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What's behind OA2020?

Accelerating the transition to open access with introspection and repurposing funds

In 2017, four University of California (UC) campuses took a public stance on accelerating the transition to open access (OA) by endorsing the Open Access 2020 (OA2020) initiative's Expression of Interest (EOI). OA2020 is an international effort to convert the existing corpus of scholarly journals from subscription-based access to OA. In March 2017, when the first three UC campuses—UC-Berkeley, UC-Davis, and UC-San Francisco—endorsed,[1,2] there had been only one U.S. signatory institution (California State University-Northridge, having endorsed in July 2016). Six months later in September 2017, another UC campus, Merced, added its affirmation. As of this writing, these five California universities remain the only OA2020 EOI signatories from the United States.[3]

In the months since signing, we have wondered, "Why only five?" Many U.S. institutions share our commitment to OA, and we believe these other institutions are likely moved by the same goal of democratizing access to knowledge resources that led our own universities to sign. As we discovered, however, when OA2020 was first announced in Europe then discussed among libraries in the United States, far too many messaging signals were crossed about how large-scale transition to OA could be achieved. American libraries interpreted the initial pitch as underscoring article processing charges (APCs) as the intended cost model—to the exclusion of many other potential OA publishing frameworks. Even within the ten-campus UC system, conflicting opinions about OA2020 remain.

As OA2020 proponents at signatory institutions, we believe the initiative has great promise for the broader OA movement, and are concerned that its uptake in the United States has suffered from misconceptions about what OA2020 represents. We directly take on lingering misunderstandings about OA2020 below. Hopefully, our explication reveals that OA2020 provides a versatile, community-specific, transformative opportunity to drive significant change in scholarly publishing towards OA, without prescribing any particular OA model.

Yet, even if we fail to succeed in correcting the record, our discussion postulates that OA2020's foundation—library intro-

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spection to determine sustainable OA business models, and subsequent repurposing of subscription funds to support them—is requisite for any institution truly committed to pursuing wide-scale transition to OA.

Origins of the miscommunication

The OA2020 initiative was established at the 12th Berlin Open Access conference in 2015. The annual Berlin Open Access conference[4] brings together thought leaders in the global OA movement, and is organized by the Max Planck Society, a German independent research organization comprised of 83 institutes across all disciplines. At the first such conference in 2003, delegates created the movement-framing Berlin Declaration on Open Access to Knowledge in Sciences and Humanities.[5]

In 2015, delegates assembled[6] to identify concrete actions that research organizations could take to affect an "incisive, feasible and rapid path toward an open information environment."[7] The result was the OA2020 initiative, which, as outlined above, proposed that institutions wishing to accelerate such a transformation should: 1) analyze what OA publishing models make sense for them, and 2) commit to repurposing current subscription funds to support sustainable OA publishing. To help institutions affirm support for this call to action, the Max Planck Digital Library (MPDL), a central unit of the Max Planck Society, created a nonbinding EOI.

Shortly thereafter, in April 2015, MPDL issued a white paper[8] explaining that money currently locked into paying journal subscriptions should be "withdrawn and repurposed for OA publishing services," and that current library acquisition budgets can provide the necessary payment streams. The white paper demonstrates that there is already enough money in the publishing system through global subscription investments to finance a flip to an "author-pays" OA system for the same content. The paper does not state that this be the single OA publishing model, but rather that the money already exists to achieve transition in this manner. The white paper is often cited in conjunction with OA2020, which has led some to believe that OA2020 advocates for an APC publishing model. Yet, OA2020 is entirely nonprescriptive with respect to how institutions might redirect subscription funds.

Furthermore, when MPDL announced OA2020, explanatory information on the initiative's website[9] focused on the transition from a European perspective. OA publishing in Europe predominantly functions under an APC-driven framework due to the ubiquity of government OA mandates, funding streams channeling OA payments to institutions, and national consortia that streamline subscription negotiations and which have led to more unified APC payment infrastructure. To help libraries with the reflection process, MDPL also drafted an OA2020 Roadmap,[10] referenced in the EOI, with sample issues that libraries could consider. Bearing the same Eurocentric hallmarks, suggested reflection points likewise referenced APCs and transitional offsetting agreements.

These promotional efforts led to some confusion, even among interested UC campuses. As we considered signing the EOI, we asked MPDL to clarify whether their Roadmap could be customized by institutions to enumerate local considerations for a given research organization or author community. Acknowledging that this had always been their intention, MPDL immediately updated its website to resolve that the nonbinding Roadmap merely sets forth the types of considerations institutions might need to make, and have continued to refine the website to articulate a multiplicity of OA approaches. Yet for many U.S. organizations that had begun reviewing OA2020, misunderstanding had already set in.

