Common Cause: How Scholarship Became a Commodity and What Libraries can do to Reclaim the Commons

Barbara Fister

Presented at the University of Wisconsin, Sept. 21, 2010

Abstract: We're used to calling it a "serials crisis," but is it really about serials? And can a situation that has been problematic for decades be accurately called a "crisis" – or is it merely business as usual? This prelude to Open Access Week will examine how we got into this situation, what the implications are, and what we can do to change it.

We all know that the system of scholarly publishing is badly broken. We aren't sure what to do about it.

We know it's going to take a lot of imagination and collaboration, political will, and significant changes to the culture of higher education to fix it. We know that some of our current fixes are not quite working: building repositories is much easier than filling them, and filling them with the stuff that will actually change the stranglehold commercial publishers have on us is particularly difficult. We also know, thanks to every day experience and from evidence in the most recent Ithaka survey of faculty, that taken in aggregate, the professoriate are traditional and conservative about what counts in publishing, and that most of them have no idea that the system is past repair and don't have any interest in changing it. What they do know well – and what they were taught in graduate school - is how to play the game.

And we've been sounding the alarm for the past thirty years or so. Sad, isn't it?

I should acknowledge here that we've made some significant gains. When Harvard's faculty of arts and sciences voted to support an open access mandate, the idea of open access – and its cool factor – were enormously enhanced. The number of institutions with mandates has grown significantly in the past couple of years.

There are over 5,000 journals now listed in the Directory of Open Access Journals, and libraries can include those journals in their link resolvers so that they are just as accessible to students and faculty as traditionally published journals, and in fact nobody can see the difference, which is both good and bad. (It would be kind of cool if we could include on each subscription article "this subscription costs the library $x a year.") We have the arXiv example: over 600,000 e-prints deposited since 1994 - to demonstrate that some fields find open access not only compatible with tradition, but indispensible. We have some

evidence to suggest that open access publication of research enhances the reach of ideas, which is likely to enhance the careers of scholars and scientists and thus their social and economic capital.

And we have the truly masterful success of the NIH policy, slipped into an appropriations bill, to mandate deposit of research based on NIH-funded research, an example that the FRPAA bill would expand to other federal funding agencies unless lobbyists win.

Yet we also are living in a time of very tight dollars for libraries, and both the prices we have to pay and expectations of instant gratification when it comes to access to research are growing. Despite some successes, libraries are still facing unsupportable needs for high cost materials. Very few scholars are likely to follow a Google Scholar (or JSTOR) link to an article, whip out their credit cards, and plunk down $30 or $40 to purchase access to each article they need to examine.

That ludicrous price simply prompts them to either charge it to the taxpayer by writing access to published research into grants or to ask their library to provide it. And increasingly libraries are doing just that, finding it much cheaper to pay extortionate rates for one article at a time rather than extortionate rates to subscribe to journals in bundles. But that significantly changes the nature of libraries, and that change is seeping into the way faculty see us. We are no longer institutions that gather, curate, preserve, and make knowledge accessible. We are not for the ages, or for the community, we are for instant gratification. We are increasingly seen as an administrative office that exists to pay invoices for disposable personal research.

So how do we get from where we are now to a more open and sustainable future, one that honors our values and ensures that libraries have information to share in future?

First of all, we should probably reflect on the fact that, as Ted Striphas has pointed out, the current system is not broken, it actually works terrifically well—for big corporate publishers.

We have formidable opponents who have a lot of money they can spend on lobbyists. In the most recent hearings on the FRPAA bill, at least one legislator was convinced that posting federally funded research results online was a national security risk, because it would let foreigners in on American research.

I guess he didn't know that a huge amount of American research *is already* owned by foreigners. We give it to multinational corporations for nothing, and then we buy it back at great expense - or we do without. That is the status quo that publishers want to

preserve, and to preserve it they provoke xenophobia in legislators and persuade them that it's against our national interest to make research open access.

This conflict between hoarding and openness as a matter of policy is nothing new. Leo Szilard [tried to patent](#) the concept of a chain reaction because he wanted it to belong to the allies. The British Admiralty wasn't interested. When General Leslie Groves was put in charge of the top secret Manhattan Project, he thought it necessary to restrict access to information, to prevent security risks.

