



Winter 12-15-2010

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Herring, Mark Y., "Can Open Access Save Us?" (2010). *Dacus Library Faculty Publications*. 58.
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Little Red Herrings — Can Open Access Save Us?¹

by **Mark Y. Herring** (Dean of Library Services, Dacus Library, Winthrop University) <herringm@winthrop.edu>

Just about every time I open a journal or read a blog online, I see something about eBooks saving newspapers and magazines. Both are going the way of all flesh, we're told, but eBook reading may provide a stay of execution, however short that may be. It got me to thinking if there might be something else that would provide a similar *Dies Irae* for scholarly communication in general. That's when the thought occurred to me it could well be open access (OA), or at least as I envision it here.

Now, before many of you quit reading with a dismissive, "Been there, tried that, saw it fail," let me hasten to add three things. Yes, open access isn't new. And yes, it has been tried before. But no, I don't think this possible solution has seen very much of the light of day.

Open access came about, of course, as one alternative to the exorbitant cost of scholarly materials. Periodical literature, as any librarian knows, has increased over the years at a rate that outstrips the inflationary cost of just about everything, including healthcare. Sadly, there appears to be no relief from these costs, either, even as libraries are struggling to find a way, not so much to maintain subscriptions, but to sustain their existence! Increased costs routinely run 7%-9% annually, with individual journals costing as much as compact cars, literally. Most journal publishers know libraries have little recourse to paying these high prices and so charge them two, three, and even four times what individual subscriptions to the same journals might cost. Aggregate databases, while offering a panoply of journals, do so only at mind-boggling (as well as mind-numbing) costs, ranging from a few thousand to tens of thousands of dollars.

It's quite true that open access isn't new. The idea has been around a long time, at least a decade, and it has been tried various ways. It's also true that many of those ways tried so far haven't been very successful. By definition, open access archives and/or journals do not provide scholarly vetting (peer review) but do allow free access via the open Internet to whatever materials are placed there. Open access usually allows for free downloading, printing, copying, and distribution, only requiring that users attribute any materials correctly. Open access bypasses the costly nature of access to scholarly publishing and/or scholarly communication conventionally conceived by making this access available on the open Web. Open access archives and/or repositories can be journal-driven, discipline-driven, or a chrestomathy, if you will, an *omnium gatherum* of scholarly content. **Peter Suber** has provided the best overview of open access and of a detailed discussion of the history and ongoing activity subsequent to its evolution (<http://bit.ly/9OP1Cj>).

Suber (<http://bit.ly/hertKV>) refers to what

he calls the BBB definition of open access, or definitions provided by Budapest (2002, <http://bit.ly/t8YA2>), Bethesda (2003, <http://bit.ly/23VpB3>), and Berlin (2003, <http://bit.ly/Eh1Jk>) statements. This refers to the three named entities whose definitions proved the most influential to the evolution and recognition of OA as a means of providing access to scholarly materials at greatly reduced prices. While all three have various granular differences, overall they say the same thing, *viz.*, that the author of the scholarly content will not restrict access (printing, downloading, distributing, etc.) to that material, so long as attribution is properly made. And herein are both the merits and defects of OA. Consent to the OA restrictions is made through **Creative Commons** licensing (<http://creativecommons.org/>). More on this below.

Out of desperation, open access began to appear, slowly at first. Today, it has become more routine to see various OA offerings. A number of celebrated open access initiatives have appeared in the last decade or so. **SPARC** (<http://www.arl.org/sparc/>, **Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources Coalition**) "is an international alliance of academic and research libraries working to correct imbalances in the scholarly publishing system. Developed by the **Association of Research Libraries**, **SPARC** has become a catalyst for change. Its pragmatic focus is to stimulate the emergence of new scholarly communication models that expand the dissemination of scholarly research and reduce financial pressures on libraries." While perhaps the most visible by virtue of being one of the first, **SPARC** is not entirely free (there are no free lunches, mind you). Its support, in addition to various foundations, comes from members' annual dues (<http://bit.ly/igiAte>). Still, it does fall into the very general category of open access because it does provide access to scholarly communication at a lower cost than high-priced subscriptions through conventional publishers.

While not a publisher itself, **SPARC** endorses various peer-reviewed journals that seek to provide lower-cost access to scholarly content. It also has come out in support of the **Confederation of Open Access Repositories** (<http://bit.ly/c5ljTO>). **COAR** (<http://coar-repositories.org/>) is a nonprofit group launched in 2009 that promotes research through open access repositories. **COAR** is more European than American, but membership is open to any not-for-profit higher education institutions. **COAR**, like **SPARC**, supports itself through grants and membership dues.

