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Intersections

Ethics and Access 2: The So-Called Sting

Call it The Bohannon Hoax or call it The OA Sting. In either case, the story revolves around “Who’s Afraid of Peer Review?” by John Bohannon, which [appeared October 4, 2013](#) in *Science*. As the link indicates, it’s freely available. It’s from the News section, not a peer-reviewed article. Here’s the tease:

A spoof paper concocted by *Science* reveals little or no scrutiny at many open-access journals.

Assuming you read last issue’s essay, you may believe I’m about to excoriate Bohannon’s piece as a terrible, horrible no-good piece of attack journalism.

You’d be wrong.

It’s a well-written, interesting piece of work, and I believe John Bohannon has demonstrated that there are a fair number of journals—more than 150, at least—with, at least for one paper, sloppy or missing peer review practices (or at least sloppy peer reviewers).

This does not surprise me.

All of the journals “stung” by Bohannon’s phony papers are gold OA journals with article processing charges.

Therefore, gold OA journals with article processing charges are unusually likely to have poor (or no) peer review practices? Well, no. You can’t draw that conclusion, for several reasons, including this one: Bohannon only submitted the phony papers to gold OA journals with article processing charges.

Over the past 10 months, I have submitted 304 versions of the wonder drug paper to open-access journals. More than half of the journals accepted the paper, failing to notice its fatal flaws. Beyond that headline result, the data from this sting operation reveal the contours of an emerging Wild West in academic publishing.

My first reaction was astonishment that there are more than 300 journals for which a specific paper would be appropriate—and there must be many more than that. My second is to wonder just what the paper actually looks like. Exploring a little, I find that there is [a downloadable 15MB .zip file](#) containing all of the papers, so it’s possible to read them.

I read one, but of course I’m not a scientist. It strikes me that Bohannon’s description of the implausibility of the paper to any *experienced* reviewer *might* be right, although some commenters raise interesting questions as to how implausible the paper actually is.

The last sentence in the quote above, though: I’m not sure that’s justified. The study revealed 157 journals with problems in peer review practices. I don’t know that it reveals *anything* more than that. I believe it’s important to note up front that *Science* explicitly endorses the study, if only by the tease—a tease that says *Science* concocted the paper, not an independent freelance journalist. So *Science* has to take at least as much responsibility for the quality of this study as it does for, say, articles about arsenic-based life...

If you haven’t already read Bohannon’s piece, [go read it now](#). I’ll wait.

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A little nitpicking

Back? Good. Let’s do a little nitpicking:

From humble and idealistic beginnings a decade ago, open-access scientific journals have mushroomed into a global industry, driven by author publication fees rather than traditional subscriptions. Most of the players are murky.

The first OA journal appeared in 1987. There have been OA scientific journals since *at least* 1993 and probably before. Most OA journals do not charge author publication fees.

The final sentence is at best questionable. I see no signs that Bohannon has checked out *most* of the

“players” in OA. Similarly, Bohannon does *not* establish that India is “the world’s largest base for open-access publishing” (elsewhere in the piece); he establishes that one-third of the journals *he targeted* are based in India.

Then there’s what I’m now thinking of as “the Gold Standard for intentionally *misdefining* gold OA.” To quote Bohannon:

The rest use the standard open-access “gold” model: The author pays a fee if the paper is published.

This is a false statement, one that even editors for the news section of a supposedly prestigious journal should have caught. *Most gold OA journals don’t charge article processing charges.* (I believe it’s also still true that a higher percentage of subscription journals charge author-side fees than the percentage of gold OA journals with such fees.)

Also true: “the author pays a fee” oversimplifies and misdescribes the reality. But since the statement is blatantly false in any case, its inclusion can only be read as a form of FUD aimed at gold OA (and, given Bohannon’s general attempt to make it seem as though *all* OA is composed of author-paid journals, FUD aimed at OA itself).

What is true: Bohannon only looked at gold OA journals that charge APCs. If I do a study of four-legged animals but restrict that study to marsupials, it’s quite probable that I’ll find that they carry their young in a pouch. If I conclude from that “all (or even most) four-legged animals carry their young in a pouch,” I’m overgeneralizing.

