



An examination of North American Library and Information Studies faculty perceptions of and experience with open-access scholarly publishing



Wilhelm Peekhaus*, Nicholas Proferes

School of Information Studies, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2025 E Newport, Milwaukee, WI 53211, United States

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ABSTRACT

Open-access (OA) scholarly publishing has grown steadily in academia for the past few decades as an alternative to traditional, subscription-based journal publishing. This research presents the descriptive analysis of a systematic survey of North American library and information science (LIS) faculty about their attitudes toward and experience with OA publishing. The study reveals that LIS faculty tend to be more experienced with and knowledgeable about open access than their colleagues in other disciplines. A majority of LIS faculty is very critical of what is perceived to be detrimental control exercised by publishers over the scholarly communication system and agrees that major changes need to be made to this system. Although a majority of LIS faculty considers OA journals to be comparable to traditional journals, a sizable minority remains unconvinced of the purported benefits of open-access journals. The perceived constraints of the tenure and promotion system within the academy tend to limit LIS faculty engagement with open-access publishing in ways similar to other academic disciplines. There thus exists a disconnect between proclaimed support for and actual engagement with open access.

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1. Introduction

As tends to be the case with many technological advances, researchers began investigating the opportunities and challenges associated with electronic publishing soon after its advent. In general, proponents contended that electronic distribution would significantly expand accessibility of information and thus the reach of research. Conversely, early critics articulated serious reservations about the rigor of the scholarship disseminated through electronic distribution channels, as well as the ability to ensure long-term preservation of such work. This perceived lack of rigor, coupled with the traditional and conservative reward structures for tenure and promotion within the academy that are based heavily on the prestige of journal titles, meant that publication in electronic journals was often considered to be a risky venture in terms of career advancement. Part of this concern may have been legitimate given that, according to Cronin and Overfelt (1995), in 1994 only 70 of the 400 electronic journals then in existence were peer-reviewed.

In any event, both champions and skeptics of electronic publishing engaged in a variety of studies that explored the perspectives of researchers, research funders, publishers, librarians, and policymakers

regarding the electronic publishing of scholarly materials (Creaser, 2010; Mercer, 2011; Swan, 2008). With the emergence of the open-access movement in the late 1990s, the number of studies dedicated to ascertaining author attitudes toward and experience with open access increased substantially across a wide range of disciplines. Some of this research was driven by an underlying desire to understand the motivations that drive authors to publish in open-access journals (Harley, Earl-Novell, Arter, Lawrence, & King, 2007; Mischo & Schlembach, 2011; Morris & Thorn, 2009; Nicholas & Rowlands, 2005; Palmer, Speier, Wren, & Hahn, 2000; Rowlands, Nicholas, & Huntington, 2004; Swan & Brown, 2004; The University of California Office of Scholarly Communication & California Digital Library eScholarship Program, 2007; Warlick & Vaughan, 2007). A better appreciation of such motivation, it was reasoned, would provide guidance for those involved in electronic publishing projects about how to ensure that journals were responding to author needs and thus positioned to thrive long-term. Other studies sought evidence that might suggest strategies of which publishers of open-access journals could avail themselves to improve the perceptions of such journals within academia (Frass, Cross, & Gardner, 2013; Schonfeld & Housewright, 2010).

1.1. Problem statement

Although library and information science/studies (LIS) faculty members have undertaken some of this work and have been part of some

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: peekhaus@uwm.edu (W. Peekhaus).

studies, no research that focuses on LIS faculty exclusively and systematically has been conducted. This represents a significant gap in the extant literature, particularly given that access is a foundational issue for both the discipline and the profession. While it might be presumed that LIS faculty have a particular affinity for open access given their disciplinary and professional tenets, this presumption lacks any empirical support. Given the dearth of research about open access specific to LIS, it is similarly impossible to determine whether any of the beliefs and concerns about open-access publishing found among faculty in other disciplines are shared by LIS colleagues. To respond to these lacunae, the present study employed a detailed, self-administered electronic survey to explore North American LIS faculty awareness of, attitudes toward, assessment of, and experience with open-access scholarly publishing. This study also goes beyond previous research in its attempt to ascertain the willingness of LIS faculty to become active promoters of open-access scholarly publishing. The findings presented below are based on a descriptive analysis of these survey results.

