

The Crisis in Scholarly Communication.

For many years, increases in the prices of library materials in all formats (including more recently electronic) have generally exceeded—sometimes significantly—increases in library acquisitions budgets. Libraries have worked hard to minimize the effects of this imbalance, but we are now reaching a point at which many institutions, including Cornell, are no longer able to provide access to some standard materials needed for instruction and research.

The Problem

As information from the Association of Research Libraries shows (<http://www.arl.org/stats/arlstat/graphs/2000t2.html>), the top research libraries in North American have been spending ever more money on ever fewer publications for at least the past fifteen years: the prices of serials have increased by 226%, library expenditures on serials have gone up by 192%, and the serials titles purchased by large academic research libraries have decreased by 7%. The Consumer Price Index during the same period has increased by only 57%.

At Cornell, Ithaca campus library budgets for materials have increased by 149% during approximately the same period, but serials purchased have increased by only 5%—at a time when the number of serials published has increased by ca. 138%. The contract colleges subscribe to 14% fewer serials than they did fifteen years ago, even though their combined library acquisitions budgets have increased over the past fifteen years by 117%. The Cornell libraries are therefore providing access to an increasingly smaller portion of the scholarly information that is being published.

The Reasons

There are several reasons for this problematic condition. One is certainly the growing commercialization of scholarly publishing, especially in the sciences and social sciences. Commercial publishers charge more for their materials than scholarly societies or university presses. Elsevier, which publishes mainly science journals, is the best example. Approximately 2% of the serials we now subscribe to are published by Elsevier, but ca. 25% of our serials budget is spent on Elsevier journals. This year we must cancel some Elsevier journals, because they are extremely expensive and are not needed nearly as much by Cornell scholars and students as some other publications—but Elsevier uses a pricing structure called “bundling.” Simply put, if we cancel any journals we presently subscribe to (without subscribing to other Elsevier journals of like price), the prices of the journals we keep will increase substantially, so that the publisher will lose as little revenue as possible.

There are other reasons for this crisis, however, besides commercialization. Perhaps the most important of these is the fact that the costs of publishing materials in traditional form are increasing to a point that in some disciplines it is becoming ever more difficult for scholarship to be published in a timely and useful fashion. The Modern Language Association has recently

undertaken a study of university press monographic publishing, and has found that university presses are being forced to reject high quality scholarship submitted for publication, because they can no longer afford to publish such work.

Another major pressure is the need for the research library to purchase materials in both traditional (mainly paper) and electronic form. The substantial advantages of electronic materials to scholarship (in terms of storage, transfer, and manipulation) are unquestionable, and the Cornell Library, like all major research libraries, is investing heavily in digital holdings. At the same time, however, we must still purchase traditional materials—and the need for such traditional materials in many disciplines is not declining, despite the increased availability of (and need for) digital publications and databases. We will likely remain in this age of transition from traditional to digital for many years to come--and the need to build in effect two libraries, one in paper and one in online form, will remain very costly.

The Solutions

First, we need to develop methods to increase funding for library materials, both in terms of regular University general purpose funding, and by placing greater emphasis on library materials in fund raising.

Second, and equally important, we need to reduce the costs of library materials. This can be accomplished in part by relying far less heavily on commercial publications, and by working with scholarly societies and university presses to ensure that they are able to publish quality scholarship at reasonable prices. There is also a need for scholars to review the methods presently used for the exchange of scholarly information in their individual disciplines, and to consider what alternatives might be practicable. There are many initiatives now underway to study or facilitate such alternatives in scholarly publishing. See, for example, Berkeley's eScholarship (<http://escholarship.cdlib.org/>), Cornell's e-print arXiv (<http://arxiv.org/>), and the Budapest Open Access Initiative (<http://www.soros.org/openaccess/>). See also Cornell's Technical Report Institutional Archive at <http://techreports.library.cornell.edu>, as well as Raym Crow's The Case for Institutional Repositories at <http://www.arl.org/sparc/IR/ir.html>.

For an analysis of the crisis in scholarly publication, see two works by Jean-Claude Guéron:

"Beyond Core Journals and Licenses: The Paths to Reform Scientific Publishing" (ARL Newsletter 218): <http://www.arl.org/newsltr/218/guedon.html>.

and

In Oldenburg's Long Shadow: Librarians, Research Scientists, Publishers, and the Control of Scientific Publishing: <http://www.arl.org/arl/proceedings/138/guedon.html>

Professor Guéron will be visiting Cornell on 11 October, and will be giving a public presentation on the subject of the crisis in scholarly publishing.

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[A note on the source of this document](#)

The text of this document was obtained from an archival copy (Wayback machine) of a Cornell University Library website (accessed February 9, 2022).

Original (defunct) URL:

<http://collectiondevelopment.library.cornell.edu/StatementOnCrisis.htm>

A date of 2005 is inferred from the date of Professor Jean-Claude Guedon's visit (Oct. 11, no year) and the date of the Janus Conference (Oct. 9-11, 2005), at which Guedon was a speaker. It is provided here for historical context on open access and scholarly communication initiatives and statements at Cornell University, and this copy should not be considered an official university record.