Now consider this paragraph:

To generate a comprehensive list of journals for my investigation, I filtered the DOAJ, eliminating those not published in English and those without standard open-access fees. I was left with 2054 journals associated with 438 publishers. Beall’s list, which I scraped from his website on 4 October 2012, named 181 publishers. The overlap was 35 publishers, meaning that one in five of Beall’s “predatory” publishers had managed to get at least one of their journals into the DOAJ.

As explained in the next paragraph, his final list was 167 publishers from DOAJ (the *Directory of Open Access Journals*), 121 from Beall’s list but *not* DOAJ and 16 in both. At least so far, I’ve never assumed that inclusion in DOAJ was some kind of gold standard, but it’s reasonable to assume that *not* being in DOAJ is a little suspicious. So, right off the bat, roughly 40% of his targets are likely candidates. (It’s never quite clear in Bohannon’s articles what percentage of acceptances came from journals listed in

DOAJ, although you could figure that out with enough work. See the final section of this discussion.)

Looking at the results and implications

Consider some of the results. A journal owned by Wolters Kluwer accepted the article. So did journals published by Elsevier and Sage. On the other hand, *PLoS One* rejected the article—as did journals published by Hindawi (Bohannon calls this result, where *two* different Hindawi journals rejected the article, “dodg[ing] the bullet”—a slightly snarky way of saying that they behaved appropriately! I wonder if Bohannon says subscription journals have “dodged the bullet” each time they reject articles?)

Then there’s this:

The results show that Beall is good at spotting publishers with poor quality control: For the publishers on his list that completed the review process, 82% accepted the paper. Of course that also means that almost one in five on his list did the right thing—at least with my submission.

That final clause is, like “dodging the bullet,” a needless piece of editorializing, suggesting that the journals *might* be defective but got it right this time. Still: *One out of five* journals denounced by Beall as predatory showed themselves to have appropriate review processes in this case, which to me is a pretty strong sign that they’re *not* predatory. Getting it wrong 18% of the time might get you a driver’s license but is pretty sad if you’ve defined yourself as the prosecutor, judge and jury of predatory publishing.

I *do* believe Bohannon has come up with a strong indicator of scammy journals, although it’s one that requires a little research: Namely, “geographic fraud”: journals that claim to be American or European but are in fact not published in America or Europe and have no significant American or European editorial presence. On the other hand, one of his examples is simply wrong: He holds up as an example of geographic fraud the *European Journal of Chemistry*. The editor of that journal is in Turkey. Guess what? *Turkey is partially in Europe.*

Here’s the paragraph that reveals the most glaring issue with this whole sting:

From the start of this sting, I have conferred with a small group of scientists who care deeply about open access. Some say that the open-access model itself is not to blame for the poor quality control revealed by *Science’s* investigation. If I had targeted traditional, subscription-based journals, Roos told me, “I strongly suspect you would get the same result.” But open access has multiplied that

underclass of journals, and the number of papers they publish. “Everyone agrees that open-access is a good thing,” Roos says. “The question is how to achieve it.” [Emphasis added.]

What *would* happen if similar articles were submitted to 304 traditional journals? I suspect we’ll never know. As for the next sentence, it’s simply a claim. In fact, traditional publishers have been multiplying journals as well, almost certainly including “underclass” journals.

Overall, then, while I think this is an interesting article, it is *not* an indictment of OA publishing: it’s one set of data. There’s no control group—or, better yet, *two* control groups: one consisting of OA journals that *don’t* charge APCs (a majority of them), one of traditional subscription journals.

Was the project itself unethical? Some commenters say so. We’ll get back to that as we look at a few of the responses to Bohannon’s selective “sting.”

Did the project lead to lots of coverage suggesting that OA journals *in general* are defective? Of course it did. Was that what *Science* and Bohannon wanted? Well...the article sure does seem to emphasize faults in OA journals and throw in the occasional bit of “they didn’t fail *this time*” rhetoric.

Let’s look at some responses to Bohannon’s piece—after noting that my commentary above was done strictly based on a late February 2014 rereading of the article. I’d forgotten the responses, most of them read months earlier. I began with roughly 40 items tagged for possible discussion; as I go through them, I’m abandoning many because they add little or nothing to the discussion. We’ll close with some “investigative journalism”: I did an informal three-minute plausibility test on each of the (more than 304) journals included in Bohannon’s “sting.” The results don’t vindicate all gold OA publishers (and I didn’t expect them to), but they did prove interesting.