Robert Oppenheimer had to break it to him that this is not how science works, that they would never meet their goals if the scientists were prevented from talking to one another about what they were up to. Discovery can't happen if information isn't shared. Going on the questions raised in recent government hearings, members of congress do not realize the reason we put so much money into basic research is, in fact, to share it, because without sharing it we can't advance knowledge. It rather annoys me that the people frightening information illiterate members of congress about foreigners getting their hands on our research work on behalf of the very foreign companies that already have their hands on our research and want to ensure that we have to use them to dignify it in the form of publication and then purchase it back.

This problem is, of course, exacerbated by the corporatization of the university. The scholars who are lucky enough to be on the tenure track need to be vetted, and publication in prestigious journals or scholarly presses is how we assess quality. Having an article accepted by *Nature* opens the door not only to career advancement but to grants. Nature is picky, which is why it's respected – but no worries! If you can't be published by the pickiest of traditional publishers, you can substitute quality for quantity, because the same publishers offer places where the rejected research can be published. Or better yet, go for both – thinly-slice your research into as many publications as possible.

And that's what you have to do. Tenure and promotion committees have outsourced the work they are expected to do – examine and interrogate the fitness of probationary faculty - to publishers, who now determine who gets tenure. This works out great for committee members, who only have to do the math, and for commercial publishers, who have an unlimited supply of content and an opportunity to create multiple tiers of journals to ensure that any rejected article can find a home, because getting published is worth so much to scholars that getting their stuff read takes a back seat. Libraries, of course, are expected to support this activity at both ends, by providing the resources scholars need for their research and by paying for Big Deals that include the fourth and fifth tier journals that nobody actually will read but which add lines to CVs. The fact that the minority of faculty

today are in tenure track positions just adds to the pressure on those lucky few to appear insanely productive.

Scholarly societies have largely abandoned their traditional purpose of fostering knowledge through enhancing the exchange of ideas, providing a means of making them public, and disseminating the discoveries of the discipline for the greater good. [is there a good historical quote available to illustrate this?] They have become entities that either use publications as a revenue stream to fund other worthy activities, and now often find themselves stumped because so few libraries are able to subsidize their activities, or that have found their publications so profitable that they are indistinguishable from commercial publishers. Sometimes societies – which claim to exist to enhance knowledge for the greater good sign contracts with commercial publishers, mistakenly believing that they have the economies of scale and the connections to make their publications more visible. Suckers! They learn that they've traded the amazing cultural assets accrued over the years for short term efficiencies, but soon the cost of continuing the relationship requires that libraries, one by one, have to turn off access to that society's historical record and, to keep the money flowing, prices for the remaining libraries have to go up, and the end result is less access, not more.

A case in point: recently the executive director of the American Anthropological Association, who shepherded the migration of Anthrosource from a university press to a commercial multinational corporation, asked how the association should proceed now that scholars have turned into hapless, scofflaw teenagers who expect information to be free.

Whoa, hold it. Scholars have always expected their scholarship to be free – free on many levels. They write up their research to set it free into the realm of ideas. They freely give it to others so it can add a contribution to a shared understanding of the world we live in – and yes, to carry their name on a banner into the frontier skirmishes where both knowledge and reputations are established. They believe that their research is freeing – liberating – because those of us in higher education actually believe knowledge is a condition for a free society, that liberal learning is liberating, and that there is no end to the questions we can and should ask about the world. And when they need to find out what other researchers already had to say about an issue, they don't get out their credit cards and go shopping. They go to the library. Because it's all there, and they can freely gather it together.

