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11 Libraries and Their Publics in the United States

Maura A. Smale

Although it has been proclaimed from the rooftops for many years, the dire situation for US libraries of all kinds on the ground, as of 2020, cannot be overstated. Indeed, it is partially the budgetary and social position of American libraries that has driven the adoption of open access to date. In this chapter, I recapitulate what may be a familiar narrative, but one that nonetheless bears repeating.

The mission of libraries, albeit not historically singular, as Stuart Lawson has shown in their chapter in this volume, is at once simple and sweeping: to provide access to information, resources, and services, and to assist community members in their use. In his foundational 1931 book *The Five Laws of Library Science*, Sirkazhi Ramamrita Ranganathan asserted that “books are for use” and “every person his or her book.” Ranganathan proposed that libraries are fundamental to education, and that education must be available for all.¹ I am a librarian and scholar at New York City College of Technology (City Tech) of the City University of New York (CUNY), the largest urban public university in the US. CUNY was established to offer affordable access to higher education for everyone in our diverse city—from students who have just graduated from secondary school to adults who are returning to complete a degree—and our libraries are an integral component of the university.

While I write from my experience in the US and at CUNY, libraries around the world, of all types and in all locations, aim to make information in all formats available for their communities. Public libraries arguably have the broadest remit, and typically serve all residents of a community. Librarians provide invaluable guidance to public library patrons seeking information for a wide range of reasons—from leisure to civic, career, or academic research. School librarians serve students in a variety of primary

and secondary educational settings, and work with teachers and administrative staff in public and private schools to provide access to information and curricular materials that students need in their course of study. Academic libraries are used by the students, faculty, and staff of colleges and universities, in coursework and in research. Information literacy—encompassing critically evaluating and making use of information—is an important component of academic librarian work, as well.

Library Funding Is Cut while Demands for Access Increase

While providing access to and guidance about information across a variety of formats and a range of topics, interests, and levels is a core component of all libraries' missions, library funding is increasingly a concern. Public libraries are funded in part by tax monies, and over the past few decades their budgets have been in decline more often than not. Almost 50 percent of states in the US cut library funding between 2010 and 2012,² cuts that come at a time of heavy use, with a 2016 Pew Research Center survey reporting that "66% [of respondents] say the closing of their local public library would have a major impact on their community."³ In the UK, more than 300 public libraries have closed in the past 10 years, with more closures possibly to come.⁴ School libraries have sometimes been hardest hit in the US, with many publicly funded primary and secondary schools lacking a librarian or even a library.⁵ Academic library budgets have also been flat or declining. In the US this is most concerning at public colleges and universities, many of which have suffered from a decrease in state funding beginning about 30 years ago,⁶ though even some well-endowed private institutions have found it difficult to appropriately fund their libraries.⁷

The challenges of declines in library funding are multifaceted and somewhat dependent on broader societal factors that include disinvestment in services for the public good and increasing pressure toward privatization of education. However, there is no question that the economics of the scholarly communication system have had an impact on library budgets. Scholarly journal prices have increased at an unsustainable rate over the past 30 years, a trend typically referred to by librarians as the serials crisis. As has been widely reported by librarians, serials expenditures by Association of Research Libraries members increased 391 percent between 1986 and 2009, while monograph expenditures increased by only 77 percent during

that time.⁸ Prices for textbooks and other curricular materials for primary through postgraduate study have also increased unsustainably. The Student Public Interest Group in the US reports that college textbook prices have risen by 73 percent since 2006, with individual textbooks now priced as high as \$400.⁹ The requirements of the academic tenure and promotion process in higher education and curricular standards and practices in primary through higher education have enabled publishers to implement these drastic price increases for scholarly journals and course textbooks; increases that are generally not possible for traditional monograph publishers.

In academic libraries, especially, unchecked price increases throughout the scholarly communication system have had profound effects on the information, resources, and services that librarians can provide for their college and university communities. Many librarians have had to eliminate institutional subscriptions to scholarly journals or reduce their reliance on packages of journal titles by replacing them with individual subscriptions to the handful of journals that are most in need by their students, faculty, and staff. Some college and university libraries cannot afford to subscribe to the journals in which their faculty publish. Academic librarians have also reduced monograph purchases as more funds are devoted to maintaining journal subscriptions, which has contributed to the contraction of university presses and academic monograph publishing. This redistribution of funds is especially concerning for scholars in the humanities and social sciences, disciplines that traditionally rely more heavily on monographs than do those in the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields. The tragic suicide in 2010 of Aaron Swartz, an activist who “faced federal charges of up to 35 years in prison” for illegally downloading scholarly articles from the JSTOR database at MIT, drew national attention to the serials crisis, and prices have only continued to increase since then.¹⁰

At the college where I work, we in the library strive to provide access to as much information for faculty and students to use in teaching and research as we can, though our collections budget cannot keep up with the increasing prices in scholarly publishing. Faculty do use interlibrary loan services to augment our library’s collections, and employ workarounds that are in common use by researchers throughout the world: contacting article authors to request that they share a copy of their article, using social media to make similar requests of other academics, and visiting SciHub and other websites that make paywalled research freely available (sometimes

in violation of copyright laws). Our library offers some textbooks on reserve loan for students, though they are only available for a short period of time, and we cannot purchase textbooks for every course or in sufficient quantity for all of our 17,000 students. Many City Tech students face challenges in affording housing, food, and tuition, and lack of access to scholarly research and curricular materials may not be their most significant difficulty. However, lack of access can impede students' success in their coursework and progress toward graduation, as it can hinder the research endeavors of our faculty.