Why OA2020?

We hope this chronology resolves questions of OA2020's premise. We wish now

to explain how OA2020's foundation of reflection and repurposing is essential to any large-scale OA transition.

The global OA movement is well past establishing the viability and potential of OA scholarly journals to provide immediate and worldwide access to the scholarly record. Making everything freely available to everyone is a shared goal of the OA community, yet a majority of the scholarly record remains in closed, subscription-funded outlets. In many respects, libraries perpetuate the biggest roadblock to transformative change, regularly recommitting to expensive, restrictive, multiyear agreements that lock in these subscription-funded, closed access scholarly publishing models. To be clear, none of us wants to replace this current unsustainable system with another unsustainable one that perpetuates the financial and intellectual dominance of any given commercial publisher.

Instead, we want to achieve meaningful and transformative change to advance OA as the rule. But in the current ecosystem where most of our money goes to pay subscriptions, scholarly institutions committed to OA must ask themselves how they can use increasingly scarce resources to reach this goal. The United States contributes approximately 50% of worldwide journal subscription revenue[11] and has substantial potential to influence this market. A truly revolutionary solution is for all of us in unison to shift the majority of our money away from subscriptions and toward new OA models. This is precisely why we endorsed the OA2020 EOI, which we believe presents a path to take this next step. We signed because we would regret missing this bold opportunity to leverage the collective power of the whole world, letting the anxious attention of commercial publishers slip away, and failing to seize the moment to reshape scholarly communication fundamentally.

We recognize there are many approaches for implementing OA, and we believe that OA2020 will enable such diversity to flourish by allowing us to transition funds now spent on closed, subscription journals to OA publishing. This core principle of OA2020, combined with the global, collaborative approach, is what motivated us to sign. In our view, the OA2020 initiative can and must also include many, if not all, possible OA models and strategies. With enough key and diverse U.S. stakeholders around the table, we can create local and national roadmaps that will be distinctly different from what was originally envisioned by the MPDL Roadmap or white paper. While APCs might be suitable for some countries, disciplines, journals, and/or publishers, for others to achieve sustainability and success, we will also need a mixture of alternative, non-APC-based OA models.

We also think OA2020 makes a compelling case for how we can transition existing journals to OA. Many institutions, including ours, are considering the viability of infrastructural investments in repositories and the creation of new OA overlay journals as one pathway forward. Yet, a large segment of scholars will continue to prefer existing journals due to their long histories, associations with professional societies, well-known editorial boards, or high-impact factors. Addressing how to repurpose funds to transition such journals thus remains critical for responding to author publishing preferences and building community support for the shift to OA.

Finally, we signed because we believe that OA2020's principles, goals, and motivations embrace the pluralistic approach of the global OA movement. While there certainly are OA2020 stakeholders committed to moving forward with an APC-driven transformation of the existing literature, this approach is only one example of how today's subscription funds can be repurposed toward OA ends. We do not see available OA models as mutually exclusive, but rather as complementary efforts in the service of open scholarship.

Next steps

We expect conversations around OA to remain contentious, and for institutional perspective to remain varied. Indeed, we must have a diverse set of insights and criticisms to undertake this ambitious project properly, and we hope to keep growing the community to ensure we do not miss the needs of those not yet involved. Our intention is to make certain we do not leave anybody behind or replace one economic barrier with another as we work together to reconstruct the publishing landscape.

Mindful, imaginative pluralism is a welcome and central component of OA transformation—one which we champion fully as OA2020 signatories, and which we believe the initiative itself can entirely encompass, as well. Our community need not, and should not, be distracted by partisanship and divisiveness on the various paths to a more open future. As long as those paths converge on the common goals of breaking our dependence on subscriptions, making scholarship OA, and enabling institutions to repurpose billions of dollars in resources to support new and transformative OA publishing models, then we can call it whatever we want.

There is no reason, however, why all sustainable OA models cannot be included under the OA2020 rubric. Worldwide consensus and collaboration on the core mechanisms—reflection on sustainable models and repurposing of subscription funds to support them—are essential to realizing change. If you find the reasoning here persuasive and wish to consider endorsing OA2020, we have compiled documentation on the OA2020.us site to reveal what the process involved for us.[12]

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Notes

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