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Open Letter(s) on Open Access

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Abstract

It is well known that one major obstacle to achieving open access (OA) is misunderstanding among stakeholders; some say it is the biggest problem of all. Throughout the supply-chain of producing and consuming scholarly literature, many participants—especially authors—understand the broader objectives of OA but not the practical steps they can take to help increase the accessibility of research. The purpose of “Open Letter(s) on Open Access” (OLOA) is to provide initial examples of communications that illustrate such steps. We do so by examining sets of well-regarded academic sources and evaluating the various paths that authors choose as a means of sharing their works with others, including Gold OA, Green OA, hybrid options, uploading to academic social media sites, deposits to institutional repositories, and so on. The letter(s) then offer commentary on the sharing practices and possibilities we discover. As the plural in the title suggests, OLOA is explicitly unexhaustive and reiterative, an example that others can copy and improve upon; thus, a key part of the project is to produce a set of processes that can be used by anyone interested in educating researchers about ways to advance sustainable accessibility.

These proceedings of our presentation at the Charleston Conference 2018 articulate our central goals, summarize the work we have done so far, and suggest future directions for the project. Just as the digital information and scholarly landscape is constantly changing, our work is always in progress.

Open Letter(s) on Open Access

“Open Letter(s) on Open Access” (OLOA) is an ongoing project to raise awareness about open access (OA) among academics and encourage authors to take advantage of the sustainable OA channels. Sponsored by a UChicago GRAD Graduate Global Impact grant during the summer of 2018, the project was a collective effort headed by Ingrid Becker, a doctoral candidate in English at the University of Chicago, OA advocate John Dove, and Sam Klein, Wikimedian, affiliate of the Berkman Klein Center for Internet & Society, and co-founder of the nonprofit Pattern Labs. In what follows, we explain how and why OLOA developed, provide an account of our project plan and decision-making points, offer initial findings, and include an example of what an open letter might look like. We will also make recommendations for scaling the open letter process horizontally as a means of opening global research to the public.

The Short History of Open Letter(s) on Open Access

Our initiative takes a cue from Peter Suber’s (2012) observation from “the trenches”:

... the largest obstacle to OA is misunderstanding. The largest cause of misunderstanding is lack of familiarity, and the largest cause of unfamiliarity is preoccupation. Everyone is busy. (p. x)

How, then, can we better inform various stakeholders about the processes and prospects of open sharing? An almost singular focus of John’s work around open access has been to find ways to facilitate and accelerate the adoption of Green OA by finding systematic ways to message authors about the importance and personal benefit of OA (Dove, 2015). In discussions with John and Sam, Ingrid learned about resources for sustainably preserving and freely sharing scholarly materials—like institutional and disciplinary repositories—of which she had no prior knowledge. She realized that, like herself, most of her colleagues in the humanities were focused on publishing in prestigious academic journals but gave little thought to handing over the rights to their work. They had never heard of the University of Chicago’s institutional repository or, if they had, they were wary of the term “open access,” which they associated with a potential threat to the publishing system they knew or with the possible misappropriation of their scholarship. Keeping the many dimensions of this

challenge in mind, much of the summer work was devoted to developing and vetting a research model and communication strategies to achieve our goal of inviting academics to adopt self-driven OA practices.

As a small group of people with a limited budget, we decided early on that OLOA had to have zero technical risk and would prioritize testing outreach to academics rather than OA advocates, librarians, or publishers. Since part of our task was figuring out what an open letter might look like, we chose to focus on developing a pilot, a sample letter and set of processes that others could adopt and adapt for whatever sets of works they wanted to see open.

OLOA in Action

After initial meetings, we circulated a working plan to a group of informal advisors—whom we have come to call our “secret admirers”—including heads of major university presses, library directors and scholarly communications librarians, affiliates of scholarly organizations, and other experts in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Europe, and Asia. This plan, which remains in a mode of continued refinement, laid out four main phases (Figure 1).

First, we would identify lists of resources that some audience would want to be open, with the

understanding that different fields have quite different norms for research and publishing, and thus were likely to reveal different sharing obstacles and options. Second, we would perform a capacious search to take stock of where these resources appeared on the Internet—in pre- or postprint versions, behind paywalls or in OA repositories, and anywhere in between. Third, we would write commentaries on this landscape in the form of Open Letter(s) that identified problematic sharing trends and encouraged authors to emulate sharing strategies that ensured the long-term maintenance and protection of documents, metadata, and academic records. Each of these phases, which we will now briefly expand upon, would involve consultation with our “secret admirers” and even wider public audiences such as members of scholarly communications listservs.

