers.

Addressing the Crisis Key Issues for Change

Addressing the crisis in scholarly publishing will require significant changes to the existing system. Stakeholders agree that workable solutions to the crisis must include a strong peer-review process, be cost effective, and allow for reliable archiving. "Principles for Emerging Systems of Scholarly Publishing", an agreement developed in May 2000 by the Association of American Universities (AAU) and the Association of Research Librarians (ARL), outlines guiding principles on issues such as cost containment, use of electronic resources, archiving, peer-review, copyright, and placing an emphasis on quality rather than quantity. This agreement is being promoted to raise awareness of issues affecting the future of scholarly publishing and to provide consensus on important points for changing the system.

In addition to the considerations outlined above, potential solutions must, at least in part, address the fundamental issue of the perceived quality of an article being linked to the particular journal in which it is published. In order for scholarly work to stand on its own, regardless of the journal or medium in which it appears, some have suggested that journal editors could instead do their work under an independent ranking body.

Consortia Buying Groups

The formation of a Canadian buying consortium has helped temporarily relieve pressures on library acquisition budgets. It allows libraries to pay into a joint acquisition fund that is matched by a one-time federal government grant.

However, the grant is only budgeted for 3 years, and runs out in 2003. While the programme has helped university libraries cope, it fails to address the underlying problem of soaring journal prices. Buyers' consortia mask the structural flaws of the current publishing system by using public money to provide an indirect subsidy to journal publishers and distributors.

Electronic publishing

Moving to a system of electronic publishing seems desirable; electronic publishing has the advantage of making production and distribution cheaper and faster. Projects like Journal Storage (JSTOR) provide access to back issues of humanities and social sciences journals by converting them to digital versions. Project Muse at Johns Hopkins University encourages use of electronic journals by adding electronic titles to their roster of Johns Hopkins University Press titles to which other universities subscribe.

There are a number of problems with electronic publishing. Rapid changes in technology may mean that electronically archived material will rapidly become obsolete, or require continual (and expensive) updating. In addition, electronic formats are not appropriate for certain resources, such as visual art material. Electronic journals are also not yet fully accepted in the academic community and often do not carry the same weight as print journals during evaluations for academic promotion and tenure. This perception, as well as substantive issues of electronic journal quality, must be addressed if electronic journals are to play a major role in resolving the crisis.

Looking ahead to long term solutions

While the measures described above have so far met with only limited success, other initiatives point toward long-term resolution of the crisis in scholarly publishing.

Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources Coalition

The Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources Coalition (SPARC) works to control costs and redefine publishing in two ways: first, by creating not-for-profit independently run journals; second, by creating lower priced journals that directly compete with existing ones, SPARC expects to exert a moderating pressure on prices. SPARC has had some success already. In 1999 SPARC worked with the American Chemical Society to establish Organic Letters, a journal designed to compete with the prestigious, for-profit journal Tetrahedron Letters. The price increases for Tetrahedron Letters between 1995 and 1999 was 68% (from \$5119 to \$8602, an average of 13.8% per year); after the introduction of Organic Letters in 1999, the 1999-2000 increase was much more moderate at 3%. In addition, scholars were provided with a new, peer-reviewed and not-for-profit journal option. Competition from the non-profit SPARC journal led to a 20% decrease in the number of articles published in its for-profit competitor.

The Open Archives Initiative

A potentially more comprehensive solution is the Open Archives Initiative, which provides an electronic repository where scholars can both archive and retrieve papers using free software (e-prints). This eliminates publishers from the process entirely, as well as subscription fees. A similar project ("Canadian Portal to Scholarly Publishing") is underway to create access to Canadian peer-reviewed electronic journals and is endorsed by the Canadian Association of Research Libraries (CARL).

Conclusion

Graduate students have an important stake in reforming scholarly publishing. As part of the research community, graduate students require access to scholarly publications both for research and to publish their own work. Graduate students who pursue academic careers will continue to need an accessible, sustainable system of scholarly publication.

A comprehensive solution to the scholarly publishing crisis will ultimately require the co-operation of faculty, librarians, university administrators, students and publishers. Researchers, academics and graduate students have the most to gain from reclaiming the distribution networks for scholarly work, and will have to be at the forefront of any successful reform process. Until a comprehensive solution is found, researchers can play a role in the growth of less costly alternatives to commercial academic publishers by choosing to publish their work in not-for-profit and reasonably priced journals.

Resources

"Create Change: a resource for faculty and librarian action to reclaim scholarly communication." Association of Research Libraries (ARL), the Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL), and SPARC. www.arl.org/create/home.html

Issues in Scholarly Communication. ARL. www.arl.org/scomm

"Principles for Emerging Systems of Scholarly Publishing". ARL. www.arl.org/scomm/tempe.html

"Reframing Scholarly Communications: A Discussion Paper", December 2001. Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT) Librarians Committee. <http://www.caut.ca/english/issues/libraries/reframing.asp>

"The Transition of Scholarly Communications in Canada." Kathleen Shearer and Bill Birdsall. Summer 2002. http://www.carl-abrc.ca/projects/RDI/12page-Background_06-7-02_final.pdf