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Should You Pay for the Chicken When You Can Get It for Free?
No Longer Life on the Farm as We Know It

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Abstract

The scholarly publishing ecosystem is being forced to adapt following changes in funding, scholarly review, and distribution. Taken alone, each changemaker could markedly influence the entire chain of research consumption. Combining these change forces together has the potential for a complete upheaval in the biome. During the 2019 Charleston Library conference, a panel of stakeholders representing researchers, funders, librarians, publishers, digital security experts, and content aggregators addressed such questions as what essential components constitute scholarly literature and who should shepherd them. The 70-minute open dialogue with audience participation invited a range of opinions and viewpoints on the care, feeding, and safekeeping of peer-reviewed scholarly research. The panelists were James King, Branch Chief & Information Architect at the NIH; Sharon Mattern Büttiker, Director of Content Management at Reprints Desk; Crane Hassold, Senior Director of Threat Research at Agari; and Susie Winter, Director of Communications and Engagement, Springer Nature. The panel was moderated by Beth Bernhardt, Consortia Account Manager at Oxford University Press. Beth posed questions to the panel and each panelist replied from their vantage point. The lively discussion touched on ideas and solutions not yet discussed in an open forum. Such collaborative approaches are now more essential than ever for shaping the progress of the scientific research community. In attendance were librarians, editorial staff, business development managers, data handlers, library collection managers, content aggregators, security experts, and CEOs.

Not unlike a farm, publishing's delicate ecosystem is a network of dependence and interdependence. What is your mission and what challenges do you see your role on the farm being? What is the main threat to achieving this goal?

The researcher mission is to identify pertinent research for furthering scientific discovery. The researcher's main challenge is to find easy and affordable access to content. The main threat to all researchers is the decreased reliability of research due to the overabundance of output and increase in poorly vetted content. Another real threat is the lack of access to research, particularly in underfunded research sectors and regions of the world.

Publishers have several challenges, because they serve numerous constituents in the ecosystem. In a world of information overload, the publisher's role is to secure trusted knowledge—in the form of the latest thinking, most relevant information, and most important data—for those who need it most,

to help them make the breakthroughs that advance discovery and transform lives, and to curate that knowledge for future generations.

Researchers want to advance in their field and their career progress by getting published and cited. Funders want to ensure that they are making sensible investments. Librarians want to ensure access to the latest research output with the greatest potential for impact. What has changed is the sheer volume of research. The job of keeping track and sorting through the large mass of output has become more difficult. Knowing what research sources to trust is also a rising challenge. Just because something has been published doesn't mean it is good or credible. For publishers, this means our role of validating, curating, and navigating is increasingly important. We need to do this in a digital world and very often in real time due to the increased speed of research output demands. Historically, publishers haven't been the best at explaining what they do or what value they add. It is now imperative to demonstrate our "value add."

To add to the challenge, varying academic communities have different needs. Other regions of the world perceive content dissemination differently. A global publisher must be able to meet needs of the varying library and funder missions such as fostering discovery in support of innovative research with a high ROI while at the same time providing access and support to researchers and staff at the institutional level.

A major threat to the publisher takes the form of sites like Sci-Hub, which are only concerned with providing access to the existing stock of scientific literature. Such entities have no role, interest, or investment in the development of new content or the curation of peer-reviewed material. It behooves us to fill the void Sci-Hub currently occupies with a better solution—one that supports and adds to the research ecosystem rather than siphons it off. We must recognize our role in the dilemma. Sci-Hub's continuing attractiveness is symptomatic of the lack of understanding of a publisher's role in the research ecosystem as well as our inability to come up with a viable legal alternative.

The mission of a digital security expert is to maintain security standards and protocols while at the same time make information accessible. The biggest challenge is to keep ahead of the threat. The biggest risk factor is also our biggest challenge. Anticipating the next move is key to maintaining our position of one-step-ahead.

Library and funder challenges include managing declining purchasing power and real declines in research funding. The rising costs of subscriptions paired with declining institutional support for decades has put strains on many organizations, resulting in cuts to services and an increased push to OA. All these pressures weaken our ability to invest in new products and services. Library and funder threats include the evolving and uncertain role in which we find ourselves. We also perceive Sci-Hub as a threat to the academic record and our role as the safe keeper of archival content. Illicit use also threatens future funding and fundraising efforts.

The content aggregator mission is to provide fast, user-driven access to copyright-compliant content at an affordable price for the researcher or research institution. The biggest challenge for content aggregators is to find a path to content that supports ease of access for users, keeps pace with technology, and satisfies copyright requirements. Aggregators also need to manage the various levels of understanding or awareness within our ecosystem. Some publishers—particularly those highly focused in niche research fields—do not recognize how their publications are used or reused. Rightly so, their focus is on the research, not the business of content dissemination postpublication. We therefore spend time notifying and educating our partners on copyright, copyright compliancy, the various types of use including regulatory submissions, reactive use, and what constitutes fair use.

We also combat illicit use, which we see as the greatest threat overall. Regarded by some as a minor and sometimes necessary negligence, the use and sharing of pirated content has a deleterious impact on the scholarly publishing cycle. Online piracy of scientific research undermines the mission and mandate of legitimate research institutions, negatively affects library budgets, compromises secure servers, and diminishes publisher validation, curation, and dissemination efforts. Piracy and illicit sharing sites claim to support the research industry, when, in fact, they weaken it and erode funding for legitimate research and output channels.

Conclusion

Each stakeholder contributes in a unique and valuable way to the delicate ecosystem of scientific discovery and publication. Illicit sharing sites—while free to use on the surface—are very costly. In using illicit sharing sites, researchers undermine the publishing infrastructure and weaken the library's budgetary leverage. Usage that cannot be measured cannot be counted at the time of renewal. Online users also run the risk of having their credentials stolen, thus putting the university servers at risk—and not just in the library. Although many users have legal access to content, they continue to use Sci-Hub to get content, because it's easier. Publishers, libraries, content aggregators, security experts, and researchers must work together to find easier and sustainable roads to content. Failing to take positive steps to improve symbiotic roles will result in further erosion of the delicate balance of the scholarly research and publication ecosystem.

Dedication

The authors dedicate this proceeding to the memory of our panel member James King, who passed away on March 30, 2020. Anyone who stood near James even for a short while became aware of the wealth of knowledge, generosity, and kindness in their presence.