Open Access and Open Educational Resources Increase Access

Open access and open educational resources increase the opportunities for all to use information and resources.

Some publishers have defended the barriers toward open access to scholarly research by asserting that the general public has no need for or interest in specialized research publications. This assertion is classist and misguided at best. The website *Who Needs Access? You Need Access!* collects testimonials from those who have benefited from open access to scholarly research.¹¹ Among the many examples is a study in which a researcher collaborated with a group of primary school children in England to examine honeybees, the results of which were then written up by the children and published in *Biology Letters*.¹² Caregivers for family members who have rare illnesses also use scientific research online. As one parent interviewed on the site notes, it can be challenging for doctors to keep up with the latest developments on uncommon diseases, and open access has enabled her to advocate for her child's care and to share information among her community of patient advocates.¹³ Beyond its use for individuals and independent researchers, immediate open access to research results speeds discoveries in medical and other scientific disciplines.¹⁴ Public access to humanities and social science research is also valuable; these disciplines enable us to understand and contextualize human history, social relations, and our place in the world, which is perhaps especially important in our current historical moment. It is clear that increased availability of scholarly research is a benefit to all in society and should not be restricted solely to those with an academic affiliation.

Much—though not all—scholarly research is publicly funded, and as such the results from and publication of that research should be available to the public. Tax monies fund research via grants from the government,

which is then undertaken by faculty and staff at public universities. As Suber has noted, "tax money should be spent in the public interest, not to create intellectual property for the benefit of private publishers, who acquire it and profit from it without paying the authors or compensating the public treasury."¹⁵ Open access can also help ameliorate funding inequities between public and private institutions by enabling access to information regardless of an institution's endowment or operating budget. For scholars and faculty at public institutions, who are typically required to research and publish as part of the tenure and promotion process, open access facilitates the academic research process regardless of the size and funding level of their academic libraries.

Open access can also be an alternative to expensive textbooks, as the open educational resources initiatives at institutions worldwide have shown. As in scholarly journal publishing, many textbook authors are faculty at institutions of higher education and, while they may have received royalties for writing textbooks, can be encouraged to convert their textbooks to open educational resources with compensation in time or funds from their institutions. Open educational resources initiatives are especially relevant for low-income college and university students and their families, as the cost of textbooks can be very high in addition to the cost of tuition. Primary and secondary schools in the US often provide textbooks to their students at no cost, and their expense means that textbooks may not be updated or replaced in a timely manner. Open access and open educational resources can help provide current, relevant scholarly materials to libraries and schools. As noted above, this is of special concern because the poorest students are often served by underfunded institutions; for example, at the public university where I work, 42.2 percent of students have an annual household income of less than \$20,000.¹⁶

While open access and the scholarly communication system are most often discussed with reference to academic libraries, open access is highly relevant to public libraries as well. Public libraries also typically provide a wide range of information outside of academic research, and most have little to no budget available for scholarly materials. This is especially problematic given the broad mission of public libraries to serve entire communities. Community residents who may have had access to scholarly research while enrolled in college or university will typically lose it once they have left school. Increasing the opportunities for patrons at public libraries to

use research information would help fill the gap for independent researchers without an affiliation to a higher education or research institution.

Open Access and Open Educational Resources Benefit Libraries and Their Publics

Open access to scholarly research and curricular materials is a sure benefit to libraries and their publics. Wide adoption of open-access publishing will allow our communities to read and use the results of scholarly research both within and outside of the bounds of an institutional affiliation, helping to dismantle information privilege and increasing equity so that libraries of all kinds can better serve their communities. As the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) has asserted: “comprehensive open access to scholarly literature and research documentation is vital to the understanding of our world and to the identification of solutions to global challenges and particularly the reduction of information inequality.”¹⁷

The affordances of digital publishing—which enable open access and open educational resources—can also increase accessibility for patrons with disabilities that may make reading a printed volume challenging. However, access to information online does not necessarily equate to universal access. Home broadband internet access varies in the US, with persistent gaps especially in some urban and rural areas, as does access to the internet via smartphone or other wifi-enabled devices; worldwide, there are many locations in which internet access is difficult or lacking.¹⁸ Libraries are helping to bridge these gaps, and for many communities, access to the internet is an invaluable service provided by their libraries.

Librarians and libraries will continue to remain vital to their communities with the transition to open access publishing, as Ranganathan’s fifth and final law—“the library is a growing organism”—suggests. Librarians have been important advocates for open access from the beginning, have been instrumental in its current successes, and will continue to be valuable partners in advocacy in the future.¹⁹ Open access helps libraries fulfill their mission to their publics.

Notes

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