

Portrait of Canadian scholarly journals

Summary

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This document summarizes an open-access study entitled “Canadian scholarly journals in the humanities and social sciences” published in 2021 [in French](#) and [in English](#).

Led by Université de Montréal professor Vincent Larivière — who holds the [Canada Research Chair on the Transformations of Scholarly Communication](#)— a team of consultants and staff members from the research group at Érudit collected data throughout 2019-2020.

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Introduction

For more than two decades, digital technologies have been shaking up how academic publishing is being used. Indeed, existing funding models, both in Canada and abroad, are being called into question by the transition towards open access, which is picking up steam and seems well on track to become standard practice. Ambitious initiatives like Plan S¹ are both a driver of and a testament to these transformations.

The current pandemic appears to be hastening this rapid uptake of open access. Yet, the various stakeholders are still adjusting to the economic and structural issues it raises, be they learned societies, funding agencies, university presses and libraries, or the journals themselves.

¹ Plan S.

<https://www.coalition-s.org/>



Methodology

We collected and analyzed two types of data to shed light on certain key elements of the state of academic journal publication in Canada:

- Quantitative data was extracted from a variety of sources to establish the number of active academic journals in the country as well as their discipline, forms of access, publishers, language of publication, etc. This data comes mainly from Ulrichsweb, the online version of Ulrich's Periodicals Directory.
- Qualitative data, collected by surveying a non-representative sample of twelve scholarly journals in the humanities and social sciences (HSS), sheds light on their finances and organizational practices.

To learn more about the study's methodology, see Appendix 1 on pages 32-33 of the study.

Quantitative portrait

Our study identified **825 Canadian scholarly journals active in 2019**. Of this number, 611 (74%) are in HSS and 214 (26%) in science, technology and medicine (STM). In comparison to STM journals, whose research and publishing networks have long been globalized, Canadian HSS periodicals are more closely integrated in the research cycle.

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OPEN ACCESS

The proportion of open-access journals is actually the same in HSS and in STM in **Canada, i.e. 45%**. The others are published under restricted access, delayed open access, or hybrid open access. In this last category, journals grant access to articles through subscriptions except those for which authors have paid article processing charges (APCs) in order to make them freely available.

To learn more, see pages 8-12 of the study.

DISSEMINATION

The Canadian academic publishing landscape differs markedly from the more oligopolistic situation internationally. Indeed, there is **very low concentration in scholarly publishing organizations and the vast majority are still affiliated to universities**. This inventory of the state of scholarly dissemination confirms the modest share of Canadian journals

held by the five big commercial publishers —Wiley, SAGE, Elsevier, Taylor & Francis, and SpringerNature.

In HSS, periodicals are available mainly through the managing and publishing software **Open Journal Systems (OJS)** —designed and maintained by the Public Knowledge Project— **Érudit’s dissemination platform**, or **via their own websites**.

To learn more, see pages 12-15 of the study.

LANGUAGES OF PUBLICATION

As expected given global trends, our findings show English is the dominant language of publication in both STM and HSS. French speakers make up about 20% of the Canadian population, but the percentage of **French-only journals is just 11% in HSS and 5% in STM**.

The proportion of **journals that publish only in English is 43% in HSS and 60% in STM**. **Bilingualism is taken up by 41% of journals in HSS and 34% in STM**. Bilingual journals do however tend to publish more articles in English than in French.

The interviews conducted with journals revealed a tension between their **desire to publish in French and the actual costs of bilingualism**, be they financial (related to copyediting and proofreading) or symbolic (stemming from the fact that English-language indexes are the main sources used to establish rankings).

Indigenous languages are absent from academic publishing in Canada.

To learn more, see pages 15-17 of the study.

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Qualitative portrait

We conducted a study on a non-representative sample of twelve scholarly journals representing a diverse cross-section of Canadian academic publishing. Data pertaining to their management and operations was gathered through interviews led by independent external consultants. Participating journals were asked to record their financial information on a standardized form. The consultants subsequently validated it in close collaboration with the journals’ editors.

To learn more about the twelve journals in the sample, see pages 35 to 49 of Appendix 2 in the study

TWO MAIN SOURCES OF REVENUE

The journals have access to two major sources of revenue: grants and commercialization. The journals in the sample have extremely variable **gross revenues that range between \$17,000 and \$119,500 per year**. Between 2014 and 2017, the Canadian yearly average was less than \$100,000.

Generally, the poorest journals publish the least articles per year (less than 20). Over a certain level, the correlation between revenue and the number of articles published dissipates.

Grants come mainly from two public funding agencies, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) and the Fonds de recherche du Québec - Société et culture (FRQSC), and at times from other academic institutions. **For the majority of journals, grants are essential and represent anywhere between half to all of their revenue.**

Commercialization revenue can vary. Periodicals operating without grants can rely, on the one hand, on APCs and resources from the research milieu (health) and, on the other hand, on agreements with commercial publishers. In the study, five out of twelve journals stated that their subscription earnings (commercialization) remain important, for print and/or digital formats depending on the case.

Journals seem to have a more detailed understanding of their revenues than of their expenses. The latter are more often incurred according to known revenues, which is how they maintain a certain financial balance.

To learn more, see pages 19-21 of the study.

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THE IMPORTANCE OF STAFFING

Scholarly journals depend on the labour of highly qualified people for their existence and production. **The costs of physically producing a journal are negligible compared to editors' ability to pursue its editorial mission.**

In reality, as the analysis of our study shows, the bulk of the expenses of the participating journals stem from personnel costs, in particular the compensation of editorial assistants and copyeditors.

Access to course releases is not systematic. The lack of released time when one accepts to take on a mandate causes work overload and devalues the duties of journal editors. This situation seems to have a direct impact on journals' ability to engage in succession planning and to make journal editorship attractive.

To learn more, see pages 23-26 of the study.

Conclusion

Our study identified 825 active scholarly journals in Canada, three quarters of which are in HSS. The data collected shows a low rate of French-language publication, with French-only journals representing just 11% of HSS journals and 5% in STM. By contrast, the country's French-speaking population sits at around 20%. When the data was collected, 45% of Canadian periodicals were open access. They were mainly published by non-commercial publishers affiliated to learned societies or university presses, faculties, or libraries.

The data collected during the study confirmed and detailed some of the conclusions of our study "Shaping a Collective Future"² published in 2015 (also available in French, "Bâtir un avenir commun"³), for instance concerning journals' sources of revenue and levels of funding.

The interviews conducted shed light on the financial needs of journals given how low their revenues are. Grants and subscriptions are still their two main sources of revenue. The interviews also surfaced a need for more support and cutting-edge expertise rooted in a genuine desire to see increased dialogue between journals and the institutions that support them.

2 Paquin, E. « Shaping a Collective Future: An Investigation into Canadian Scholarly Journals' Socio-Economic Reality and an Outlook on the Partnership Model for Open Access ». http://www.erudit.org/public/documents/Canadian_Journals_Socio-Economic_Study.pdf

3 Paquin, E. « Bâtir un avenir commun. Enquête sur la réalité socio-économique des revues savantes canadiennes et aperçu du modèle de partenariat pour la diffusion en libre accès ». http://www.erudit.org/public/documents/etude_socio-economique_revues_savantes_canadiennes.pdf