

Kathleen Fitzpatrick

# Openness, value, and scholarly societies

## The Modern Language Association model

In 2011, the Modern Language Association (MLA) established a new office of scholarly communication and began a series of experiments in ways of supporting the open exchange of scholarly work among its members. While the office and its platforms are new, the motivating force behind the office is not. From the beginning, scholarly societies were designed to play a crucial role in facilitating communication between scholars working on common subjects. The Royal Society of London, for instance, was founded in the mid-17th century as a means of helping the “invisible college” of natural philosophers attain visibility; the society met weekly to discuss experiments and their results, and its members worked together to extend knowledge of the natural world.<sup>1</sup> These face-to-face meetings were supplemented by an active correspondence among the members; their mode of communication gradually shifted from letters sent between individual members to correspondence gathered, reproduced, and distributed by the society. The society thus became a formal structure whose goal was to improve the circulation of the research of its members, furthering the knowledge that they produced and advancing their common work. Such has been true for every learned society founded since that time. Facilitating scholarly communication, in other words, is exactly what societies such as these were founded to do.

The letters that were exchanged among the membership of the Royal Society in the mid-17th century, and that were later gathered into journals, gradually accrued formalized processes of review, editing, production, and distribution.

In creating this new product—the scholarly journal—learned societies found one part of the financial model that would allow them to serve their larger goals. Scholars were encouraged to join and maintain their memberships in order to receive the journal. In addition to memberships made available to individuals, journal subscriptions were created for libraries, allowing academic institutions to help support the organizations that facilitated, validated, and circulated the work of their faculty members.

Today, however, many scholarly societies, like many academic institutions, are facing challenging times. Maintaining a membership in one’s disciplinary organization was once thought of as a core component of what it was to be a professional, but the changing funding environment, the increasing casualization of the academic workforce, and the ease of creating direct ties among individual colleagues in online social networking systems have contributed to the tenuous relationships that many scholars feel to their organizations today. Scholarly societies thus face rising costs and declining memberships, causing them to rely increasingly on income from publications—at precisely the moment that they face increasing expectations among scholars that information and communication

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Kathleen Fitzpatrick is director of scholarly communication for the Modern Language Association, e-mail: [kfitzpatrick@mla.org](mailto:kfitzpatrick@mla.org)

Contact Claire Stewart—series editor, head of digital collections and scholarly communication service at Northwestern University—with article ideas, e-mail: [claire-stewart@northwestern.edu](mailto:claire-stewart@northwestern.edu)

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will exist in open spaces online. Increasing calls for open access to scholarship are posing serious challenges to the financial models that have allowed scholarly societies to fund the nonrevenue generating projects that they have established on behalf of their members.

Together, these twin pressures—the need to enhance the ties between scholars and their organizations while simultaneously doing more with less—begin to suggest that the traditional value proposition of the scholarly society, in which one becomes a member in order to receive the various communications of the society, is no longer as viable as it once was. But there isn't a clear sense, as yet, of where the society's value for its members today, not to mention its sources of revenue that allow it to fulfill its mission, might lie. In order to find a way forward, today's scholarly societies must begin to think differently about their functions, their structures, and their overall goals.

Some scholars respond to the situation that societies find themselves in by saying, well, if these organizations can't figure out where their

value lies in an era of networked communication, good riddance. But disciplinary organizations serve a crucial (if too often invisible) role in the lives of scholars, assisting them in articulating and supporting their professional values and promoting better understandings of the ways their fields work, both within their members' institutions and across the broader culture. Scholarly societies work with and through their members to develop and disseminate standards for professional development; for the evaluation of scholarly work; for processes of hiring, review, and retention; for the development and support of curricula; and more. None of this work is—or should be—revenue-producing, and it's often conducted in a seamless enough way that members don't quite see the tie between their support for the association and this work done on their behalf.

So if the value of a society to its membership no longer lies in access to its otherwise revenue-producing publications—if, in fact, many members want scholarship to be distributed in a way that will greatly reduce if not



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eliminate its ability to produce revenue—and if the other crucial work of the society supported by that revenue is often too invisible to constitute a new locus of value that will keep scholars renewing their memberships year after year, where might a new value proposition lie for scholarly societies?

Many, if not most, scholarly societies would be happy to embrace open access, if they could afford to do so without disrupting the other activities in which they engage on behalf of their members. As the Open Society Institute noted in 2005, scholarly societies are “natural” open access publishers. However, that same report went on to note that “once a journal is basically online-only and abolishes print (perhaps just having a print edition available on demand, at an extra cost), there is no reason why traditional page charges cannot become article processing charges and pay for open access.”<sup>2</sup> But of course “traditional page charges” have primarily applied to scientific journals and the journals of other fields in which grant support to researchers made possible passing some of the costs of producing the journal their way. In those fields, shifting from a subscription model to an author-pays model has been a relatively simple affair. This is not so, of course, in the humanities and much of the social sciences, where researcher grant support is small and comparatively rare, and where page charges have never been traditional. The editorial, production, and distribution processes for such journals still result in significant costs, and those costs cannot be passed back to authors.

