In Defense of Open Access:
Or, Why I Stopped Worrying and Started an OA Journal

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By now, I am sure that most of you have either read or at least heard about John Bohannon's study (2013) on the state of peer review in open access journals (if not, here you go: http://www.sciencemag.org/content/342/6154/60.full). You likely have also read criticisms and defenses of Bohannon's study. I was disheartened by Bohannon's findings, needless to say, but I was also disheartened by the rather broad conclusions he drew from his findings. And while I appreciated those voices that criticized the study and its flaws, and I especially appreciated those voices that rose to defend open access, I find myself more baffled by the fact that open access hasn't gained more ground, and that it still seems to need so much defending.

Scandalous!

What also baffles me is that in his study Bohannon openly admits that reputable, traditional-model publishers also accepted his "bait" papers, calling into question the legitimacy of their peer-review processes and highlighting the fact that the failure of peer-review is not endemic to open access journals. True, technically the parameters of his study were focused on OA. Yet the study seemed intent on framing the issue as an OA problem. This troubles me, especially in light of the troubles that "reputable" publishers like Elsevier have experienced over the last few years.

This evokes two responses, in my humble opinion. Firstly, I think it's a mistake to pit traditional-model publishing *against* open access publishing, as though they were two wholly different things – it's true that they are competitive, in the sense that they compete

for submissions and readership, but they are both modes of publishing, both avenues of opportunity for the publication of research; they are simply two arms of one organism. Or to put it in the vernacular: there's more than one way to skin a cat.

Secondly, Bohannon's study and Elsevier's troubles emphasize something that's truly endemic to *publishing*, rather than to one facet of it as compared to another: ethics violations. The peer review process is not intrinsically flawed; its application – or lack thereof – is the real problem. How can a journal call itself scholarly or peer-reviewed if it's not actually peer-reviewing submissions? Moreover, even before the peer-review process, as one author notes, "the article selection process is not exempt from errors" (Bianchini, 2011). If the selection process is flawed, then the rest of the system is corrupted. And that can hardly be the exclusive purview of OA, as evidenced by the Elsevier "fake journal" scandal (Bianchini, 2011) AND Bohannon's work. If ethics aren't guiding policies or article selection or peer-review – if publishers aren't being held adequately accountable for their policies – if they aren't observing ethical practice to begin with - then we cannot expect the publishing industry to work the way we need it to: to produce quality-controlled, reliable, expert-vetted information.

Enough with the Pearl-Clutching – Let's DO Something

These are not issues that a single article, or even a series of articles, can fix. These are issues that *no* article can fix, in the same way that articles cannot fix world hunger or pollution or how annoying that guy at the next table chewing with his mouth open is. These problems require thoughtful and deliberate action on the part of the perpetrators to fix - they must remember that good reputations are best born out of ethical practice. They must examine their practices and make changes where appropriate to rectify these

situations.

Those who are outside of the industry and wish to effect change can do so by boycotting publishers who have clearly violated ethical practice (which has been done before, as Bianchini points out). They can favor, support, and highlight reliable and reputable publishers that have good track records of ethical practice. They can hold publishers accountable for their practices, as Phil Davis (2013) suggested in his assessment of the Bohannon study. Davis notes (2013), "It is simply not enough to take promises of quality control on word alone."

Librarians can help by being advocates: educating their faculty and administrators on what *open access* means (i.e., it DOESN'T mean NOT PEER-REVIEWED) and the benefits of open access avenues (not just journals but repositories, too). Many faculty still don't understand what *open access* means and mistrust it. Demonstrating the "safety" of OA resources and how they can supplement dwindling periodical subscriptions are key ways in which OA can be demystified and find footing on reluctant campuses.

Where Does *Codex* Stand?

Of course, it's easy and boringly predictable that the founder and editor of an open access journal would defend OA. But I would point out that it's clear from Bohannon's work that OA does suffer from some problems which clearly need to be addressed. I'm not blind to that fact. But I'd like to think that *Codex* is one of those OA journals that contributes to the POSITIVE reputation of OA.

