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Book Review: Open and Equitable Scholarly Communications: Creating a More Inclusive Future

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Book Review: *Open and Equitable Scholarly Communications: Creating a More Inclusive Future*

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There is an inherent tension to the central argument of *Open and Equitable Scholarly Communications: Creating a More Inclusive Future*. Scholarly communication (and specifically peer review) are inherently exclusive, but here the ACRL (Association of College and Research Libraries) is trying to work out what a more inclusive version would look like. How can a gatekeeping process become more open, while continuing to perform its primary function?

This report presents a research agenda for the field of Scholarly Communications within research libraries. It divides its subject into three main themes – People, Content, and Systems – and considers for each a variety of areas of progress, research practical actions, and next directions for research. This current research agenda is a follow up to another report issued by the ACRL in 2007, *Establishing a Research Agenda for Scholarly Communication: A Call for Community Engagement*. Where the previous work examined existing and emerging themes in the profession, this report looks forward, anticipating and suggesting future directions, and deliberately trying to change the course of the profession, to bend it towards equity. It also operates in an explicit framework of social justice, a framework it articulates in the first of several valuable appendices.

As a scholarly publication about scholarly publication, it takes a number of opportunities for praxis: demonstrating the open, equitable, inclusive scholarly communication it advocates for. These choices are particularly marked when contrasted with the 2007 version. Where the earlier report was developed by "a selective group of principals from leading not-for-profit organizations attuned to North American academic libraries" (ACRL 2007, 3) crafting the new agenda was broadly consultative and thereby inclusive. In addition to an extensive literature review, the current report uses not only expert interviews, but also focus groups and workshops. They sought input at all stages of the work, from defining their basic terminology (workshopping their definitions of "open", "equitable", and "inclusive" with hundreds of participants) to releasing a draft for public comment before releasing the final report.

In addition to their attempts at inclusivity, the authors also demonstrate openness. Like the earlier report, the final version of this report is available freely online, but the authors of the new report are also considerably more open about their process. The appendices include not only a basic methodology and list of participants, but the full survey results and analysis, and even the text used in invitations to participate and workshops. This kind of openness works on two levels: it both welcomes scrutiny of the equity and inclusiveness of the project and also pulls back the curtain on the scholarly process to a potential reader who isn't embedded in the profession. While this research agenda is explicitly a call to action to people working in scholarly communications, the document itself could also be useful to those on the outside, looking in. It both demonstrates how the profession operates now and gestures toward a more open future.

Because the appendices make up the bulk of the document (more than three quarters of the page count) they merit some discussion on their own. While most of them are only useful as context for understanding the research agenda itself, the final appendix, "Recommended Readings", is also valuable as a stand-alone document. Organized by the same topics and sub-topics as the research agenda itself, the appendix lists hundreds of readings on the ideas of openness, equity and inclusion in the field of scholarly communications (and libraries more broadly) and provides a one- or two-sentence summary of each. This is likely intended to contextualize the authors' approach to and understanding of the issues, but it would also be a great place for a novice reader trying to understand the state of the field to start. The inclusion of the synopses is another type of lowering the barriers for outsiders.

The tension between gatekeeping and openness quietly undergirds the entire report, but it breaks through from subtext into the text in a couple of places. The first is at the very beginning, when reporting some individual responses to their

initial definition of open which "refers to removing barriers to access, especially to the tools of production of scholarly content and to the outputs of that work"; to which one respondent replied "*Why only scholarly*?" (3). The authors leave this question unanswered here, but come closer to addressing this fundamental tension in the section about the relationship between publication and promotion and tenure. One of their suggested areas of progress under the topic of content is "reward in the PRT process of different types of output" (16). In both cases, this feels like less of a call to abandon the entire project of scholarly communication, but instead to carefully consider where the barriers of "scholarly" and "scholarly communication" should rightly be. This is not a call to end gatekeeping, but to carefully consider who minds the gate, and what should be inside of the fence.

It is in the nature of a research agenda to raise more questions than it answers, and this report achieves a good balance of defining the current ground and suggesting a future direction. In it, scholarly communication professionals will find guidance towards research topics that will improve openness and equity in the field, but novices will find a clear portrait of where the field is now and where it could move in a future that includes voices and perspectives that have historically been left out of the discussion.

REFERENCES

ACRL Scholarly Communications Committee. 2007. "Establishing a Research Agenda for Scholarly Communication: A Call for Community Engagement." Association of College and Research Libraries. http://www.ala.org/acrl/sites/ala.org.acrl/files/content/issues/scholcomm/SCResearchAgenda.pdf.