

# **Affiliation in Transition: Rethinking Society Membership with Early- Career Researchers in the Social Sciences**

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## Introduction

The coalescence of the open-access movement during the early years of the 21st century marked an inflection point for the member organizations known as scholarly or learned societies.<sup>1</sup> As new information and communication technologies intersected with a diverse but impactful set of claims about the benefits of providing free and immediate access to scholarly publications, these organizations were forced not only to reexamine their business models but also to confront fundamental questions on the order of “what are scholarly societies for?”<sup>2</sup> Such questions were, on the one hand, specific to the internal dynamics of the science system and its shifting relations with other societal actors.<sup>3</sup> They were, on the other hand, reflective of a more general reassessment of associational forms from civic organizations to political parties.<sup>4</sup>

In recent years, resources have been developed to help scholarly societies navigate the complexities of a transition to open access.<sup>5</sup>

But the same degree of rigor and imagination has not been applied to understanding changes in contemporary practices of affiliation and their implications

for societies. A telling example of this gap can be seen in a chapter on innovations for member organizations in a key reference work for association professionals.<sup>6</sup> The chapter opens on a promising note by invoking “new models for affiliation, participation, and relationships,” citing examples as diverse and provocative as the crowdfunding platform Kickstarter and the political revolutions of the Arab Spring. Yet, as the chapter unfolds, it falls back on received models of organizational membership and proposes fairly minor adjustments to them. Even amid the upheaval of the COVID-19 pandemic and the protests for racial justice sparked by the police killing of George Floyd,

For the purposes of this report, **affiliation** refers to patterned social action expressing investment in a collectivity and what it potentiates, which may take the form of (but cannot be reduced to) formal membership in an organization.

the assumption in most trade publications has been that the member organization just needs to ride out the storm.

On December 11–12, 2018, the Association of Research Libraries and the Social Science Research Council convened an invitational meeting on open scholarship in the social sciences.<sup>7</sup> The scope of the meeting extended beyond open access as such to address novel methods of peer review and governance of scholarly infrastructure, as well as to ask how issues around openness relate to the social sciences in particular. The meeting’s conveners sought to foreground shared values among the 34 participants representing libraries, societies, funders, and other stakeholders. But they also challenged participants to bracket the question of institutional self-preservation so as to more freely envision what an inclusive, equitable, trustworthy, and durable system of scholarly communication could look like. One of the commitments to action that came out of the meeting was commissioning this report on the changing nature of scholarly affiliation. A proposal was accepted in the spring of 2019 and the decision was made to focus on early-career researchers, who have been described as having “one foot in the future” as they balance rival inclinations toward disruption and convention.<sup>8</sup>

This report takes a conceptual approach inspired by the work of the sociologist Miller McPherson, who in the early 1980s began a program of inquiry into what he termed the “ecology of affiliation.”<sup>9</sup> For McPherson, the finite amount of time and energy that individuals have to invest in social organizations manifests itself, on a system level, in a competition for members. Thus, the prospects of a particular type of organization are best understood in relation to others that are seeking to occupy the same niche of a multidimensional social space. The central argument of this report is that scholarly societies are becoming less successful at laying claim to the affiliative investments of early-career researchers, relative to other emerging spaces of scholarly affiliation. Yet, drawing on more recent scholarship in the ecology of affiliation tradition,<sup>10</sup> the report also charts a path forward for incumbent societies, based on the insight that organizations do not only

compete for members on a zero-sum basis but can also foster mutual engagement.

The original research for this report took the form of semi-structured interviews with twelve early-career researchers in the social sciences, spanning the fields of anthropology, economics, geography, linguistics, psychology, science and technology studies, and sociology. Interviewees were either current graduate students or had completed their PhDs within the past five years; the latter group included tenure-track faculty, adjunct instructors, and researchers working in nonacademic settings. Interviewees were based in the United States and Canada. They included six women, five men, and one researcher who identified as nonbinary; six of the interviewees identified as researchers of color. All of the interviewees were members of at least one scholarly society, and several had held formal leadership roles. The interviews were conducted between October 2019 and April 2020, both in person and remotely using videoconference software; minor changes have been made to the excerpts presented here in order to deidentify them.