What the AAA executive editor said in a recent blog post about the threat posed by the FRPAA is this:

- "A very effective open access lobby has been at work both within the US Congress and the executive branch drafting regulations and legislation to mandate free online access to published scholarly journal articles."
- For that reason biomedical publishers have "been able to shift the costs of publication from subscribers to authors"
- Social science articles cost twice as much to publish than science articles, but anthropologists have less money than scientists, so open access can't work for the social sciences.
- Old social science research is cited a lot and new research isn't, so while a yearlong embargo may be fine for science, embargoes on anthropology journals would have to last decades.
- "Costs per average article in 2008 ran from $4,865 (*Ethos*) to $6,960 (*MAQ*), with *American Anthropologist* being $5,564." [these figures don't include the enormous amount of volunteer labor. It actually costs the association that much to have Wiley publish their journals.] To be open access, authors would have to pay that much.
- Anthropologists won't pay $5,000 to publish an article.
- Therefore "it is essential that we formulate a strategy to sustain AAA's traditional journal publishing role as we engage with a world that expects scholarly content to be 'free.'"

In other words, the problem is the perception that people should have access to scholarly information, not that the current system is outrageously inefficient, unsustainable, and renders the society's knowledge inaccessible to most people.

Here's how an AAA $6,000 per article costs break down:
- 33.39% – editorial (an online submission site and a managing editor) - $2003.40
- 31.74% – production costs (copyediting, typesetting, xml coding) - $1904.40
- 18.96% – distribution costs - $1,137.60
- 13.50% – AAA staff overheads - $810.00
- 2.41% – marketing - $144.60

Not included: writing the articles, expenses to conduct the research, peers reviewing and commenting on the articles (as well as articles not accepted for publication), overhead costs of the universities where those authors and reviewers work.

In rebuttal, Jason Baird Jackson, the human dynamo involved in the Open Folklore Project claims that (also without taking into account the volunteer labor and overhead costs

not factored into the AAA per-article figure) that the open access journal he founded when frustrated by the high cost and low accessibility of the AAA journal Museum Anthropology only costs 42 cents per article to produce. When he edited the AAA journal, it cost over $200 per page to produce and cost $79 per article more than it made in sales.

How can this be – to go from thousands of dollars per article to only 42 cents? It was a rough back-of-the-envelope calculation based on the cost of acquiring a domain and a few other out-of-pocket expenses. Here's how he explains the real costs in more detail:

> As things stand in 2010, the most important subsidy for the journal is the remarkable-super-awesome support provided to the journal by the Indiana University Blooming Libraries (and Librarians!) through the IUScholarWorks program. The IUB Libraries are now *MAR*'s publisher. They make this possible with the use of an amazing open source software program called Open Journal Systems (it does editorial work flow and publishing) and, very importantly, significant (but not insane) amounts of technical (and librarian-skills) support . . . the costs are many orders of magnitude less than any current AAA publication. And they are being willingly taken up by the best research library in the United States. Why? *Because the system we have known is broken and the librarians at IU want to be part of the solution rather than part of the problem.*

What we're faced with is a big, big issue, and we're already stretched keeping our basic, traditional activities afloat in an environment where change is constant, expectations are high, and costs are increasing though budgets are not. Being part of the solution means doing things that will go against our deeply ingrained instinct to serve, but the ways we serve often implicates us in problem. We feel stymied by the conservatism and inertia of the faculty rewards system, and we don't know how to get their attention long enough to explain this vexed problem. Not for profit scholarly publishers such as university presses are also stymied by being treated as if they should make money when we all know that's not going to happen. Playing scholarly presses off against libraries is an evil and inefficient shell game. In an era when university presses sue university library directors over e-reserves, we are clearly working toward a common solution. So libraries make the best of it by canceling subscriptions in favor of buying articles for $30 a pop, or deciding not to buy books because it's easier than negotiating a serial cancelation. But while we're busy pinching pennies and gutting our libraries, we're sustaining a system that is the enemy of sharing and preserving knowledge. We're part of the problem.

I am fascinated by something that Charlotte Hesse and Eleanor Ostrom said: "collective action and new institutional design play as large a part in the shaping of scholarly information as do legal restrictions and market forces."

So what should that action and design look like?

Let me quote from an exchange about the AAA, in which Christopher Kelty asked "what are scholarly societies for? Why did we create them? What do they do for us as scholars and as citizens and what reasons do they have for existing?" Jason Baird Jackson answered: "the association's interests are now more congruent with those of the publishing industry, not my library or the university presses. As a result the interests of my ethnographic consultants, my university library, my students, and my colleagues are increasingly in conflict with those of my professional society." He responded by working with a library to create a much less expensive journal that embodies all of the traditional values of scholarship while being free to anyone who cares to read it. (And for cultural anthropology, that includes a lot of people who are not affiliated with wealthy institutions.)