During phase one, we generated lists of works from fields as diverse as literary studies to medical and sociological research of international scope. We derived them both from recommendations and a number of criteria for “why readers would want them to be open,” including high citation counts, awards and other markers of institutional recognition or prestige, suitability for teaching, disciplinary review, and the treatment of urgent global issues.

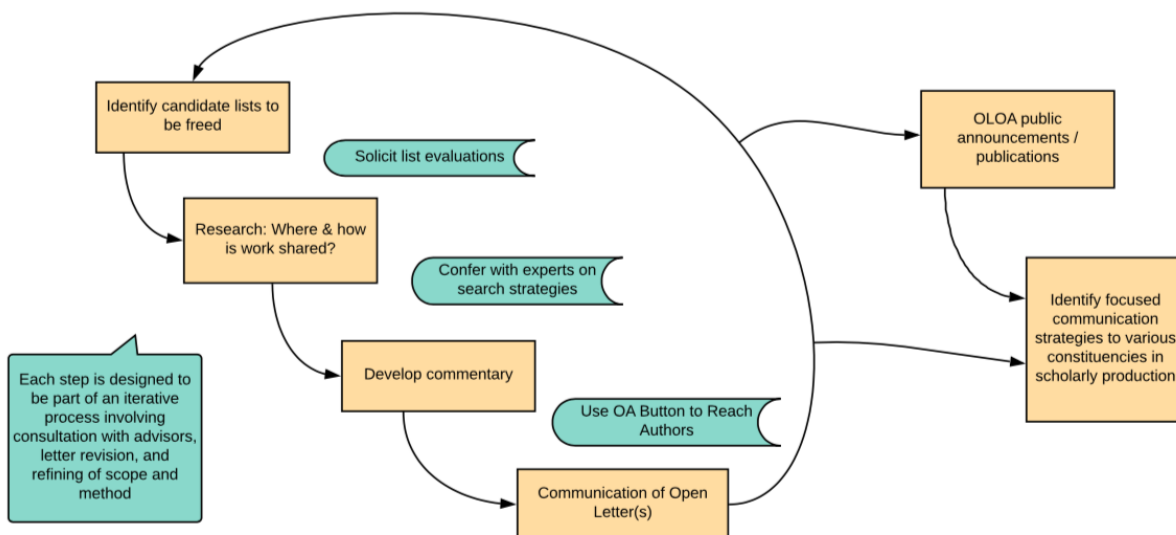


Figure 1. Project plan visualization.

Sample Lists of Resources

List	# works
Most frequently cited works with DOIs in Wikipedia as of 03/01/2018	25
Cited works in a Gates Foundation–funded Alzheimer’s field review article	48
Top-cited articles on Malaria (according to 1Science metrics)	50
American Sociological Association award-winning articles in last 5 years	15
All cited works in an OBO (Oxford Bibliographies Online) entry	124
Modern Language Association award-winning articles in last 10 years	10

During phase two, it was important that we not rely on any one particular search engine or discovery tool, each of which would have its own blind spots. We began looking for works using Google and Google Scholar and manually checked their presence on OA content databases like Arxiv.org or SocArXiv, PubMed Central or PLOS, subscription and publisher-run databases like JSTOR, Science Direct, Wiley Online Library, and so on. We chose to exclude SciHub or similar databases that automated the collection of articles without permission; we felt that these did not reflect any author’s intention to share. We did, however, want to be as capacious as possible in our exploration of sharing habits that reveal large uptake from authors, including on academic social networking sites like Academia.edu and ResearchGate. We also used the bibliometric tool 1findr to cross-check our manual search, discovering additional copies in several cases. We gathered our findings in a spreadsheet with over 50 columns, which included further information such as Journals’ and Publishers’ SHERPA/RoMEO Scores, membership in Directory of Open Access Journals, article copyright information, and other related data.

