

Scholarly Publishing isn't Neutral: Our Quest to Opt Out of Big Deals and Invest in Fair Open Access

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The current state of scholarly publishing is unsustainable. With subscriptions rising 5 – 10 times the rate of inflation, for financial reasons alone libraries are going to have to take a long hard look at our spending in the not-so-distant future, if they haven't begun to already. However, the imperatives for change go beyond just financial need – there are strong ethical, academic, and autonomy related reasons to critique the system. While the mainstreaming of OA via funder requirements in some ways has increased the visibility of discourse around Open Access, OA increasingly suffers from the same problems of the hegemonic scholarly publishing industry – colonialism, patriarchy, racism, and inequality of opportunity.

At the UofW we have been actively working on what Shea Swauger called 'information literacy' about scholarly communications, with the larger goal of Big Deal cancellations. Looking at scholarly publishing through the lens of the ACRL Framework is useful - academic publishing acts as the gatekeeper for constructed authority, for who gets to participate in the conversation, for what scholarship has value (and who can extract it). Initially we tried to make the case via a purely financial argument, but discovered quickly we have to talk about ethics, sustainability, autonomy, and what kinds of systems we want to support.

The framework described by Demmy Verbeke from the KU Leuven offers axes from which to assess the types of system our Library dollars are supporting. Looking at the ethical, academic, and financial goals that we have as libraries helps make it clear that not just serial subscriptions, but even certain OA initiatives, are actively working against our own interests. Fair Open Access, which is scholar (not shareholder) led, community built, and transparent in its operations isn't neutral either – but I would argue if we want to actively challenge some of the power imbalances and forms of oppression we reflect, conscious choices about the publishing models we support is something we need to get our campus communities behind.