It is important to acknowledge that the interviewees for this report cannot be considered representative of all early-career researchers in the social sciences. They were identified through professional networks and online searches according to a purposive sampling strategy, which aimed at recruiting researchers who were in some way involved with emerging spaces of affiliation. Thus, the interviewees can be said to represent “edge perspectives” on an ecology of affiliation traditionally dominated by scholarly societies.<sup>11</sup> This does not, however, mean that their attitudes and beliefs should be discounted; as one association executive has noted, a core responsibility for leaders of member organizations like societies is “listening for weak signals that can become strong signals.”<sup>12</sup> This report explicitly aims to amplify signals of this sort, in order to help both societies and their supporters to recognize and respond to changing priorities.

## Findings

### **Finding 1: Membership in scholarly societies is only one site of belonging and engagement for early-career researchers**

Early-career researchers in the social sciences seek settings where they can share and receive feedback on their ideas, form supportive relationships with peers and mentors, and work together on projects of mutual consequence. While the researchers interviewed for this study saw scholarly societies as one setting in which these needs could be met, they also described a range of other settings marked by varying degrees of coherence or formality that were seen as no less important. Some interviewees engaged with these settings as casual participants, while others were actively involved in constructing spaces of affiliation that were distinct from existing scholarly societies.

Researchers described a kind of ground state of potential connections facilitated by information and communication technologies from email lists to social media platforms. An interviewee living in a remote area explained: “It’s really kind of exploding, where we can develop these communities and no longer do we actually have to be reliant on the big organizations that cost so much money. We hook up and get to know each other through Twitter.” Blogs and other online publications were also mentioned as hubs for researchers with similar interests, although one interviewee who had launched such a project reflected that “it never really had the infrastructure to be a community, because it was always kind of one-directional.”

Face-to-face connections were prized, but seen as more time-intensive to cultivate and contingent on the researcher’s location. Thus, one interviewee living in a major city mentioned events sponsored by a prominent think tank as a place to gain insights for his job in business intelligence; another has hosted a regular meetup for people working in technology and design. A professor based at a STEM-focused institution recharged at an interdisciplinary reading group drawing from several nearby colleges. In each of these cases, recent PhDs aimed

to build connections beyond their places of employment and often outside of academia.

In contrast, current graduate students were more likely to discuss efforts to foster community within their universities. One interviewee had initiated a forum for both students and faculty working on issues of identity and social justice, which she described as “a space where all of these different disciplines can come together and have a space of solace to talk about the hardships...but also a place where we can create participatory action.” Another formed a group to support and advocate for students of color in her department, starting with a report that documented racial inequities in the graduate program’s retention rates. As word of the report spread, it inspired similar data-collection efforts inside at least one other university.

### **Scholars of Color in Language Studies (SCiLS)**

**Established:** 2018

**Members:** 390

**Mission:** SCiLS provides a space where scholars of color in linguistics and language studies can connect, network, and socialize, accessing a system of support for people affected by structural racism and colorism in academia and society at large.

**Origin Story:** While attending a webinar on navigating academia as a minority scholar offered by the American Association for Applied Linguistics, the graduate students who would go on to found SCiLS were encouraged to “find their crew.” They created a closed Facebook group, which became a focal point of activity and attracted members from across the career cycle.

**Current Developments:** A working group has formed to explore the creation of a SCiLS-sponsored publication, which will rethink traditional peer review by emphasizing validation on the basis of community knowledge. As one of its members explained, not all contributions to scholarship “need two white peer reviewers to say, ‘OK, you are valid in your analysis of self.’”

A few interviewees also reflected on the trade-off between investments in scholarly networks and in personal interests or causes beyond the academy. “When it comes to my commitments outside of my research and my teaching and my obligatory service,” one interviewee explained, “I would rather just chop wood and carry water, knock on doors for Bernie Sanders or do data entry for [a community group], which works in Black and Latino neighborhoods. I don’t think every form of service or whatever needs to be commodifiable or professionalized.” This outlook challenges the all-too-common view of research as a vocation, reasserting the weight of other obligations. It also widens the ecology of affiliation in which scholarly societies are situated, competing as they are for researchers’ time and energy with other organizations of every stripe.

