



Report on Berlin 12 Open Access Conference

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On December 8 and 9, 2015, representatives from several regions (Asia, Europe, and North America) met in Berlin, Germany, to discuss a proposal to flip subscription-based journals to open access models. The initiative is being led by the Max Planck Society, the organizer and host of the invitation-only Berlin 12 Open Access Conference. The rationale for the initiative is based on an analysis undertaken by Max Planck Digital Library (MPDL), which found that a flip to open access would be possible at no financial risk, “maybe even at lower overall costs”¹ to the system. More information about the analysis is available in the MPDL white paper, *Disrupting the Subscription Journals’ Business Model for the Necessary Large-Scale Transformation to Open Access*.²

The objective of the conference was to build a consensus for an internationally coordinated effort to shift libraries’ journal budgets away from subscriptions and towards article processing costs (APCs). The meeting was attended by 96 participants from 19 countries, with several US and Canadian representatives (listed below). The major point of discussion was an expression of interest (EOI) that would form the basis for gaining support and moving forward with the initiative. Once published, organizations will be invited to sign the EOI and it will be used to galvanize interest in the initiative around the world.

The conversation about the EOI was interspersed with presentations from several speakers. John Willinsky from Stanford University and the Public Knowledge Project talked about publishing cooperatives. He argued that the APC model being proposed by the major publishers, often with very high APCs, will not work in many regional and disciplinary contexts. Willinsky is leading a two-year project that is looking at the viability of cooperative models for open access that will redirect funding for scholarly publishing, but not employ APCs. The project will also launch a number of pilot projects to demonstrate the feasibility of cooperative publishing on a global scale.

Ivy Anderson from the California Digital Library presented some preliminary results of a study assessing the financial impact of a transition to APCs for several North American institutions. Early conclusions from this study show that the costs of paying APCs may be

¹ Ralf Schimmer quoted in Max Planck Society, “Area-Wide Transition to Open Access Is Possible: A New Study Calculates a Redeployment of Funds in Open Access,” news release, April 27, 2015, <https://www.mpg.de/9202262/area-wide-transition-open-access>.

² Ralf Schimmer, Kai Karin Geschuhn, and Andreas Vogler, *Disrupting the Subscription Journals’ Business Model for the Necessary Large-Scale Transformation to Open Access* (Munich, Germany: Max Planck Digital Library, April 2015), <http://dx.doi.org/10.17617/1.3>.

even greater than annual subscriptions for large research-intensive institutions, but will likely be less costly than the subscription model for smaller universities.

Gerard Meijer from Radboud University in the Netherlands presented the Association of Dutch Universities (VSNU) approach to negotiating with publishers. The VSNU has taken a strong stand in its licensing negotiations, stating that they are only prepared to renew subscription agreements if the publishers take steps towards open access. To date, they have reached deals with most of the major publishers that include the traditional subscription model plus open access to all Dutch publications, with no extra costs included in the licenses for the open access components (e.g., no added APCs).

Finally, Ralf Schimmer of the Max Planck Digital Library gave a presentation about a draft road map, which sets out the practical details of how countries can make the transition from subscriptions to APCs. Schimmer pointed out that there will never be one central global entity that can undertake these changes on behalf of the international community and therefore the “challenge and beauty of a scholarly driven transformation is that it has to find expression in various institutions, regions, and countries.” The road map draws heavily from experiences of the SCOAP3 initiative, which has been working to transform international physics journals from subscription to open access. The road map contains 5 phases: (1) galvanize national support, (2) analyze the local environment, (3) reorganize payment schemes, (4) negotiate new conditions with publishers, and (5) share experiences with other countries. This road map will be further expanded by the Max Planck Digital Library as support for the initiative grows.

Conference organizers provided a draft EOI that participants discussed and revised over the course of the two-day meeting. US delegates played a key role in ensuring some important issues were articulated in the EOI, including the need for cost reductions and situating the initiative within the broader context. Although not yet completely finalized, the EOI will likely contain the following three commitments for organizations signing on:

- Transform the majority of today’s scholarly journals from subscription to open access publishing and, at the same time, continue to support new and improved forms of open access publishing.
- Pursue this transformation process through which we intend to lower costs over time and convert resources currently spent on journal subscriptions into funds to support sustainable open access business models.
- Invite all parties involved in scholarly publishing to collaborate on a swift and efficient transition for the benefit of the research enterprise and the society at large.

The EOI will be made publicly available soon and specific steps and milestones for the transformation process will be outlined in the road map to be further developed in the course of this initiative.

In general, most conference participants were supportive “in principle” of a collaborative, international effort to accelerate the transition to open access, although a number of concerns were expressed about a model in which APCs would prevail. Several representatives, including US delegates, felt that this transition must come with real reductions in the overall costs of the scholarly publishing system. Such cost reductions will only happen if greater competition is introduced into the system. Yet, for some, there

is still insufficient evidence that a flip from subscriptions to APCs will offer relief from spiralling costs. A more comprehensive analysis of the market conditions that would result from a flip to APCs would be extremely helpful in terms of determining whether key stakeholders will support the proposal.

Some participants also voiced concerns around how this transition would affect developing countries that are already negatively impacted by the current “Western” biases in the international publishing system. Adopting a pay-to-publish model may further exacerbate the already difficult challenges these regions have in participating in system. As there were no representatives from developing regions at the meeting, these perspectives were not well reflected in the discussion.

Others expressed reservations about whether this approach would achieve the kind of disruptive change that needs to happen to improve the sustainability, transparency, and accessibility of the system. It is uncertain as to whether this strategy will simply further consolidate the power of the major publishers in whose interest it is to maintain the status quo.

From the US perspective, there are also real pragmatic challenges in terms of the feasibility of the approach. Unlike other countries there is no national licensing body that could broker such a transition at the national level. However, a large flip in journal publishing models cannot be accomplished without international participation of the major players, including the US. Canadian and US-based authors represent about 30% of all the research papers published in Web of Science³ so North American support will be critical for the success of this initiative. The next joint Association of Research Libraries–Canadian Association of Research Libraries meeting in Vancouver, British Columbia, in April 2016, may offer a good opportunity for members to discuss this initiative further and determine if there is sufficient support for moving forward.

North American Participants in Berlin 12 Open Access Conference

Clare Appavoo, Canadian Research Knowledge Network, Canada

Carol Shepstone, Mount Royal University, Canada

Leslie Weir, University of Ottawa, Canada

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Ivy Anderson, California Digital Library, United States

Eric Bakovic, University of California, San Diego, United States

Richard Flagan, California Institute of Technology, United States

Heather Joseph, SPARC, United States

Rick Luce, University of Oklahoma, United States

Kamran Naim, Stanford University, United States

Kathleen Shearer, Association of Research Libraries, United States

Elliott Shore, Association of Research Libraries, United States

John Willinsky, Stanford University, United States

³ *UNESCO Science Report: Towards 2030* (Paris, France: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2015), 36,

<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0023/002354/235406e.pdf>.