The First Two Days

Although the Bohannon article seems to be dated October 4, 2013, it clearly appeared on October 3—and by the end of October 4, there were already dozens of posts and other responses. Some are noted here; many more can be found in links from at least one of these items.

New “sting” of weak open-access journals

Peter Suber posted this [on October 3, 2013](#) on Google+, his apparent “blog alternative” these days, and it’s such a good writeup that I’m quoting all of it:

This afternoon John Bohannon published an article in *Science* exposing lamentably low quality at a large number of OA journals. He and *Science* call it a “sting” and it’s easy to see why. Unfortunately it may be hard to disentangle what the article does and doesn’t show. My take:

- * It shows that many OA journals are weak.
 - * It doesn’t show that all or most OA journals are weak. Bohannon didn’t study all or most OA journals.
 - * It doesn’t show that overall or on average, OA journals are weaker than non-OA journals. Bohannon didn’t study non-OA journals.
 - * It shows that some OA journals are strong. In particular, it vindicates peer review at Hindawi and PLoS ONE. I’m particularly pleased by this result because Hindawi has been unfairly characterized as “predatory”, and because PLoS ONE has been unfairly characterized as using lax peer review. PLoS ONE evaluates articles for methodological soundness and not significance. That’s less than conventional peer review takes on, but it doesn’t mean, and never meant, that PLoS ONE couldn’t be as rigorous as any other journal in evaluating methodological soundness.
 - * Putting some of these together, the article shows that some OA journals are weak and some are strong.
 - * It doesn’t show that the problem it exposes is limited to OA journals, or intrinsic to OA journals. It exposes a problem with low-quality or dishonest journals, not with OA journals as such.
 - * It doesn’t show that low quality is non-existent or rare on the subscription side of the line. It merely singles out low quality on the OA side of the line.
 - * It doesn’t show that good OA journals cannot be as good as the best non-OA journals.
 - * It doesn’t show anything about green OA, or OA delivered by repositories. Hence, it doesn’t expose a problem intrinsic to OA itself, which is broader than gold OA or OA delivered by journals. It doesn’t even mention green OA. Nor does it mention the fact that researchers can publish in the very best journals in their field and deposit a copy of their peer-reviewed manuscript in an OA repository. But apart from what the article does and doesn’t show, it will have consequences for the perception of OA journals and the perception of OA itself. I’m afraid it will have these consequences apart from what the article does and doesn’t actually show.
- One effect is good, and I’ll mention it first. Weak and dishonest OA journals give OA a bad name. I want to expose them. I want to warn authors and readers against them. I want to drive them from the field. To some degree, Bohannon’s paper will help in that cause.

Unfortunately it will probably overshoot. Many people incorrectly believe that all OA journals are weak and dishonest. Hence, many will put all OA journals under the cloud of suspicion. Many people incorrectly believe that all OA is gold OA, or that OA journals are the only way to deliver OA. Hence, many will put all OA, not just gold OA, and not just the weak subset of gold OA, under the cloud of suspicion.

Bohannon is not responsible for these widespread, pre-existing misunderstandings. But his conclusions combine badly with them, especially when he is not careful in drawing his conclusions or in characterizing OA.

He refers to “an emerging Wild West in academic publishing” as if low-quality journals were something new. This is unjustified and invidious, especially since he chose to study only OA journals, which tend to be new. Because he deliberately omitted to study non-OA journals, he should carefully avoid the conclusion that the kind of low quality he has exposed is something new.

In two places he gives the false impression that all or most OA journals charge publication fees. But most charge no fees at all. It’s possible that all or most of the OA journals in his sample charge publication fees. But he doesn’t say so and doesn’t seem to have checked. He makes it easy for readers to draw unwarranted conclusions about OA journals as a class and about the fee-based business model for OA journals.

As is frequently the case with Suber, I don’t have much to comment on here—I think he nails it. (Actually, I do believe Bohannon checked to be sure that the OA journals *in his sample* charged APCs—he says so, for one thing—and nearly all of them do.) There are several dozen comments, unfortunately beginning with Jeffrey Beall calling Suber’s *honest, clear* take “a very clever spin.” Beall seems to challenge Suber’s numbers (that most gold OA journals don’t charge fees), but without evidence to the contrary. There are also useful comments:

It’s difficult to tell how many OA journals exist and in essence meaningless since anyone can create a web site and call it a journal and charge a fee for publishing. A more important question is how many authors send their articles to very low quality journals that do not do real peer review.

