SCOAP3: a key library leadership opportunity in the transition to open access

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Abstract

The SCOAP3 consortium aims to transition the whole of High Energy Physics (HEP) publishing from a subscription to an open access basis. SCOAP3 currently has commitments for more than 63% of the projected 10 million Euros per year budget, from partners in more than 21 countries, including more than 50 libraries and consortia in the U.S. Full participation from the U.S., a leader in HEP research, is both essential and particularly challenging, as the U.S. does not have a national coordinating body that can make one commitment for the country, as many other countries do. While the *work* to undertake this commitment for the library should not be underestimated – figuring out subscription costs when journals are part of a big deal, often through a consortium – neither should the *benefits* be underestimated. In brief, the benefits are the optimum access that comes with open access – full open access to the publisher's PDF for everyone, everywhere; a model for transitioning to open access that involves no financial risk, as commitments are capped at current subscriptions expenditures, and SCOAP3 is addressing the issue of unbundling successful journals from big deals and reducing costs accordingly; future financial benefits as a transparent, production-based pricing model for scholarly communication introduces competition into a market where it has been lacking; gaining publisher acceptance of library advocacy efforts for open access by addressing a key concern of publishers (financing the journals in an open access environment) and perhaps most importantly, establishing a leadership role for libraries in a future for scholarly communication that will be largely open access.

As Douglas (2009) explains, "To move forward in achieving open access, U.S. libraries that subscribe to any of the five journals that are considered 100 percent convertible to SCOAP3 (European Physical Journal C, Journal of High Energy Physics, Nuclear Physics B, Physical Review D, and Physics Letters B) need to participate". If this describes your library, please go to the SCOAP3 website, now, to learn more and participate in this innovative global collaboration that can be a model, not only for transitioning to open access, but also for how humankind can work cooperatively across borders to accomplish a great good that will benefit all of us.

Library leadership in transformative change in scholarly communication

Librarians were early leaders in recognizing that scholarly communication was in need of fundamental re-direction, beginning with identification of the serials crisis. Librarians have also been early leaders in developing and implementing creative solutions to the serials crisis. For years, most libraries have enjoyed better pricing and access through participation in library consortia, partially offsetting the negative impact of the serials pricing crisis. Librarians have also been leaders in advocating for positive change in scholarly communication, particularly open access. Librarians and library associations have led in the call for open or public access policies, such as the U.S. National Institutes of Health *Public Access Policy (2008)*, the Canadian Institutes of Health Research's *Policy on Access to Research Outputs (2007)*, and the recently re-introduced *Federal Research and Public Access Act* (2009) in the U.S.

Open access advocacy efforts are beginning to show significant fruit, with much more to come. The Registry of Open Access Repository Material Archiving Policies (ROARMAP), lists 120 open access mandate policies as of July 2009 (39 funder, 39 institutional, 13 departmental, 29 theses). As examples of the scope of existing policies, and what is to come, consider that all 7 federal funding agencies in the U.K. have open access policies, and that the European University Association (2008), a body of over 700 universities in more than 40 countries, unanimously committed to developing open access policies and repositories at each and every one of their universities.

One of the obstacles to open access policy adoption has been opposition from the scholarly publishing community. A key issue for scholarly publishers is (understandably) the financial implications of open access. In addition to being leaders in open access advocacy, academic libraries, through their budgets, are the backbone of economic support for scholarly publishing. In a report commissioned by the Association of Learned and Professional Society Publishers (ALPSP) and the International Association of Scientific, Technical and Medical Publishers (STM), Ware (2006) discusses the economics of scholarly publishing, and the only revenue stream even *mentioned* is academic library budgets. This is not to say that this is the only revenue stream, as a small portion of revenue stems from advertising and sales to other library types, rather that percentage-wise the academic library budget is, by far, the primary source of revenue in academic publishing.

It is timely for libraries to address the issue of economic support for an open access scholarly publishing system, for three reasons: 1) to defuse opposition and gain publisher support for open access policy initiatives, such as FRPAA, that are under discussion, and 2) more importantly in the longer term, to develop models for economic support for a largely open access scholarly communication system, and 3) to ensure an ongoing leadership role for libraries in scholarly communication (currently, academic libraries are the leading stewards / coordinators of economic support for scholarly communication, through subscriptions; there can be a leadership role for libraries in supporting open access scholarly communication; it is up to us to assume this leadership role).

SCOAP3

The SCOAP3 consortium presents an outstanding opportunity for such a leadership role in transitioning support from subscriptions to open access for the academic library. The SCOAP3 consortium aims to transition to whole of scholarly publishing in High Energy Physics (HEP) from a subscriptions to an open access basis. Building on the long-term success of the self-archiving approach to open access through arXiv, SCOAP3 is currently gathering commitments from institutions (usually libraries) around the world that are involved in high energy physics research.

SCOAP3: *no* financial risk, potential financial *benefits* for libraries

Participating in SCOAP3 involves *no* financial risk to libraries. Commitment at this point involves a philosophical commitment to transition no more than current expenditures on HEP journals and articles; firm commitments to pay will come after successful negotiations with publishers. The SCOAP3 initiative is very well thought out, and has addressed all the important issues, such as ensuring that successful publishers unbundle the respective journals from big deals and decrease pricing accordingly. Indeed, the full report of the SCOAP3 Working Party is well worth reading, for an in-depth look at the economics of transitioning from subscriptions to open access.