Codex observes ethical practice; peer-review is double-blind. Peer reviewers are not paid for their work; they volunteer. I am not paid for my work, nor is my webmaster; we are also volunteers. *Codex* makes no money; it offers no space for advertising; it is

freely available via the web. Authors are not charged fees for submission; they are not charged for publication. All articles are considered for publication, unless they are clearly bogus, are beyond the scope of the journal, or have serious flaws with regard to observing the journal's guidelines and policies.

I do not make decisions alone with regards to what gets published and what doesn't; the peer reviewers determine that, using a scoring rubric and guidelines - it's a kind of blind democratic process, in that way. The reviewers are not privy to the opinions of the others reviewing the same article. I am the only one who knows the majority score for an article; if two out of three reviewers recommend publication, the article is published. The journal is overseen by the Louisiana Chapter of the ACRL, so the journal's policies and practices are subject to oversight.

And in keeping with standard OA principles, authors published in *Codex* retain the rights to their work, with the exception of one right: first rights of publication. That means the authors are giving *Codex* the right to be the first place to publish their work. All other rights are retained by the authors – they can republish the work somewhere else (if that somewhere else doesn't mind work that's already been published – some publications DO mind that), or deposit a copy in a repository or post it on a website, as long as the authors acknowledge that the article was first published in *Codex*.

But Wait – There's More!

But wanting to get involved in open access and to create an ethical OA journal were not the only reasons I started *Codex*. I discovered, from my own experience and the experiences of my colleagues, that in traditional publishing authors did not always get meaningful feedback, were not always advised of their rights, and did not always

understand the machinery of publication – and were also not advised of how that machinery works by the people who drive it.

So I decided to start a journal in a venue that had no vested financial interest in publishing (that is, money would not be a motivation so it could not cloud the waters). Authors would always be offered meaningful feedback, whether their work was accepted for publication or not. Their rights would be clear and protected. And the process of publication would be transparent; anybody interested in the process of how *Codex* works can be privy to that process (except for the identities of the peer reviewers).

I don't know that this level of transparency or intimacy is possible in the traditional publishing model – there are many obstacles, not the least of which is copyright and its concerns and issues. But I think the most significant obstacle is the sheer complexity of the publishers and the publications themselves. They can get big because they get the money, and ironically it's the money they get that they use to justify their practices. Because they've always gotten money, one author rationalized, they must continue to get money. The publishers assert that they are "important gatekeepers" because they employ the peer review process, which "cost[s] money and, by undermining the subscription model, open access threatens the revenues that have traditionally funded scientific publications" (Gwynne, 2013, p. 6). Gynne (2013) quotes H. Frederick Dylla, executive director and CEO of the American Institute of Physics, as saying that the subscriptions fund the efforts of the publications, from peer review to physical publishing to distribution, and "it all costs money" (p. 6). And one author phrased it, "Publishers deserve to make money, and their investors should see a return on their portfolios" (Harms, 2006, p. 6).

What I hear in this response to OA is that this mode of publication – traditional, subscription-based publishing – has always existed and must be protected. It cannot change. It has been with us since scholarly journals first began being published. Don't rock the boat, don't scare or upset the money-people, regardless of their intellectual or ethical investment in the process. (Also: when did scholarly publishing become about money? When did the money-people start having so much say in the process of scholarly communication?) Clearly this way of doing things is viable and doesn't need to change. But failure to change – to evolve – can often result in the death of an organism.

Furthermore, I am flummoxed by the ever-increasing costs of subscriptions to these journals and how these publishers continue to hold sway over libraries and institutions of higher learning. Kathleen Fitzpatrick (2012) noted during her keynote address to the Council of Editors of Learned Journals at the 2012 annual convention of the Modern Language Association that "early mobilization around open access focused primarily on the damage being done to university library budgets by a small number of corporate publishers who were accumulating vast numbers of scholarly journals" (p. 350). As noted earlier, there have been boycotts of these publishers in the recent past; however, it does not seem to have made enough of a difference, as journal subscriptions continue to skyrocket, a fact that also mystifies me, since most periodicals are mostly electronic now. Shouldn't prices be decreasing? It's true that the server space, software, and hardware that essentially compose most periodicals now also cost money…but as technology has become more and more affordable, and your average savvy techno-user can purchase space on servers for relatively cheap, I have to ask: what exactly are the subscription funds paying for?