Phase three consisted of drafting an open letter. Based on feedback from our “secret admirers,” we chose to begin with our list of the cited sources in an open access field review article on Alzheimer’s funded by the Gates Foundation, an organization with a very strong OA policy. We had already determined which works were already open, and which could be but weren’t—given the deeply tangled lives of many of these online works, we found ourselves

wondering what we could say in a page or two that academics would find compelling.

We landed on the fact that a significant portion of the works on this list were freely available only on academic social networking sites (ASNS)—and not always uploaded by the author. One of the key points we wanted to make in our letter was that, while ASNS have a useful role in the scholarly communications ecology, institutional and disciplinary repositories offer more sustainable sharing strategies for authors wishing to expand visibility and secure longevity for their work.

This is just one of many possible angles an open letter might take. In our evaluation of the list of articles granted awards from the American Sociological Association during the last five years, we saw an opportunity to create a letter that might show how compatible OA was with prestige. We found that almost all the articles behind paywalls were published by influential journals that had policies acknowledging an author’s right to share through a Green OA channel. Additionally, some of these articles were written by scholars at colleges and universities with OA policies, but had not yet been deposited in local institutional repositories. Highlighting the works on our list that *had* been shared in such repositories, we encouraged authors to emulate their model.

The fourth phase, upon which we are about to embark, involves the dissemination of letters through channels such as newsletters, listservs and proceedings for scholarly societies, disciplinary conferences, or local institutional events. Down the road, we would also like to publish an article in a scholarly communications or higher-ed journal and to create a digital public space to centralize and dialogue about letters. For now, we want to close with our hopes for further avenues for expansion.

OLOA as a Model to Follow: Scaling Outreach

The results of these searches helped us establish some principles for communications strategies not only for a wide audience, but also for individual authors and publishers. In the case of authors, we chose not to call out individuals or articles in any Open Letter so as to avoid exposing a punch list for publishers deciding to issue take-down notices to sites providing access. And we thought it would be more likely to motivate scholars to reliably share if we approached them one at a time. As none of us were librarians, however, we

realized we were inadequately equipped to advise them about the fine-grained details around copyright. We found our solution in the form of SPARC's Open Access Button bulk upload feature. We used their system to automate searches for existing OA copies and author contact information as well as to send customizable emails to authors concerning articles stuck behind paywalls.

The OA Button is an extremely easy tool that can be used to circumvent manual research by anyone interested in creating an Open Letter. One must simply choose a list of works—perhaps the publication record of an entire department, or an issue of a journal, or assigned readings from a course—and upload a digital identifier or webpage along with a customizable message that will be sent to authors. The OA Button staff then does the rest, tracking the outcome of requests for an OA version of an article, managing the conversation when an author has questions or attempts to share an inappropriate version, and keeping you updated with progress.

Finally, our research process also illuminated some reasons to get in touch with publishers, editors, or anyone who could help ease the frictions slowing the adoption of sustainable OA. We noticed, for instance, nonexistent or outdated SHERPA/RoMEO scores as well as cases in which a publisher has a “white” score, the worst one could have from an OA standpoint. We have already contacted several publishers about these issues with overall positive reception.

After some of the open letters have been published and some time has passed, we should be able to report improvement brought on both by the OA Button back-end process and our own messaging to journal editors and publishers.

As this presentation about “Open Letter(s) on Open Access” has demonstrated, a small team of busy people can indeed make a difference to the future of Open Access and scholarly communications practices. Our hope is that during Open Access Week next year there are lots of local efforts that can replicate this OLOA process, and that our story may motivate some of you to write letters of your own.

Sample Open Letter

“Alzheimer’s and Open Access: Taking Shared Research One Step Further”

Treatment of Alzheimer’s is one of the most pressing issues today. The prevalence of the disease has grown

proportionally with increasing human lifespans, and with it a surge of public, professional, and media attention. Last year, Bill Gates pledged to invest \$100 million of his personal wealth in Alzheimer’s research (“Bill Gates makes \$100 million personal investment,” 2017). His official philanthropic engine, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, has also funded studies on Alzheimer’s. Like many organizations, especially in the fields of scientific and medical research, the Gates Foundation has an Open Access Policy that requires publications coming out of funded projects, as well as the data underlying those publications, to be freely available upon release.

In cases like this, where exactly are Open Access (OA) articles shared, by whom, and how easy are they to find? Where and by whom are they preserved, and will they always be discoverable in the future?