This does mean library investment, and none of us have excess time or money. Are we duty-bound to spend every penny and every ounce of energy available to us to sustain traditional and commercial publishing as a service to students who can't pay for it and to faculty who have to rack up publications to keep their jobs? Or should we strategically reallocate some of that funding and energy and invest it in changing the system? Significant change can't happen if we only support it with spare change in our free time. In fact, we don't have spare money or time – but we can strategically withdraw money from the bank of business as usual and use it collectively to provide service and disrupt a system that isn't working.

The library is the commons of the university. In recent years, it has been enclosed and exploited by corporations, and individual scholars have been schooled to be grateful to those corporations for claiming the copyright over their work in exchange for career advancement. Instead of having a collection, we have licensed temporary access to materials that can be turned off with the flick of a switch. That's the true tragedy of the commons today – not that selfish people will exploit a shared common resource and use it up, but that individualism and a market-based emphasis on "productivity" that relies on producing goods that will benefit very few people is gobbling up our common resources.

Yes, I realize it costs money to organize the freely-donated work of scholars and for the back-office processes (the copyediting, the layout, the server space, the administrative tracking of manuscripts in process) that the publication process requires. But currently it costs us all a lot more to purchase access to it, one library at a time, than it would if we

collectively paid for that work up front and set it free. Currently we're not just funding publication, we're also funding the salaries of lobbyists in Washington who try to persuade our legislators that purchasing access to publicly funded research from corporations is working superbly and shouldn't be messed with. We're funding huge CEO salaries and staggering profit margins built on the artificial scarcity of the knowledge that we produce in order to share it.

Library values are too often lost in the day-to-day practice of our profession. Searching for some way to connect this theoretical belief system with daily practice, I hit on liberation theology, a kind of theology that applies Christian principles to problems of social injustice. So I found a short article (unfortunately behind a paywall) written by a colleague of mine at Gustavus on why she feels liberation theology should be taught in her classes as a way of relating core beliefs to choices that we make daily. That inspired a remixed manifesto for a whimsically titled movement, Liberation Bibliography. So long as I'm dreaming, I may as well dream big. Here's my manifesto for change – and how I feel libraries need to strategize for the future:

- Liberation bibliography arises out of outrage at the injustice of the current system. It's not about saving money, it's about the empowering nature of knowledge and the belief that it shouldn't be a luxury good for the few.
- Liberation bibliography must emerge out of a sense of solidarity with communities struggling for liberation. It's not just a matter of a few academics and librarians tinkering under the hood of the scholarly communication system to improve conditions for scholars; it's about action for the public good.
- Liberation bibliography recognizes that the world is not separated into the scholarly and the ordinary. If knowledge matters, it must matter beyond the boundaries of our campuses, and beyond the conference halls of our scholarly societies.
- Liberation bibliography recognizes that we are implicated in systems that personally benefit us, even when we recognize those systems to be unjust. Whenever we publish in a journal that will resell our work for a profit and withhold it from those who can't pay, we have put our self-interest before social justice. Librarians shouldn't do that. Scholars shouldn't do that.
- Liberation bibliography takes seriously the slogan, so often inscribed on academic buildings of a certain age, that the truth shall set us free—and that means freedom should extend to all of us, not just to a select class of employed academics and currently enrolled tuition-paying students. Information should not be a member benefit for those who belong to the club.

- Liberation bibliography recognizes that the liberal learning we promote must be beneficial to all people. Some libraries baulk at the idea that we might contribute to information being free to all, rather than spending that time and money on making information available to our immediate community. I think that's a betrayal of our purpose and ideals. Libraries should not simply serve our institutions' immediate needs but rather their higher ideals. Toward that end, libraries and scholars need to remind our institutions of those ideals which still form the material for countless mission statements and taglines but are ignored in daily institutional practice. And as individuals and in communities, we must act on them.