### **Finding 2: The desire for alternative spaces of affiliation is widespread**

Many interviewees expressed a powerful sense of frustration and disillusionment with incumbent scholarly societies, pointing to an emerging crisis of legitimacy for these organizations. “I don’t know of many people who actually like their large professional associations,” one interviewee stated flatly. In reference to the main US-based society in their discipline, another observed: “It feels like a rent-seeking organization, because the things that it provides me are nothing. And the things that it extracts from me are hundreds and hundreds of dollars. And that’s presented to you as a cost of literally existing in the profession; it tries to make itself identical to the profession.” Explaining the decision to phase out her involvement in a subdisciplinary society, a third interviewee explained: “They seem like they care more about prestige than their values, and I really had to think about that for myself. Like, these organizations that I’m deciding to maintain my relationship with, am I doing that for prestige or am I doing that for my values?”

Areas of criticism included specific pain points like protracted reimbursement processes, which place a disproportionate burden on



cash-strapped graduate students, or what one interviewee described as “standard-issue pleas to resubscribe should you let your membership lapse, including ridiculous, really unprofessional efforts to play on your fear of missing out.” But they also included more programmatic issues such as closed-door committee meetings where decisions about the organization were made or lucrative partnerships with commercial publishers, which were described by one interviewee as “not a good thing for scholarship.” Meanwhile, interviewees working outside of academia consistently mentioned the low relevance of society programs and services. Asked how scholarly societies inform his work as director of research for an industry organization, one interviewee stated: “To be perfectly frank, they don’t.”

### **Society for the Improvement of Psychological Science (SIPS)**

**Established:** 2016

**Members:** 924

**Mission:** SIPS brings together scholars working to improve methods and practices in psychological science, by fostering values that include transparency, openness, and critical evaluation.

**Origin Story:** Frustrated with existing societies in her field and their response to growing concerns about a replication crisis, psychology professor Simine Vazire wanted to find a setting where researchers regardless of their career stage could work toward concrete solutions. Brian Nosek, as cofounder of the Center for Open Science, helped to convene an initial meeting of interested parties, and at its conclusion participants voted to begin forming an organization.

**Current Developments:** SIPS is providing advice to researchers in other fields (including criminology) about how to form parallel organizations. Yet, as she prepared to rotate off of the executive board, Vazire reflected that founding SIPS on the model of the scholarly society came with certain limitations and expressed her admiration for newer projects like ReproducibiliTea, a decentralized network of journal clubs initiated by early-career researchers in 2018.

Large society meetings were singled out as a particular site of dissatisfaction, both with the staid format of the scholarly program and the interpersonal dynamics that tended to prevail. “Because they’re so big and because there’s so much built on eminence,” one interviewee explained, “I just don’t feel like I can get a lot done at those conferences.” Graduate students, in particular, described feeling lonely and overwhelmed; as one indicated, “if you’re not part of some sort of network or something, there is an immense sense of alienation.” Yet recent PhDs with more established networks reported similar feelings of estrangement, if for different reasons. As one revealed: “I find it emotionally devastating to be at [one large society meeting], which is weird because at this point, I know enough people that I can happily spend a weekend just having a series of coffees with people. And that’s nice. But I think the experience of seeing a lot of people who I went to graduate school with [and who now have] fancy tenure-track jobs...it’s impossible for me to rid myself of that feeling of being a failure, to go and see them in the setting where they are the most concentrated.”

Interviewees were not uniformly negative in their appraisal of incumbent societies. One praised a recent move to institute sliding-scale fees based on income, while others spoke about personal relationships that they had formed with mentors through formal service roles. Yet most of the positive assessments were directed at smaller subsections of more established societies or younger specialist organizations. One graduate student spoke movingly about her first time attending the meeting of a regional Black studies society. “It’s very rare that I get to be in a space of Black scholars, and it’s such an enriching experience. I was like, this is amazing. This is something I want to be a part of on a leadership level. It’s not just something I want to hear about. I want to be a part of growing it.” Interviewees from Canada also expressed measured support for the annual gathering of societies across the social sciences and humanities known as “Congress,” which aims to promote both organizational autonomy and cross-pollination.