The money issue disturbs me. It clearly divides users into haves and have-nots, and in the realm of research, in my opinion, that serves no one. It undermines the free flow of scholarly communication and hobbles researchers and scholars.

"I'm Skeered!"

I've also noticed amongst those new to the field of librarianship a certain trepidation when it comes to publishing. Either they fear outright rejection (which is often not accompanied by any explanation), or the whole process completely overwhelms them. The process of submission and revision is a mystery; the question of rights often never occurs to them. The reputation of the journals and publishers and the complexity of the system as a whole keep these potential authors at bay.

One of the ways traditional publishers have responded to the open access movement, which is also a way in which some OA journals fund themselves, is somewhat attractive to new librarian-scholars – authors pay page charges (Gwynne, 2013, p. 6). Yet this, too, in a time of dwindling library budgets and no raises, seems unfeasible to new librarians. This also creates a possible ethical problem – are authors really paying "page charges," or are they basically buying their way into a published piece of work? Bohannon (2013) touches on this model in his sting-cum-study; he notes that authors only pay if their articles are accepted…so wouldn't it be in the interest of the journals to accept as many submissions? How does this represent any kind of ethical quality control?

One of the benefits, as I see it, of *Codex* is that we don't have page charges. If you get published in this journal, it's because your work passed muster, not because you greased the journal's palm. You've been published based on the merits of your work

alone.

Furthermore, another benefit to publishing with *Codex* is that we aren't so big as to be impersonal. If you have questions, you can simply email me. If you aren't clear on a policy, or you need clarification regarding a suggested revision, you can get help with that. **One of the main reasons – perhaps the most significant reason – I started *Codex* was to help librarians navigate the publication process, to demystify it, to give them a chance to get their feet wet.** I want their experiences to be positive – meaningful, constructive feedback; freedom to ask questions; opportunities to explore and get involved in the publication process; opportunities to explore open access; and a way in which to participate and contribute to the field of librarianship.

My personal experiences with other (traditional) publications have NEVER been that positive, encouraging, or transparent.

In Closing…

I feel like I've probably sung the praises of *Codex* a little too frequently and a little too loudly, but I shan't apologize. I think *Codex* is a clear example of a journal that ethically and positively contributes to the reputation of open access. To me, an attack on OA is an attack on *Codex*, too. And while there may be bad apples in the bunch, they hardly ruin the whole barrel.

Thankfully, OA is gaining ground. Perhaps not as fast as those of us who support it would like, but it is gaining ground. In a time of dwindling budgets, which means decreasing access, OA can help solve resource issues and provide new avenues of access. No, it's not an easy battle to fight. As one campus case study noted, "The work of fostering an environment on campus in which interest in open access in principle can

move to a concrete willingness to take collective action is not easy" (Emmett, Stratton, Peterson, Church-Duran, & Haricombe, 2011, pp. 558-559).

But it is crucial to foment support for OA. With "expanding amounts of knowledge, shrinking budgets, and emerging technological modes of discovery and delivery of scholarly information" (Emmett et al., 2011, pp. 574-575), there are so many opportunities and possibilities that can be positively exploited to not only supplement library collections but also facilitate scholarly communication - to bring research and scholarship to the broadest possible audience (Fitzpatrick, 2012). Yes, we need to be careful. Yes, there needs to be oversight. As Davis (2013) observes, "It would be unfair to conclude from Bohannon's work that open access publishers, as a class, are untrustworthy and provide little (or no) quality assurance through peer review" but there are predatory titles out there that "willfully deceive authors and readers with false promises, descriptions copied verbatim from successful journals, and fake contact information." But again: these titles are the exception NOT the rule and in no way truly reflect the principles of open access.

So, while OA does have issues, it's still viable. Clearly it is no more or less susceptible to fraud or scandal than its traditional counterpart, and its benefits still outweigh its risks. I would like to see a more thorough and balanced examination of the submission and peer review processes in both traditional and open access publications, to shine a light on these issues and to encourage oversight. If as librarians we are gatekeepers, vetters, evaluators of information, then it is incumbent upon us to demand oversight, to demand quality, to demand accountability of the information providers we use and to whom we direct our users. I also see it as our job to seek out alternate avenues

of access and publication, to provide our users and ourselves, our libraries, with options,

and OA is one of those options.

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