2. Literature review

According to Xia (2010), since 1994, surveys about authors' attitudes toward and experience with open-access publishing have been administered every year to academics across a wide range of disciplines and locations. As Togia and Korobili (2014) observe, attitudes and behaviors regarding open access vary across disciplines. Unsurprisingly, awareness of open-access journal publishing has increased substantially since the mid-1990s from around 50% to 85% by 2007. Similarly, over the last decade and a half, there has been a gradual increase in the number of academics publishing in open-access journals, which, as Xia (2010) points out, may be a consequence of the proliferation of open-access journals across many disciplines, as well as expanding awareness among academics of the existence of such journals. This increase in the number of authors availing themselves of open-access publication venues notwithstanding, Xia (2010) argues that the rate of this form of academic publishing has yet to reach a high overall level. Although he points out that methodological and corresponding analytical challenges for comparing different surveys across time render definitive conclusions problematic, one explanation may be that scholars' support for open-access publishing may still be honored more in theory than in practice. Indeed, a number of researchers have noted a disjuncture between rhetoric and practice among both faculty and academic librarians when it comes to open-access publishing (see, for example, Grandbois & Beheshti 2014; Mercer 2011; Xia, Wilhoite, & Myers 2011).

2.1. Attitudes toward versus actual practice with open access

A survey conducted by the University of California Office of Scholarly Communication in 2006 among a little over half of the system's faculty revealed a serious disconnect between purported attitudes and actual behavior in respect of scholarly publishing. Although substantial numbers of respondents indicated the need for changes to the current scholarly communication system, in practice the majority of faculty members conformed to the traditional model that relies on publication in peer-reviewed, subscription-based journals (The University of California Office of Scholarly Communication & California Digital Library eScholarship Program, 2007). Although sizable numbers of respondents bemoaned the failure of the tenure and promotion system to keep pace with new developments in scholarly communication and thus focus too intently on publications in traditional publication venues, very few admitted a willingness to alter their behavior or to take an active role in instigating change to this system. Seventy-five percent claimed that their publishing activities were likely to stay the same (see also, for example, Morris & Thorn, 2009). Indeed, although about two-thirds of respondents claimed to be aware of or knowledgeable about gold and green

open-access models,¹ only 21% had published in open-access journals, and even fewer (14%) had deposited an article in an electronic subject or institutional repository (The University of California Office of Scholarly Communication & California Digital Library eScholarship Program, 2007). As several studies have revealed, much of this disconnect between claimed support for open access and actual publication practices can be traced to anxiety among faculty members about the impact of open-access publishing on their careers.

2.2. Open access and career prospects

Swan and Brown (2004) determined that some of the early concerns articulated by researchers about open-access publishing remain important for substantial numbers of both open-access and non-open-access authors. For example, 40% of open-access authors and 42% of non-open-access authors rated as important concerns about open-access journals adversely affecting chances for appointment and promotion. Respondents from both cohorts voiced similar concerns that publishing in open-access journals might adversely affect their chances of attracting research grants, their career in general, and the impact of their published work. The latter was an even more pronounced concern for those authors who had not published in open-access journals previously – 74% considered it important as compared to 42% for those who had published previously in an open-access journal) (Swan & Brown, 2004).

Other researchers have also determined that the perceptions and realities of the tenure and promotion system exercise a strong braking effect on the uptake of open-access publishing among faculty (Gaines, 2015; Harley et al., 2007; Migheli & Ramello, 2014). Harley and her colleagues concluded that such institutional inertia, coupled with perceptions that electronic publishing lacks rigorous peer review and is thus of lower quality and prestige, has meant that conventional, high status print publications remain the preferred scholarly communication venue among a majority of academics. Dalton (2013) similarly observed that career-related factors strongly influence library faculty and practitioners' decisions about appropriate journals in which to publish their work. But beyond career considerations, substantial numbers of faculty have indicated additional, related concerns about open-access journals.

2.3. General faculty concerns about open-access publishing

In his review of previous studies, Xia (2010) ascertained that reasons for not publishing in open-access journals include unfamiliarity with appropriate venues (as opposed to familiarity with open access in general), concerns about low prestige, lack of rigorous peer review, low impact factors, and corresponding poor citation rates. According to Swan and Brown (2004), those authors who have never availed themselves of open-access journals perceive such venues as having a smaller number of readers and thus lower citation rates, and generally possessing lower prestige and quality than traditional journal publications. The overwhelming reason, however, why these authors have not published in open-access journals is their unfamiliarity with any suitable venues in their fields (Swan & Brown, 2004).

Although their small study was limited to semi-structured interviews with 14 biomedical faculty members, Warlick and Vaughan (2007) found that impact factor, target audience, and speed of publication of a journal were the leading considerations driving authors' decisions about where to publish their work. Most of their respondents believed that open-access journals have lower impact factors than

¹ The primary distinction between gold and green open access is based on venue or delivery vehicle (i.e., journal or repository) rather than price or user rights, which delineates gratis from libre. Gold open access refers to peer-reviewed publication in an open-access journal, whereas green open access involves deposit of the work in an institutional or subject repository.

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