Despite their frustration with existing spaces of affiliation, most interviewees retained at least a guarded optimism about the creation of alternatives. “There’s a lot of goodwill and positive vibes and no organization that knows how to really channel them in the right way,” one interviewee mused. Another observed that “there’s hundreds of us working outside or sort of part-time in academia, but we haven’t figured out how to most effectively scale up and invite other people who might be passing through the city to come” to events like the meetups that she organized. Early-career researchers in the social sciences perceive the need for new spaces of scholarly affiliation and are, to varying degrees, willing to help bring them into being. Yet they are also pragmatic about their capacity and that of their peers to see this through. As one interviewee noted: “I understand why people do not necessarily feel eager at the end of their day to go and devote energy to [a new network]. People are overcommitted and the rewards you get from being involved in this are very hard to figure out, I think. The task itself is obscure.”

### **Finding 3: Alternative spaces are more loosely institutionalized and may not aspire to permanence**

Alternative spaces of affiliation like the three profiled in this report carry out some of the same activities that incumbent scholarly societies do. Scholars of Color in Language Studies (SCiLS) has hosted events like a webinar on navigating the academic hiring process. The Anthropology Collective (ANTCO) has discussed the establishment of what one interviewee described as “prizes for other things than traditionally there are prizes for.” The Society for the Improvement of Psychological Science (SIPS) hosts an annual meeting and sponsors an open-access journal as well as a preprint server. These activities enact departures from (and, at times, critiques of) prevailing norms for scholarly societies, but they also fulfill familiar functions of offering career advice, conferring recognition, and promoting the exchange of knowledge.

### Anthropology Collective (ANTCO)

**Established:** 2019

**Members:** 150

**Mission:** ANTCO defined itself as a group of humans seeking to form an alternative anthropological organization, to be transnational, inclusive, and antiauthoritarian in nature.

**Origin Story:** On March 29, 2019, anthropologist Eli Thorkelson tweeted a half-serious proposal to start a new scholarly society, noting that “it would literally be easier to found a new society than to fix the historical problems of the existing ones.” The unexpectedly enthusiastic response turned into a planning group of almost 100 participants, which relied on principles of direct democracy (and messaging tools like Slack) to organize its activities.

**Current Developments:** On July 3, 2020, the ANTCO website ([anthrocollective.org](http://anthrocollective.org)) was updated to indicate that the project had “an indeterminate status.” Reflecting on the challenges of working across differences in the absence of received roles or incentives, Thorkelson tweeted on June 25 that “the reason why the project was necessary was the reason why it was impossible.” Yet other participants expressed their hope that the project was simply in a period of hibernation, waiting for the right time to be reactivated.

Yet, from an organizational perspective, these projects are considerably less formal than many of their society counterparts. None of the three employs paid staff. Only one (SIPS) is incorporated as a legal entity and has bylaws that call for the election of a board; ANTCO takes a consensus-based approach to governance, while SCiLS is steered by a council of the group’s founders. Only one (SIPS) links formal membership to the payment of dues; ANTCO and SCiLS use the term “member” more loosely to refer to anyone who supports the projects and is granted access to the online settings in which organizational activity takes place. Indeed, these alternative spaces of affiliation tend to embrace a certain vagueness about their structure that allows for ongoing redefinition. An example can be found on the SIPS website, in an FAQ page explaining the unorthodox format of its annual meeting.

In response to the question “What are hack-a-thons and unconference sessions?” the provided answer begins: “It’s not entirely clear to us, either!”

Interviewees were careful not to romanticize the open-endedness of these spaces, recognizing that a lack of structure could be disorienting as well as empowering. Still, the tractability of these spaces—the chance to meaningfully shape their direction now, rather than after years of climbing the ladder of one’s field—makes them attractive to early-career researchers. These projects can also act boldly because they have little to lose and do not necessarily aspire to permanence, in contrast to organizations whose long histories and substantial payrolls contribute to an understandable instinct toward self-preservation. Alternative spaces of affiliation are, for now, unlikely to outcompete incumbent societies given their limited organizational capacity. But the agency and authenticity that they represent do set them apart from (to use one interviewee’s words) a “nonprofit-industrial complex” of which early-career researchers are increasingly skeptical.

