Dollars and Decision-Making

Some Reflections on Open Access and Collection Management

By Tony Horava

In the September/October 2016 issue of Technicalities, Mary Case called scholarly communication and preservation “the grand challenges of our time.” I think this is quite true. Regarding the Open Access (OA) puzzle, she noted that “there is urgency in addressing this grand challenge, but unfortunately there seems to be no agreement on what should be the most effective collective action.” What I want to do in this piece is to focus on OA from a nuts and bolts perspective. I will address criteria for library support, consortial issues, funding challenges, business models, library publishing, and integration with our collections activities and workflows.

OA Criteria

Many criteria are important to consider in determining which OA publishing initiatives to support. Do we limit ourselves to non-profit initiatives, or allow ourselves to venture into for-profit territory? Think of various OA initiatives that started out as non-profit but have been bought by commercial publishers, such as BiomedCentral (Springer), SSRN (Elsevier) and Mendeley (also Elsevier). Should we favor initiatives that are national versus international? Do we focus on those that provide a consortial advantage, or build upon existing consortial relationships with traditional partners? How do we evaluate sustainability of these initiatives, considering their newness and lack of a significant track record?

Some of these initiatives are focused on building library relationships and others are focused on authors and readers, with less interest in institutional approaches. How do we carry out a risk analysis of these initiatives, in the context of a complex and rapidly evolving information landscape, with so many new technologies and business models, and new possibilities for partnering with and educating our researchers? The minefield of predatory publishing leaves many researchers bewildered about trusting any journals other than those published by prestigious, well-known commercial publishers. This is an era of rapid experimentation with alternative methods for knowledge creation, dissemination, visibility, and impact.

What do we hope to accomplish with our OA investment choices? This is where policy and practice need to align with decision-making, since our decisions will necessarily support some approaches at the expense of many others. The strategic goals of the library should be the lens through which we filter, weigh, and commit our limited financial resources and staff time. If we explicitly wish to influence the scholarly communication ecosystem to lower barriers to knowledge creation and dissemination, there is an ethical and professional imperative to ensure that our choices align with our values and goals.

Funding

One of the major challenges is identifying and applying our available funds to initiatives that will yield the greatest impact, in line with our strategic directions. While OA has moved from the fringes to mainstream in recent years, libraries and academic institutions have found it very difficult to integrate this reality into the budget allocation process, for a number of reasons. There is uncertainty as to which initiatives are sustainable and uncertainty as to how much funding is needed and for making common cause with other libraries. There is sometimes the need to advocate and raise funds with other campus stakeholders, and there are implications if monies are taken from the existing financial pie, namely the reduced funds available for existing library operations and collections. Is supporting an OA initiative considered a donation or a membership, in our acquisition and payment systems? What are the implications of either approach?

As opposed to funding for traditional library collection materials, e.g.,
books, journals, and databases, funding for OA is new and faces many barriers. Funding can rise and fall based on campus support and awareness, and the prioritizing of competing interests. How important is OA in relation to other priorities? As a consequence, it is important to think of this as a large scale, long-term dialogue that should include fundamental questions about the scholarly communications ecosystem, the dissemination of the results of publicly-funded research, and the values of the academy. The campus conversation should include questions about the logistics of publishing, including copyright awareness, promoting the impact and visibility of one’s work, the dysfunctionality of the traditional publishing paradigm, and the archiving of one’s publications in an institutional repository or a disciplinary archive. At heart is the professional ethic of openness that is widely espoused by librarians and libraries. This closely relates to the dissemination and preservation of the scholarly output of the institution, which in turn lines up with the library goal of providing broad access to information and knowledge for all who need it.

Within the library, it has typically been the case that OA monies are allocated from the collections budget. This brings its own set of challenges. For example, the funds might be depleted during the year (e.g., deposit agreements with OA publishers to cover the costs of researchers’ articles, and direct funding of OA publications to authors). This means that the services would either have to be suspended until the next fiscal year or short term funding identified for the remainder of the fiscal year.

