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Recommended Citation

Harrington, Caitlin and Scott, Rachel E., "Intersections of Open Access and Information Privilege in Higher Education and Beyond" (2023). *Faculty and Staff Publications – Milner Library*. 193.

<https://ir.library.illinoisstate.edu/fpml/193>

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Intersections of Open Access and Information Privilege in Higher Education and Beyond

Caitlin Harrington and Rachel E. Scott

Abstract

Despite its capacity to reach readers irrespective of affiliation or geographic location, conversations about Open Access (OA) frequently center academic stakeholders in high-income countries. This presentation will examine opportunities for technical services librarians to explore with students some of the inequities of the scholarly communications landscape, including various approaches to and aspects of OA, and to consider the disparate levels of access available to individuals based on institutional affiliation. Because higher education settings afford students a high degree of information privilege, academic librarians face the challenge of teaching students to appreciate the value of information, acknowledge barriers to it, and identify and evaluate the freely available resources and content to which they will have access post-graduation. Although technical services and scholarly communication librarians tend to have fewer teaching responsibilities than those working in public services, our experiences with collection development, licensing, and resource description provide insights to share with students regarding information value and privilege. A case study on student projects which included the editing of Wikipedia entries highlights tensions between institutional privilege and open resources. Teaching students about the costs, processes, and value of information production empowers them to understand their privilege and responsibilities.

Keywords: open access, information privilege, technical services, scholarly communication, information literacy

Information privilege in higher education

Char Booth coined the term “information privilege” to distinguish between working within institutional paywalls and outside of them and highlight how OA resonates with pedagogical movements to center the student’s knowledge, agency, and contributions.¹ Higher education does indeed afford students an often unprecedented and short-lived information privilege. Without intervention, it seems likely that many students will take these riches for granted and miss them after graduation or that they will miss out on costly and impactful resources entirely. Several studies and initiatives have highlighted the importance of engaging students in conversations surrounding the information privilege they experience as college and university students.² Academic librarians, then, navigate the tension of teaching students to use and appreciate licensed resources while they can, understand the manifold barriers to information students may encounter, and identify resources and content to which they will have access upon leaving the institution.

Although public services librarians may have more opportunities to interact with students, NASIG conferences have highlighted initiatives taken by technical services librarians to engage students in conversations around information privilege. For example, another NASIG 2022 session details a grant-funded initiative to engage students in collection development at Southeast Missouri State University and a session at the 2016 meeting highlighted a collaboration between a collection development librarian and publisher to promote information literacy with respect to scholarly publishing processes.^{3,4}

The speakers, Caitlin Harrington and Rachel E. Scott, have long been interested in connecting their work in technical services to students’ understanding of information literacy and privilege. One example of

this involved participating in the Student Leadership and Professional Competencies workshop jointly sponsored by Career Services and the Office of Student Leadership and Involvement at the University of Memphis.⁵ Tasked to present materials that would “impact student leaders and how they will translate to life after college,” the speakers leveraged their experience working with collection development, licensing, and e-resource management to engage students in critical thinking about their information privilege and its boundaries. Harrington more recently collaborated with Karen Brunsting to draw students’ attention to information privilege in their credit-bearing course on Wikipedia.⁶ By “using licensed library resources to contribute to and update articles on the freely available Wikipedia website,” the authors highlight the intersections between freely available and pay-walled content in a way that makes the distinction clear to students.⁷

The work of Brunsting and Harrington reiterates the importance of leading discussions with students about distinctions between licensed, OA, and free-to-read content, both in terms of how to access it and limitations on what can be done with it. Librarians working in technical services are uniquely situated to engage students on these distinctions and limitations or to partner with other librarians and campus partners. It is essential for students to understand and make good use of the resources available to them and to appreciate the limits they will encounter when they leave higher education.

It is also arguably important to convey to students and faculty the cost and value of information. In an age of stagnant or diminished budgets, librarians are called upon to be careful stewards of their budgets. Although non-disclosure statements often preclude stating exact terms of agreements, librarians can nonetheless find ways to convey the cost of licensed resources. University of Virginia and University of Colorado Boulder recently took creative approaches to making the cost of resources understood by campus constituents.⁸ Librarians at both institutions created interactive tutorials that conveyed the staggering costs of some of their licensed resources not by sharing not the actual numbers but rather by comparing them to outrageously

luxurious (commercial trip to space) or comically large (11,300 large pizzas) purchases. By comparing the cost of an annual subscription to a yacht, individuals who are not typically involved in this work gain a clearer picture of the true cost of information.