#### **Finding 4: Early-career researchers balance strategic and symbolic investments in existing societies**

At one extreme, interviewees described the value that incumbent scholarly societies provide in purely transactional terms: one joined his discipline’s main US-based society in the final year of his PhD just to be eligible for job interviews at the annual meeting, while another temporarily joined a society in a neighboring discipline in order to be considered for a book prize. A third described some “squishiness” in terms of what membership in a society means in the first place, explaining: “It’s like, yes, I’m a member. Yes, I’m part of the community. People will expect to see me there. But do I really need to pay the \$200 membership fee if I’m not going to the conference that year? Maybe not.” Since the need for access to the goods that societies administer is not continuous (and since the value of those goods appears to drop off for PhDs working outside of academia), societies that rely on this value proposition are vulnerable to year-over-year fluctuations in

membership and long-term attrition. They are also susceptible to having specific, more highly valued programs and services unbundled and offered at a discount by niche competitors.

Yet one key finding of this study is that early-career researchers in the social sciences retain a symbolic investment in the convening and legitimizing functions of scholarly societies. This point was most clearly expressed by researchers of color, many of whom saw foregrounding issues of race and racism in the intellectual and organizational work of scholarly societies as a way of reclaiming historically white space. One interviewee reflected on the personal impact of hearing a recent keynote on racial inclusion at a society's annual meeting, which was delivered by a tenured Black woman. The same researcher cited that society's public statement on race to bolster his case when raising concerns in his own department about a lack of racial diversity in faculty hiring. Another interviewee added that, even as researchers of color create small organizations that can challenge the status quo, "we need those larger organizations because we do want to be validated and legitimized by academia in general...It's not like, let's do away with [the discipline's main US-based society]. We also want to be recognized by them because there's so many of us who are coming up and doing scholarship and being invalidated, because it's not seen as legitimate research." Here, the scholarly society becomes the terrain on which contests over legitimacy are staged and critical excavations of disciplinary histories can take place.

White researchers also expressed a symbolic investment in incumbent societies, if in a slightly different register. One interviewee explained: "I may have utopian desires for the world, but I have never really been like: let's destroy all existing institutions. I might wish that [the discipline's main US-based society] would liberate its own sections. But I don't wish they would just wink out of existence." Another reflected on his reluctance to discontinue his longtime membership to one society, even though he has concluded that it is no longer relevant to his career track. For him, membership is bound up with a desire to

maintain a particular identity, even as he went on to dismiss that desire as “really stupid.” Torn, this interviewee decided to renew for one more year. “I just wanted to keep open the possibility,” he noted, “just hold the door cracked open a little while longer to see what might happen in a year’s time. It was about maintaining a potentiality rather than activating something specific.” This sense of potentiality on the part of early-career researchers, which lingers in the face of frustration and disillusionment, is a vital resource that incumbent societies would do well to mobilize.

## Recommendations

### For Libraries

*Recommendation 1: Establish a level playing field for deciding which scholarly communities to support*

It is no secret that scholarly societies cross-subsidize other activities, many of which do benefit early-career researchers, with the surplus generated by their publishing programs. Attitudes toward this arrangement vary across the library world; some see these subsidies as unsustainable, while others view them in the context of a commitment to support scholars and scholarship (but, in return, want to see societies move more deliberately toward open publishing models). Often taken for granted, though, are claims by incumbent societies to speak in a privileged capacity on behalf of researchers and their needs. Recent posts on the *Scholarly Kitchen* blog exemplify this discourse of exceptionalism, describing societies as “the only community organizations whose sole reason for existence is to provide for the scholars in their academic community” and as “an indelible part of the research support system for academics across many disciplines.”<sup>13</sup>

The findings of this report should give librarians reason to assess these claims more critically. As shown above, early-career researchers in the social sciences increasingly do not regard scholarly societies as their only or even primary spaces of affiliation. Thus, libraries should not

feel obliged to support a particular set of incumbent organizations over emerging communities whose approaches to scholarly communication may be more aligned with library values. If scholarly societies wish to remain “indelible,” then they can and should organize their operations in a way that their supporters can endorse. Meanwhile, as emerging communities develop programs and services that libraries see as consistent with their mission, libraries should not hesitate to shift their support in this direction (even if, as is likely, supporting more loosely institutionalized projects poses logistical challenges).