In this letter, we address a few of the many complexities of the OA landscape in STEM research from the position of the reader in order to draw the attention of researchers to the utility of different strategies for sharing their work. Beyond illuminating obstacles to widespread circulation, we will point to trustworthy, long-term hosting and indexing services in hopes of motivating authors to carefully consider the OA options they may employ.

Our inquiry begins with a field-review article on Alzheimer’s, funded in part by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, that unearths “valuable” but “largely unexplored” research. “Epidemiology of Alzheimer’s disease and other forms of dementia in China, 1990–2010: A systematic review and analysis” was “the first large-scale systematic analysis of the epidemiology of Alzheimer’s disease and other forms of dementia in a low-income or middle-income setting” (Chan et al., 2013). The results of this important endeavor were published in *The Lancet*, a reputable, primarily paid-subscription journal. The article is OA—but can its readers easily access its cited publications as a means of further research?

With the aid of Google Scholar—one of the most highly used search tools by STEM academics (Martín-Martín, Costas, van Leeuwen, & López-Cózar, 2018, p. 10)—as well as the recently released bibliometric tool 1findr, we answered this question by looking for each of 48 cited sources, 79% of which are journal articles. We located freely available copies of just over half of these articles in the form of pre- or post-print, peer-reviewed versions on the sites of a variety of organizations and content hosts. In contrast, about

10% of cited articles—all of them published in American and European journals—were available only on a paid-subscription basis.

This percentage of completely paywalled material may seem low; but, from the reader's perspective, there are actually problems with the way that well over half of this list has been shared. Consider a handful of imagined scenarios that reflect the real availability of our examined set of works, scenarios that highlight the artificial, unnecessary complexity of much online research:

. . . *Someone is interested in a cited article on senile dementia in China to drive drug development and government policy-making; the only copy she can find is behind a paywall, and her institution doesn't pay a subscription to the journal. She's unable to read the article and moves on . . .*

. . . *Someone is struck by the call that "more research should be done to improve understanding of the different social and environmental risk factors for dementia" (Chan et al., 2013, p. 2022). She tries to click through to a cited article that identifies data gaps on childhood mortality and poverty in less developed countries--and is informed that she can read it for free only if she creates an online account with the journal. Rather than set up yet another login, she does a quick check on Academia.edu, where she finds three versions of the paper . . .*

. . . *Someone is attracted to a reference in "Epidemiology of Alzheimer's" about dementia in West Africa—perhaps that's even where he's doing research. He hits a paywall, but a quick search on Google Scholar yields a copy that has been uploaded by the author on ResearchGate . . .*

As these examples show, the significant percentage of cases in which a reader may have to search several locations or create new accounts before reaching the desired article is less than ideal. Popular academic social network sites (ASNS) like Academia.edu and

ResearchGate, which house copies of more than half of the works on our list, also leave a lot to be desired when it comes to a sustainable OA ecology. ASNS have sustained enormous uptake as spaces for scholarly communications, in part because they are so easy to use; they appeal to many busy people because they do not guarantee compliance with, and thus do not require authors to navigate, often labyrinthine publisher copyright policies. Beyond their vulnerability to take-down notices, ASNS do not employ practices that academic institutional repositories, built and coordinated by trained librarians and information scientists, use to ensure the discoverability, indexing, longevity, and legacy of scholarly materials (Martín-Martín et al., pp. 5–6).

Process as well as content matters when it comes to publishing, consuming, and advancing research. We think the academic community can optimize its sharing strategies. Using the OA Button, we have already reached out to the authors of any articles cited by "Epidemiology of Alzheimer's" for which we could not locate legitimate open access versions. We encouraged them to take advantage of the options for author self-archiving that universities and funding agencies support or require, and that *The Lancet* and most of the journals on our list—indeed, most major scholarly journals across fields—do in fact enable.

And the process doesn't have to be as laborious as it may seem. Here are some practical measures to take:

- Review the Harvard Open Access Project's "How to Make Your Work Open Access" Guide.
- Consult the Public Toolkit of OA Policy Resources developed by the Coalition of Open Access Policy Institutions.
- Find your institutional repository on the Directory of Open Access Repositories.
- Check your options for sharing at the SHERPA/RoMEO Database of publisher and journal policies.

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