Open Access in higher education

In addition to understanding the financial cost and limitations of library-licensed resources, students would also arguably benefit from learning about OA, both in terms of its free-to-read and free-to-reuse elements. Although OA is available to all to read, it is nonetheless imbued with elements of privilege. Academic institutions in high-income countries are best positioned to fund OA agreements or publishing costs, a reality which perpetuates inequities in who can and cannot publish their work OA. Funding to support OA editorial work and much OA infrastructure is also strongly rooted within higher education. Much of the current OA content is often within the confines of traditional peer-reviewed article and monograph publishing, which is primarily, though not exclusively, associated with higher education and dependent on university funding.

Although OA opens up content for readers worldwide, it nonetheless poses challenges to authors in a variety of contexts, especially those in low-income countries. The realities of commercial publishing have diminished the opportunities to create a truly level playing field for all authors, irrespective of affiliation, and instead have reinforced the privilege of holding a tenured position at a research-intensive university with robust funding for research and related resources. Anthony J. Olejniczak and Molly J. Wilson found that “in general, the likelihood for a scholar to author an APC OA article increases with male gender, employment at a prestigious institution (AAU member universities), association with a STEM discipline, greater federal research funding, and more advanced career stage.”⁹ Tony Ross-Hellauer similarly acknowledged several of the layers of privilege that allow authors

with job security and access to resources to publish OA, including a tenured position, noting: “the fact that career-advancement criteria don’t reward open practices puts early-career adherents at a disadvantage.”¹⁰

Having discussions with students about OA inequities will help them understand how publishers commodify information and what they, as information creators and consumers, can do about it. Although conversation can increase awareness of the nuances surrounding differences in free-to-read and licensed content, engaging students as Wikipedia contributors or editors can more directly inform their understanding of distinctions between these categories and how they align with Wikipedia’s requirements for neutrality and verifiability of sources in the references section. Before offering a case study from her work at the University of Memphis to engage students in thinking about information privilege and free-to-read versus paywalled materials using Wikipedia, Harrington will consider what OA looks like outside of academia.

Open Access outside higher education

The funding that academic institutions in higher-income countries provide for the publishing and editorial work associated with OA also extends to structures of access created specifically for the needs of academic libraries and their users. While OA content may be freely available on the web, it must be discoverable to provide value, which can be challenging in public and school libraries. Academic libraries employ various solutions to optimize the discoverability of OA content, including knowledgebases and discovery services that can automate metadata management. These tools can free librarians from needing to identify OA content at the title-level or to vet it for quality. A reliable source, such as the Directory of Open Access Journals, will likely have an available collection within a library’s knowledgebase or discovery layer that can be activated so that OA content appears

alongside subscription content, and no additional actions are necessary for the user. However, because their collections, user needs, and resource budgets vary significantly from academic libraries, public and school libraries are unlikely to have access to a handy metadata tool that provides this streamlined access to OA content. One solution marketed to public libraries is CloudSource OA from SirsiDynix. CloudSource OA is an aggregator of OA content that provides access within other SirsiDynix products, such as their ILS, Symphony. However, any cost associated with a product aggregating free-to-read content is a hard pill to swallow for libraries whose budgets are already stretched to their limit in disparate directions.

For most users outside higher education, access to OA content will be filtered through an internet search engine, such as Google Scholar. Google Scholar has unique benefits, such as its capacity to search the open web across institutional repositories for Green OA content, but it also strips out the context and curation of the library environment. Finding OA content through Google Scholar but being unable to explore references because they are locked behind paywalls limits the research capabilities and experience of users unaffiliated with a college or university. Hopefully, information literacy skills are explored in K-12 school libraries and can benefit public library users interested in conducting research for whatever purpose.

Wikipedia case study

At the University of Memphis (UofM), efforts to address information privilege were undertaken by two technical services librarians using the Wikipedia platform for a semester-long, credit-bearing course about research methods for the undergraduate researcher. The University of Memphis is a public R1 institution located in the mid-sized city of Memphis, TN, with a fall 2021 headcount of 21,622. In Spring 2019, two UofM librarians proposed their Wikipedia-based course to the Helen Hardin Honors College for their one-credit hour Honors

Forum course. Each section of the Honors Forum is taught on a subject that might otherwise be excluded from the undergraduate curriculum; previous topics include "Bob Dylan's Art of Self-Invention" and "Being a Fan of Disney." The proposed topic became a course called "[edit] Wikipedia: For the Undergraduate Researcher," and was taught for three consecutive years in the fall semesters of 2019, 2020, and 2021.