*Recommendation 2: Think campuswide about where to source support for scholarly communities*

Colleges and universities have a role to play in supporting the spaces of affiliation in which their researchers participate, given the role these spaces play in the reproduction of a highly skilled workforce (as well as the credentialing functions that they provide; for instance, by conferring prizes). But critics have long wondered why libraries should be the organizational units providing this support, to the extent that it exceeds support for publishing activities as such.<sup>14</sup> This point is of renewed importance today as the largest commercial publishers pivot from a business model focused on content delivery to one focused on infrastructure provision, using products like researcher information systems to make a bid for resources that extend well beyond the library budget. The question of who pays for what and why has plainly been reopened.

Scholarly societies have had some success in sourcing financial support directly from academic departments, often by providing a tier of premium services to institutional members. But since departmental budgets do not always include a dedicated line for the recurring support of scholarly communities, societies have regarded this revenue stream as unstable relative to that of library subscriptions. Libraries should thus help to convene strategic conversations about decoupling direct financial support for spaces of affiliation from the library budget and locating it elsewhere within their institutions. Departments and



interdisciplinary centers are obvious candidates, since they are likely best positioned to judge the value of the programs and services that are being provided to their members. As these entities gauge the priorities of their early-career researchers, they too may wish to direct support toward a mix of incumbent and emerging communities.

*Recommendation 3: Offer an expanded range of services relevant to scholarly communities of all kinds*

To be clear, the previous recommendation should not be read as a call for libraries to withdraw from engagement with spaces of scholarly affiliation. Rather, libraries would do well to capacitate these communities in the ways that they are uniquely equipped to do as libraries. This means looking beyond direct financial support (although this may continue through open-access funding models like Subscribe to Open) to include in-kind support of initiatives with ties to their home institutions and beyond. It means drawing on the expertise of staff from across the library and enrolling them in the ever-evolving work of supporting scholarly affiliation.

Examples of this approach abound, but have yet to be synthesized into a set of best practices. A recent article discussed how one university's library publishing program is providing services for several small society journals, a model that could be scaled up and built out through a consortium of library publishers and/or university presses.<sup>15</sup> Libraries are offering both tools and know-how to facilitate virtual conferences and other settings of scholarly exchange, including preserving their outputs for the long term. In some cases, libraries have even cocreated new scholarly resources with societies, as with the Open Folklore project sponsored by the American Folklore Society and the Indiana University Libraries. Endeavors like these can challenge incumbent societies to set aside the familiar logic of a vendor-client relationship in favor of values-driven partnerships. Meanwhile, alternative spaces of affiliation can also benefit from library services along these lines, which provide capacity that many would not be in a position to purchase on the open market.

## **For Societies**

### *Recommendation 1: Coordinate with and capacitate emerging communities*

Early-career researchers increasingly want scholarly societies to serve as amplifiers for projects that are initiated from the bottom up, rather than as architects of top-down projects that are often seen as disconnected from their needs. This outlook can leave society leadership at a loss when it is narrowly focused on ideas brought forward through the organization's formal structure, a structure whose intricacies many early-career researchers are simply not invested in navigating. But some incumbent societies won praise from interviewees for this study by, for instance, inviting alternative spaces of affiliation to have a presence at or alongside their annual meeting. Rather than seeing these communities as competitors or fixating on how to monetize their participation, societies were able to enhance the value of their meetings by turning them into polycentric gathering points. In this spirit, societies should consider expanding their member engagement activities from the recruitment and retention of individuals to a liaison model aimed at thickening ties with other spaces of affiliation. Centering this convening function, perhaps in tandem with an affordable set of incubator services, could represent a new value proposition for societies.

Yet some interviewees sounded a cautionary note: in their view, societies squander the goodwill that overtures to other spaces of affiliation can build when these are accompanied by efforts to exert centralized control. Conveners of such spaces cited this desire for control as the most consistently frustrating aspect of their interactions with incumbent societies. One interviewee pointed to SIPS as a positive example of an organization that has spawned new initiatives and supported them in material ways without, for instance, insisting that the SIPS logo appear on every external presentation. "It's like collaboration between friends," this interviewee reflected, "not collaboration between a parent and a child." Societies will need to find

lightweight ways of vetting other spaces of affiliation for alignment with member values and of distinguishing their own messaging from those of the bottom-up projects they amplify. But, if incumbent societies are to associate themselves with the dynamism of such projects and the early-career researchers who often lead them, then they must work to decenter their own expectations of primacy.