At the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the recent integration of the collections budget under the umbrella of the scholarly communications program, in the context of a new organizational structure that brings together the collection strategists and the scholarly communications team, is an important development to follow. The new team will be “assessing potential purchases in relation to whether they transform the scholarly communications system toward openness, or make a positive impact on the scholarly communications environment in some way, via licensing, access, pricing, or another dimension.” This is a bold and innovative strategy with lots of potential benefits, and it will be very interesting to see whether this is emulated by other academic libraries in the coming years, or not.

So Many Models

Anyone working in this space knows that there is a plethora of business models around OA publishing and infrastructure initiatives. This issue is beyond the scope of this article. Briefly, though, it can be mentioned that pricing is based on any number of factors—it could be the cost of publications (which varies enormously), the number of publications in a given field, the price of paying a share of a fixed investment or infrastructure cost, the bundling of costs for OA publishing within a consortial agreement for licensed content (known as offsetting agreements), or it could be based on the number and extent of other library partners supporting an initiative. What is worth pointing out here is the stark difference with traditional costs of scholarly resources. Traditionally, there was a range of pricing for journals that everyone expected (and which was subject-specific) and the same held true for books and other analog scholarly objects like maps or sheet music. We may not have liked the pricing, but there was a certain predictability to it. It was often based on an inflationary increase from previous years, whether this was 3 percent or 5 percent or 10 percent.

This reality does not align with the huge variety of disruptive OA business models out there. Each venture is unique, based on its infrastructure, its goals, its funding source (for-profit or non-profit), and whether there is in-kind institutional or organizational support. Each is seeking the holy grail of sustainability. The publishing tools, submission and editorial workflows, number and type of staff, and physical footprint (office space) also play a huge role in budgets of these initiatives, and hence the cost of publishing as OA. To understand each initiative, one would need to look “under the hood” and delve into the details of each operation. Moreover, these operations are rapidly evolving as new services are offered to authors and institutions, and therefore the market is becoming more competitive and diffuse. At the same time, governmental funding bodies are looking for more transparency—accountability in the public availability of research that they have funded with taxpayer money. OA publishing is generally cheaper than commercial toll-gate publishing and holds the promise of enabling us to put our scholarly communication values into practice.

(continued on page 14)
Dollars and Decision-Making

Some Reflections on Open Access and Collection Management

(continued from page 13)

Integrating OA resources

There are practical approaches to the integration of OA resources within the library environment that can be promoted. Developing a policy to encourage librarians to select OA journals and databases to be included in the library’s knowledge base of vetted materials can help focus attention on these resources. Including them in library guides and course materials has become quite common. OA books can be tagged in the catalogue record so that they can more easily be surfaced in patron searches. Talk to your local cataloguer about ways to do this. Facets can be created in a local discovery system, to enable patrons to sort their search results based on an OA filter. Generating digital object identifiers (DOIs) for articles from locally published OA journals can help promote visibility and ease of access. At our institution, we have several such journals hosted on the Open Journal Systems (OJS) platform and registered through CrossRef. A DOI is auto-assigned to published articles from registered journals, thus creating a permanent link to the article and aiding discovery from the library search box.

One also can review and update the collection development policy so that it is inclusive of OA resources and explicitly supports the library’s strategic goals around scholarly communications. This confers a stamp of legitimacy on OA, and it helps combat many myths and misinformation. It adds coherence to the library’s overall approach to knowledge management and dissemination. At the University of Ottawa, the library’s collection development policy makes a clear commitment to this holistic approach:

- It is recognized that openly available resources of all types that meet our intellectual criteria are equally valuable to licensed or purchased resources in support of the university’s research and teaching mission, and scholarship in general. These OA materials complement existing strategies and methods.4

This also points to the convergence between collection building, scholarly communication engagement, and strategic direction in the digital knowledge economy. Lorcan Dempsey describes the inside-out versus outside-in strategies to collection management and curation. As he puts it, there is a distinction between outside-in resources, where the library is buying or licensing materials from external providers and making them accessible to a local audience (e.g., books and journals), and ‘inside-out’ resources which may be unique to an institution (e.g., digitized images, research materials) where the audience is both local and external.5

The scholarly and learning objects unique to an institution—e.g., reports, working papers, digitized images, audio and video files, datasets, and conference papers—can showcase the dynamic range of research and new knowledge being produced by faculty and students. Ensuring that this body of material is made openly available can lead to significant usage not only locally but nationally and internationally, thereby creating a powerful argument for the value of OA for the reputation and profile of the institution.