The goals of the course were to prepare students in the Honors College for college-level research expectations, impart information literacy skills, and bring students' awareness to their own context-dependent information privilege. The first half of the semester was lecture-based with an in-class activity that focused primarily on Wikipedia's principles, philosophy, and history. This prepared students for the second half of the semester, which featured the editing of a student-selected article on Wikipedia. The final project required each student to contribute ten citations to either an existing Wikipedia article or create a new article with ten citations.

The instructors lectured on information privilege and related topics, such as copyright, diversity within scholarly publishing, and credentialing. Students were challenged to identify the information economy everyone in higher education engages with and to consider their future information-seeking experience once their time at the UofM has concluded. To this end, as a class, we attempted to use our own information privilege to enrich articles on Wikipedia, which are and always will be freely available online.

As technical services librarians, the instructors had limited experience teaching undergraduate students but used their knowledge of acquisitions, licensing, and selecting resources to put their own spin on library instruction. Instructors addressed search strategies and content evaluation and led discussions about resource cost and licensing that undergraduate students are rarely privy to. The actual cost of library resources compared to the consumer products and services that students were familiar with reliably resulted in surprise and confusion from the students.

After teaching this course for three semesters, certain trends appeared as strengths and weaknesses of the course. Some of these trends could be improved through better course planning, and others perhaps indicated fatal flaws in the design of the final project. Selecting an appropriate topic was an issue that caused students strife and confusion each year. Students needed to find an existing Wikipedia article, or write a new one from scratch, that would benefit from the addition of ten new citations but was not so obscure that it would be impossible to find ten citable sources on the topic. This excluded very popular topics, like athletes or celebrities, whose pages were being watched by so many Wikipedia editors that their articles needed no help from us to stay accurate and up to date. Each semester, at least one student was plagued by indecision and repeatedly attempted to change their topic. To address this issue, in years two and three of teaching this course, the instructors integrated topic-related decisions much earlier into the course. They created a pre-topic selection assignment that required students to complete a checklist about their topic to rule out some common mistakes. This assignment did result in a more thoughtful approach to topic selection, and in the third year, fewer students needed to change their topics mid-semester than in previous years.

Another noticeable trend was that students tended to select unsuitable topics to research using library resources. Students were welcome to select any topic of interest to them so long as they could find ten sources to cite. Successful articles included a student's local school district from her pre-college education, the Chicago Mercantile Exchange, and a popular manufacturer of baseball gloves. In each instance, the student had a personal connection to their article that made it interesting for them and allowed them to serve as an expert within the class on that topic. However, these personal connections rarely lent themselves to using library resources and therefore did little to address the information privilege goal of the course. While the instructors had visions of liberating knowledge from behind a paywall to share with the English-speaking world, it turned out that

most citations came from sources found on government websites or otherwise freely available on the Web. The goal of research skills was adequately addressed through the final project, but information privilege remained more of a concept than a practice.

One potential method for addressing the ongoing issue of information privilege is to require that students choose a topic related to Memphis history and use the UofM Libraries' Special Collections to develop their citations. While the resources held by Special Collections are not licensed behind a paywall or subject to a subscription fee, they can be inaccessible and hard to find for the casual researcher. This approach was not taken in previous years because the instructors had limited experience using Special Collections and the assignment would require a collaboration that the instructors did not have time to undertake.

Conclusion

The specialized knowledge that technical services librarians have regarding resource cost and licensing has the potential to empower students through the knowledge of their privilege and role within the information economy. This presentation has highlighted some current information inequities, along with suggestions for how to address them with students. The presenters concluded by inviting audience members to share their ideas for further tackling this topic with students. Some audience members highlighted Wikipedia editing initiatives at their libraries or institutions and shared that a credit-bearing course was a rich opportunity for this work. An OA publisher asked what might be done to make OA publishing more inclusive of authors in low-income countries. The speakers responded by reiterating the importance of removing obstacles where possible. Instead of relying on authors to submit an application for a waiver or send a million emails and sign various forms after the manuscript has gone into production, it would be beneficial for publishers to review the corresponding author's email

address, affiliation, or other information that might make them eligible for a discount or waiver and notify the author of these at the point of acceptance.

Contributor Notes

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Notes

- 1 Char Booth, "open access as pedagogy," *info-mational* (blog), July 29, 2013, <https://infomational.wordpress.com/2013/07/29/open-access-as-pedagogy/>.
- 2 Sarah Hare and Cara Evanson, "Information Privilege Outreach for Undergraduate Students," *College & Research Libraries* 79, no. 6 (2018): 726–36, <https://doi.org/10.5860/crl.79.6.726>.
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