*Recommendation 2: Define and communicate the society's sphere of influence*

As incumbent societies work more closely with emerging communities, they may also identify programs and services that no longer need to be administered by the society itself. Making this determination cuts against the growth imperative that many societies and other nonprofits have inherited from the business world.<sup>16</sup> Each new initiative that a society launches or hire that a society makes can, no doubt, be justified in terms of member needs or best practices from the association sector. But when changing priorities mean that traditional sources of revenue and volunteer energy may not be available, societies should not hesitate to have frank conversations with members and supporters on what could be allowed to fall away.

Open conversations along these lines are likely to earn the respect of early-career researchers, who can slip into the mindset of ascribing societies (as the symbolic bastions of disciplines to which they are seeking entry) more influence than they actually possess. A prime example is the issue of adjunctification, which is of concern to many early-career researchers hoping to secure a permanent academic position. Practically speaking, scholarly societies cannot compel colleges and universities to structure their hiring in a particular way. Indeed, one interviewee noted that they “would not expect an organization like a scholarly society to be able to constitute itself” as an influential actor around this issue. For them, controlling the supply and negotiating the conditions of teaching labor would require an entity more like a labor union. What this example underscores is that early-career researchers can and will accept the reality that societies cannot

solve every problem in view. Thus, for societies to locate themselves within an ecology of other actors and to commit themselves to a coalitional approach can actually enhance their standing, by offering transparency about the limitations of their structural position.

*Recommendation 3: Act out values when selecting partners*

To be clear, the previous recommendation should not be read as a call for societies to duck difficult issues. Early-career researchers want their spaces of affiliation to stand for something, and the demands that they are starting to make of incumbent societies stand to challenge arrangements currently seen as expedient or even necessary.<sup>17</sup> To this end, several interviewees for this study centered the choices that societies make about the organizations with which they contract, cooperate, or otherwise align themselves as a matter of concern. One described her decision to steer clear of her discipline's main US-based society because of its perceived ties to government detention and interrogation programs. Partnerships with commercial publishers were also viewed in morally coded terms, with another interviewee expressing admiration for a society that had "gotten out of that." Thus, societies would do well to evaluate interorganizational ties with respect not only to their transactional value, but also to the reputational cost that such ties can incur.

Yet societies also should not turn inward and preoccupy themselves with the supposed purity of the academic world. Interviewees expressed a clear desire for societies to play an expanded role in fostering public engagement, although they were more divided on the extent to which these capabilities should be developed internally or with external partners. For instance, one interviewee critiqued publishing initiatives for which, "rather than doing the work of training social scientists on how to engage with different kinds of audiences, the fallback is just to hire some science writers." Some societies have worked with training providers like the OpEd Project, and the findings of this study suggest that such efforts could be expanded or scaled up. Interviewees working outside of academia called for sifting

mechanisms that would help them to identify and even commission research relevant to their fields. Here, societies in North America might look to the EU-funded TRIPLE (Transforming Research through Innovative Practices for Linked Interdisciplinary Exploration) initiative, which seeks to build a federated open infrastructure promoting not just the discoverability of social science research but also, crucially, its uptake.

## **Moving Forward**

The COVID-19 pandemic has radically disrupted the lives of researchers and, as of this writing, reconfigured their spaces of affiliation. Hundreds of meetings sponsored by scholarly societies have been canceled or moved online, posing both technical and engagement challenges as event organizers look for ways to cut through a mounting sense of “Zoom fatigue.” With a recession underway, economic uncertainty threatens to drive a drop-off in both individual and institutional memberships, with worrisome implications for societies that depend heavily on dues revenue. Yet the news for these organizations is not all bad: as colleges and universities take their courses online, opportunities abound for societies to deliver programs and services that identify them more closely with these institutions’ teaching mission. Calls to consolidate the gains in scientific openness seen during the pandemic also present opportunities for both incumbent societies and emerging spaces of affiliation to show leadership in this regard.<sup>18</sup>

While it may seem that there are other fires to put out, the findings of this report suggest that incumbent societies should regard innovations in governance as no less pressing than diversification of revenues as they begin to plan for a post-COVID future. Too many society boards, nominating committees, and other key bodies remain dominated by mid-career and senior scholars, with at most a token student representative. Business meetings often struggle to achieve a quorum, as members conclude that the real decisions are being made elsewhere.