Potential financial benefits of SCOAP3 flow from large-scale negotiations and the potential for a transparent pricing process tied to production to introduce competition into the market for scholarly communication, currently characterized as an inelastic market lacking in competition. That is to say, the plan is to cap spending at no more than current subscription expenditures, but also to seek more favorable pricing through competition. That is to say, when publishers bid to

be part of SCOAP3, any publisher that is cost-effective, producing high-quality articles at the average for the discipline, will do well. On the other hand, if two publishers are producing equivalent quality but one charges much more, this introduces the potential for competition, whether through expansion of existing publishers, or introduction of new publishers into the market.

The advantages of transparent and production-based pricing

SCOAP3 is not unique in aiming for a scholarly communication system where pricing is tied to production costs. Most approaches to open access publishing have, at the very least, elements of pricing that are based on production costs. For example, the many libraries currently involved in hosting and supporting journals for their faculty (Hahn, 2008), are providing *production services* that are either subsidized or cost-recovery, removing this element from pricing for access (i.e., no subscriptions costs for fully open access journals, and/or making it possible for scholarly, association, or independent publishers to move forward into the online environment at low or no cost to the journal). The production costs of many open access journals are subsidized, whether by societies / associations, funding agencies, organizations, or governments. Direct subsidy of production costs may be the most efficient means of funding scholarly communication, as it minimizes many of the costs associated with preventing access, such as authentication mechanisms and troubleshooting when these authentication mechanisms fail.

To illustrate how transparent, production-based pricing can introduce competition into the marketplace, consider the hybrid "open choice" model of subscription-based publishers and the article processing fee approach employed by a minority of open access publishers. Most of the traditional publishers now have some form of "open choice", in which authors can pay to have their articles made available for free, for example Springer's Open Choice, and the Sponsored Article option of Elsevier (owner of *Serials Review*).

Subscriptions publishers are reporting low update of the open choice hybrid options. In contrast, some of the fully open access publishers using the article processing fee approach are beginning to report some very significant successes. Hindawi's whole business model is based on this approach, and the commercial Hindawi is making a profit. BioMedCentral (BMC) was recently purchased by Springer. The owners of Springer, Cinven and Candover, are private equity firms that specialize in buyouts, with a mission of profits for investors; clearly, these profit-seeking firms are seeing profit potential in the BMC approach. *PLoS One*, a fully open access journal with a transparent article processing fee model for authors, is already among the world's largest scholarly journals with projected output of 4,300 published articles in 2009, and 8,000 articles in 2010 (which would make PLoS One the world's largest scholarly journal) (Binfield, 2009).

Why the disparity in results? One reason could be the difference in both prices and services. *PLoS One*, for example, offers full open access, with Creative Commons-Attribution only licensing that provides full, libre, open access including re-use – at $1,300 U.S. per article, compared to Elsevier and Springer's hybrid options at $3,000 U.S. per article. This *higher* price for the hybrids comes with *less* rights for authors; for example, Elsevier's Sponsored Articles is free access at the publisher's website and much fewer rights for authors. For libraries, either Elsevier or Springer publications are already paid for through subscriptions, at rather hefty prices. There is little or no incentive for libraries to support hybrid "open choice" options that represent additional revenue for publishers already reaping high profits, unless such payments are tied to lower pricing for subscriptions. The differences in services and prices between PLoS One and the hybrid options are easy to see, or transparent. This is a very different situation from subscriptions, where both pricing elements (ranging from production costs to profits) and revenue streams (e.g. how many subscribers, what each is paying) are not always available to the consumer.

Combining subscriptions and open access support for due diligence

Avoiding "double-dipping" – paying for scholarly articles on production through open choice, and again through subscriptions – is arguably essential in the transition to open access, for due diligence. The best way to avoid double-dipping is to address both subscriptions and open access support simultaneously. The University of California is an early leader in this area, having recently negotiated a combined license / o)pen choice purchase with Springer (University of California, 2009).

Summary: why libraries should participate in SCOAP3

To summarize the benefits of SCOAP3, this is an important opportunity for libraries to lead in transitioning the economics of scholarly communication from a subscription to an open access basis. The SCOAP3 initiative is well thought out, and has addressed both the key access issues (full open access to the publisher's PDF) and the key economic issues (commitment capped at current subscriptions expenditures, with lower pricing to come through the introduction of competition, unbundling of SCOAP3 journals from the big deals).

SCOAP3 currently has commitments for more than 63% of the projected 10 million Euros per year budget, from 21 countries, with discussions underway with many more libraries, consortia, and countries. The U.S. market in particular is key to the success of SCOAP3, as the U.S. is a leader in HEP research. The U.S. market is more complex than other countries, as there is no national coordinating body that can make one commitment to SCOAP3 on behalf of the country. As of July 2009, more than 50 U.S. partnering libraries and consortia have committed to participation in SCOAP3, however more commitments are needed for SCOAP3 to advance. While the work of committing to SCOAP3 – figuring out subscriptions costs to these journals currently part of the "big deal" and generally part of a consortial offer – should not be underestimated, neither should the benefits of participation in SCOAP3 be underestimated: the optimal ubiquitous access that comes with full open access; the coming financial benefits from introducing competition into the marketplace; engaging publisher cooperation in the key library advocacy effort of open access by addressing the major concern, finances; and, last but not least, ensuring a future role of leadership in scholarly communication for libraries and librarians.

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