Other organizations and groups abound, but the point of all of them is the same. Through some mechanism like the **Creative Commons** license, users are able to share research, bypassing publishers whose intent is, of course, to make money. While I am a strong entrepreneurial proponent, *some* publishers have taken this to extremes, and many of them publish exorbitantly costly academic journals. The cost of academic research is so high now that it threatens to undo all of us. Through **Creative Commons** licensing we have a way to share information via open access, maintain publishing tenure and promotion standards, and to provide low-cost scholarly communication, all the while contributing to the body of important academic research. Founded in 2001, creative common licenses released its first set of licenses in 2002. By 2009, over 350 million had been issued. While some readers might think that only "has been" and "never wases" use **Creative Commons** licensing, history proves them wrong. Familiar entities using **CCL** are **Flickr**, **Google**, the **Public Library of Science**, **Whitehouse.gov**, and most recently, **Wikipedia**.

So, we have a history of open access, a wheel that has already been invented through which to share scholarly communication. We have a means through which it may be properly attributed via **Creative Commons** licensing. We also have a history of the process working more or less well enough to perpetuate itself, if barely, for about a decade. But one piece is missing if open access is really to provide any salvation from the high cost of scholarly communication. Right now only the largest of educational institutions (or only institutions with robust funding) are able to make open access work. What is needed is a funding mechanism that makes it easier for small- to medium-sized higher educational institutions to get in on the act.

While technically speaking, anyone with access to the Web can do this, it really isn't practical without some organizing software that may make sharing easy and "publishing" easier still. Institutional Repository software allows for that, but that kind of software isn't cheap. Granted, freeware access to software like **D-Space** is available. But such software requires very heavy lifting from IT departments, exactly what small- to medium-sized institutions do not have to spare. With funding help to purchase out-of-the-box software, we may well be able to reach the proverbial "tipping point." (For more on this see <http://eprints.rclis.org/19438/>.) Granted, some IT oversight will be needed but not as much, and many libraries could manage it through their systems librarians.

This is just the sort of idea that begs the funding of **Google**, **Microsoft**, or some other technology titan. Sure, some public and private money

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is available, and enterprising libraries have found it. But we need a privatized version of something like the old *Library Services and Construction Act (LSCA)*, — say a three year start-up — for this to work on the scale that it must for all to benefit equally. Why three years? Most IR software is purchased on a subscription basis. The three-year start-up allows time for institutions to fold the cost into their current budgets with a proven track record of the software doing what it claims it can do. Three-year start-up funding would allow institutions to assign oversight of the repository to an internal entity.

I can think of no better oversight entity than the library, since it is, after all, about information and shared knowledge. With funding like that in place, libraries could arrange the repository in such a manner that would allow various levels of participation, secure the **Creative Commons** licensing, and organize — read catalog — the available resources in an easy-to-find and manageable way. With large, medium and small institutions contributing to scholarly communication, the pressure would be effectively applied to publishers to reduce pricing substantially or get left out altogether (as they are about to be with digital textbook publishing). I also imagine that the large-scale participation would in many ways legitimize the process for tenure and promotion purposes,

if that remains a key ingredient in higher education in the future.

If these benefits were not enough, open access repositories also allow for more on-campus collaboration that simply cannot be done via the Web without it. For example, a math professor might log on and discover that a professor in art and design is painting fractals. They two might work together to create an interactive presentation. Students, too, would be able to see what faculty are working on and offer assistance on projects that truly interest them. It strikes me as a win-win equation.

Lastly, this addition would vastly improve the chances of bringing to reality **Robert Darnton’s National Digital Library (NDL)** (<http://bit.ly/b7PeWV>). **Darnton** views the **NDL** as a “digital equivalent of the **Library of Congress**.” But it can’t happen without OA, or rather I should say it won’t happen as easily and quickly without it, if it happens at all.

Imagine the shared resources of all the world’s academic institutions online and at one’s fingertips! Some will argue that the quality of such offerings would be small compared to its vast size, but I would argue that they haven’t spent much time in academic publications already in print. I would further argue that it would at least rival what’s been printed and, quite possibly, be much better.

Can open access save us? I think it can, but it’s going to require something like this — if not this exactly — to make it work. Without it, academics will remain the indentured servants of the publishing world, while academic libraries are held hostage to their high prices. 🐘

Endnote

1. Published simultaneous in *Against the Grain* and at <http://dacuslibrary.wordpress.com>.

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And, we had nearly **367+ first-timers in Charleston** this year among our over 1,300 registrants! For the first time this year, we published profiles of the first-time attendees (online and some were printed). The profiles that we received are loaded on the Conference Website. <http://www.katina.info/conference/>

Forgot! Be sure to vote for **Xan Arch** who is running for **ALA Council**.

Also — be sure to look at the magnificent **Don Hawkins’** blog. www.theconferencecircuit.com

I have run out of room for this time. Be sure and visit the **ATG** Website for updates. In the meantime, **Happy ALA Midwinter and Happy New Year!**

Much love, Yr. Ed.

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