And while paid staff can bring expertise, continuity, and perspective to spaces of scholarly affiliation, societies should talk openly about the trade-offs of professionalization. Evidence-based strategies exist for counteracting tendencies toward bureaucracy and hierarchy in member organizations, such as demystifying the knowledge needed to perform organizational functions.<sup>19</sup> These and other strategies will be needed to reengage early-career researchers like the interviewee for this study who, when asked about the extent to which she feels like she has a voice in her discipline's main US-based society, scoffed: "Who cares about what graduate students have to say?"

For all of its limitations as a small-scale qualitative study, this report has hopefully also established the need for others like it. Today, the American Society of Association Executives maintains an active publishing program, but spaces of scholarly affiliation are just one part of its remit. Alarming, the only major ongoing study of members of scholarly societies is conducted by a commercial publisher that is also a vendor for many of these societies.<sup>20</sup> This conflict of interest ought to be a matter of concern for societies and their supporters, all of whom stand to benefit from critical, independent research on scholarly affiliation. Indeed, there is a track record of research libraries supporting the production of knowledge in this vein, as with the web directory known as the Scholarly Societies Project that was created at the University of Waterloo Libraries in the 1990s. Stakeholders including funders should consider how a new research program in this area might be resourced, where it might be located, and how it could draw on the insights of emerging spaces of affiliation.

Confronted by changes in technology, labor markets, and the very texture of social life, scholarly societies are adapting to new realities. This report has called on societies to recognize that (now more than ever) they form part of an ecology of affiliation, one that is populated by alternative networks whose logics they may struggle to comprehend. Yet the task at hand for societies is to capacitate these networks rather than trying to control them or crowd them out. It is, more broadly, to

place themselves in right relation with a wider ecology, recognizing that sustainability can and must be measured at a scale beyond that of a single organization. In doing so, and in taking cues from early-career researchers who are forging community in the face of precarity, these spaces of affiliation can renew their mission to advance the aims of scholars and scholarship.

## Endnotes

1. For an overview of what scholarly societies do and how they operate, see Michael Hewitt, Robert Dingwall, and Ilke Turkmendag, “More than Research Intermediaries: A Descriptive Study of the Impact and Value of Learned Societies in the UK Social Sciences,” *Science and Public Policy* 44, no. 6 (December 2017): 775–88, <https://doi.org/10.1093/scipol/scx013>. While Hewitt and colleagues doubt that the functions of scholarly societies could be carried out as effectively by other organizations, this report begins from the basic premise that things could be and have been otherwise, informed by historical scholarship like Aileen Fyfe, “The Royal Society and the Noncommercial Circulation of Knowledge,” in *Reassembling Scholarly Communications: Histories, Infrastructures, and Global Politics of Open Access*, ed. Martin Paul Eve and Jonathan Gray (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2020), 147–59. The author’s perspective is also informed by his experience on the publications staff of the Society for Cultural Anthropology, and his role as convener of a project team at the 2018 Triangle Scholarly Communication Institute, “Identifying and Mitigating the Risks of Open Access for Scholarly Societies.”
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8. David Nicholas, Anthony Watkinson, Cherifa Boukacem-Zeghmouri, Blanca Rodríguez-Bravo, Jie Xu, Abdullah Abrizah, Marzena Świgoń, David Clark, and Eti Herman, “So, Are Early Career Researchers the Harbingers of Change?” *Learned Publishing* 32, no. 3 (July 2019): 237–47, <https://doi.org/10.1002/leap.1232>.
9. Miller McPherson, “An Ecology of Affiliation,” *American Sociological Review* 48, no. 4 (August 1983): 519–32, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2117719>. This report does not represent a pure application of McPherson’s approach, since it considers



sociodemographic drivers of affiliation in interaction with agentic capacities and affective processes at the level of the individual.

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