Of course, author-pays journals represent only one model for increasing public access to scholarship, a model most closely aligned with what has been called the “gold” road to open access. There are other models that societies can and should explore, including the “green” road provided by institutional repositories and other kinds of scholarly archives. These repositories can gather, preserve, and make available a range of kinds of work, including working papers, data sets, and other gray literature, but they can also house preprints of more traditional publications. Preprints provide the

potential for broad public access to scholarly work while allowing the editorial function of crafting journal issues to continue to thrive; links from individual articles in repositories to their sites of publication can drive interest in, and demand for, those publications, even while the scholarly content of those articles is broadly publicly accessible.

In this vein, MLA has chosen two first steps toward ensuring public access to the work published by the organization. First, we have recently revised all of our author agreements to make them gold open access friendly, and, second, we are developing a platform through which members can share their work as openly as they might like, allowing that work to reach not only their colleagues but also interested members of the public.

Our revised author agreements no longer require scholars to sign over copyright to the association; copyright instead remains with the author, who grants the association a license to publish their work (as well as to perform a range of related tasks with it). This license is exclusive for one year after the date of publication, after which period the author is free to republish or distribute the work in any form or manner desired. Moreover, these contracts explicitly grant authors the right to post a draft version of their work on a personal or departmental Web site prior to publication, and to post their final manuscript on such a Web site, or to deposit it in an institutional repository immediately upon acceptance. In this way, we hope to allow our journals to remain vital, scrupulously reviewed and carefully edited publications, while simultaneously helping our authors get their work into the broadest possible circulation.

Facilitating this broad circulation is a new mandate—or a revitalized old mandate—for today’s scholarly society. To further this goal, a new platform, MLA Commons, will launch at the 2013 MLA Annual Convention in Boston, allowing us to support a range of kinds of member-to-member communication.

Working with the generous support of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, and in collaboration with the CUNY Academic Com-

mons team, MLA is building a network based on proven open-source software (primarily WordPress and BuddyPress) that will support members as they share work in progress, find other members with whom to discuss their work and collaborate on new projects, form new kinds of working groups, develop new publications that are as publicly accessible as they wish, and so on. We understand MLA Commons as one key to the new value proposition for scholarly societies, in which members join the association less in order to receive its communications than to participate in them, to be part of the conversation, and to have their work circulated with the work being done in their community of practice.

Moreover, a key component of this new locus of value for the scholarly society lies in the kinds of validation and credentialing that a society can provide. As Cameron Neylon has suggested, disciplinary organizations have a crucial role to play in the process of developing new forms of peer review for new forms of scholarship: "The unique offering that a society brings is the aggregation and organization of expert attention."<sup>3</sup>

Societies are above all communities, or clusters of communities, that gather experts in particular fields or subfields in the common project of sharing, discussing, and improving their work. These scholars, in direct, open communication with one another, will be in the best possible position to develop and implement the standards that scholars and their institutions require for the evaluation of new kinds of scholarly projects.

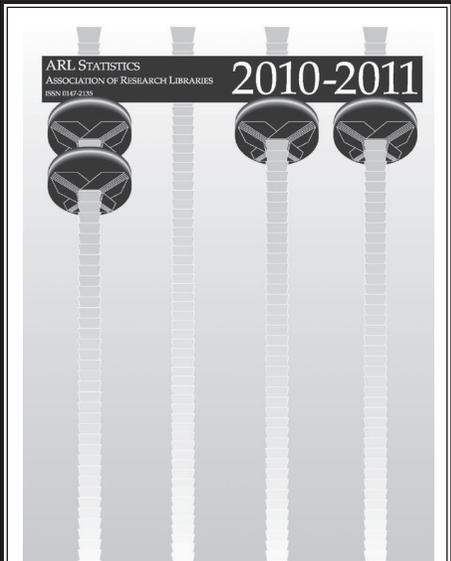
We hope that MLA Commons will provide a robust space in which the society can engage directly with its members in building its new value proposition, in discussing the means through which the society can flourish. We also look forward to inviting other such societies to the table, opening our platform to them and fostering new kinds of interdisciplinary and inter-society collaborations.

None of this is easy; no reorganization or reorientation can be undertaken without risk, and none can be accomplished without significant investments of labor. Societies such

as MLA will need the continued dedication of its members, and the support of academic institutions, if we are to find a new model that facilitates the important work ahead. But we're confident that, working with our members, we can create a more open, more robust, more productive association, and in so doing that we can facilitate even better communication for our members in the years to come.

## Notes

1. Royal Society, "History," <http://royalsociety.org/about-us/history/>.
2. Open Society Institute, "Open Access Publishing and Scholarly Societies: A Guide," July 2005, pp. 9–10, [www.opensocietyfoundations.org/openaccess/pdf/open\\_access\\_publishing\\_and\\_scholarly\\_societies.pdf](http://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/openaccess/pdf/open_access_publishing_and_scholarly_societies.pdf).
3. Cameron Neylon, "The Challenge for Scholarly Societies," *Science in the Open*, 22 July 2012, <http://cameronneylon.net/blog/the-challenge-for-scholarly-societies/>. *zz*



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