The Library as Publisher

In recent years we have witnessed a rapid expansion in library publishing and hosting activities, initially for journals and then for monographs, datasets, and media-rich learning objects. It is axiomatic that library-led publishing services will deliver resources in an open environment, with no tolls or other barriers to access. This has been an exciting new realm for libraries, as we have seen the library becoming much more integrated into the scholarly communications life-cycle and the workflow of faculty and students. Being more closely connected to the creation, curation, promotion, dissemination, and preservation of new knowledge, librarians are gaining a central place in the campus dialogue on these vital issues. As a consequence, the importance of open availability of new knowledge across disciplines and in many formats has come to the fore.

The momentum of library publishing and hosting in recent years has led to the banding together of libraries for sharing knowledge and experience, and establishing new initiatives. A great example of this is the Library Publishing Coalition, which fosters “collaboration, knowledge-sharing, and the development of common practices for library publishers. Our goal is to explore how to better serve the scholarly communication needs of the academic community, through sustainable, innovative library publishing solutions aligned with institutional missions.”6 This is strategic and critical for the academic library—to take on a new and timely role in scholarly publishing that dovetails with the values and needs of the academy.

Conclusion

We are rapidly moving from a collection-centric model of library
service to a user-centric model. This means that the emphasis is squarely on engagement with the student or professor to find out what resources, tools, and workflows help them to reach their research and learning goals. In a digital age, where information washes and flows abundantly all around us, this is an exciting opportunity to engage with our patrons in new ways, such as via embedded librarians who are physically located in the faculties they serve. The more we can identify valuable OA resources and then incorporate these into teaching and research activities, the better we can promote the importance of openness in the media-rich knowledge space in which we live and work today.

This is also about being mission-driven. We need to have frank conversations in our libraries about what our priorities are, what is sustainable, and how our strategies and practices align with our professed directions. This also is about the willingness to experiment with new opportunities and business models that are very different from what we have known in the past. It is about being part of the broader public policy discourse—regional, national, and international—on the open availability of publicly funded research. Has OA saved us any money? No, but that should not be the standard of our effectiveness or success. Rather it is about community building—establishing credibility and lines of communication, developing partnerships and alliances, listening to the diversity of opinion, dispelling myths, and ultimately influencing the culture of scholarly communication practice, to develop a new paradigm of knowledge production and dissemination in the digital era.

I would like to end this piece with a quote from the Budapest OA Manifesto, now celebrating its 15th anniversary. Way back in 2002, many stakeholders and proponents for OA met in Budapest to discuss how they could coordinate initiatives and work toward a common cause. This was a seminal moment that defined the core principles and crystallized the importance of coordinated action:

An old tradition and a new technology have converged to make possible an unprecedented public good. The old tradition is the willingness of scientists and scholars to publish the fruits of their research in scholarly journals without payment, for the sake of inquiry and knowledge. The new technology is the Internet. The public good they make possible is the world-wide electronic distribution of the peer-reviewed journal literature and completely free and unrestricted access to it by all scientists, scholars, teachers, students, and other curious minds. Removing access barriers to this literature will accelerate research, enrich education, share the learning of the rich with the poor and the poor with the rich, make this literature as useful as it can be, and lay the foundation for uniting humanity in a common intellectual conversation and quest for knowledge.7

This still resonates today, and should inspire our diverse actions and strategies for advancing the cause of OA. Onwards and upwards. . .

References
2. Ibid, 5.

Tony Horava is Associate University Librarian for Collections at the University of Ottawa, Canada. He can be reached at thorava@uottawa.ca.