That’s the start of a comment by David Solomon, and it’s one of my (many) issues with Beall’s seeming condemnation of all OA based on his List. I now think of it as the journals-vs.-“journals” problem, and it may be the basis for a later original essay, when that new 28-hour day kicks in... Solomon then offers a real data point: looking at 200+ “jour-

nals” from one questionable publisher, the average number of articles per journal over a 3-4 year period was *nine*, with many of them apparently empty. There are other useful comments along with some wholly predictable irritants.

Flawed sting operation singles out open access journals

The title of [this October 4, 2013 piece](#) by Martin Eve at *The Conversation* suggests he wasn’t entirely happy with Bohannon’s project. He offers a fair summary of the project and suggests an implicit hypothesis:

It would seem that Bohannon has neatly demonstrated a fatal flaw in open access publishing. Bohannon never explicitly compares open access model to the subscription model (in which the researcher submitting the article doesn’t pay but those reading it do), but his hypothesis seems to be that open access journals driven by publication charges will be inherently biased towards acceptance.

On the surface this looks like a potentially deadly blow to open access journals that levy Article Processing Charges (APCs). But I found some glaring problems with the article and its premises.

In short, Bohannon’s article isn’t really about open access. It’s about a flawed system of trusting journals and the inherent problems in peer review, but he targets only open access here.

Whew. That’s followed with a link to a 1982 project that did the converse: Saw whether peer review in psychology journals was fair—as in, whether it appeared to be influenced by author names. (I had this silly idea that all journal peer review was double blind, but that’s clearly not the case: some referees either know the authors’ names or can intuit them from the content of the articles. Indeed, some journals use open peer review, even publishing reviewers’ comments along with the article.) In [the 1982 project](#), researchers took a dozen *published* articles from prestigious psychology departments, one from each of a dozen “highly regarded and widely read American psychology journals with high rejection rates...and nonblind refereeing practices.” (These were all subscription journals.) Here’s the key paragraph:

With fictitious names and institutions substituted for the original ones (e.g., Tri-Valley Center for Human Potential), the altered manuscripts were formally resubmitted to the journals that had originally refereed and published them 18 to 32 months earlier. Of the sample of 38 editors and reviewers, only three (8%) detected the resubmissions. This result allowed nine of the 12 articles to continue through the review process to receive an actual evaluation: **eight of the nine were rejected. Sixteen**

of the 18 referees (89%) recommended against publication and the editors concurred. The grounds for rejection were in many cases described as “serious methodological flaws.” A number of possible interpretations of these data are reviewed and evaluated. [Emphasis added.]

But that was 1982, subscription journals and a different although perhaps even more shocking consideration: Namely, that the work of unknown authors was judged *much* more harshly than that of well-known authors. (*Personal sidenote*: I’m a little surprised that the Tri-Valley Center for Human Potential is imaginary. Livermore, where I live, is in the heart of California’s original wine country, typically called the Tri-Valley.)

Eve’s major complaint with Bohannon’s project is simple enough:

All along it seems to be an attack on open access journals. While it is not directly mentioned, the implication is “it would never happen in the subscription model”. But, given this wasn’t tested, how do we know?

Value addition in the publication process happens at the peer review stage, as most journals claim. The journals exposed were clearly not adding that value. But this value addition is the same whether the journal is open access or not.

So, why did Science publish such a clearly incomplete study? The harsh truth is that Bohannon’s article is hostile. He submitted articles only to open access journals. This omission then wrongly links the failure of deeper problems in academia to a single business model.

While he acknowledges that the top players (including the journal PLOS ONE) provided rigorous review, Bohannon submitted his bogus paper mostly to poor journals. They do not represent open access as a whole. Although Bohannon argues that “open access has multiplied that underclass of journals”, I would like to counter that it is only through a history of masking editorial processes amid claims of “value added” that we have arrived at this mess.

Not much to add here, except that *Science* not only published the study, it claimed it as its own. (There’s more to Eve’s article, along with a set of comments, some of which seem to duplicate comments elsewhere. [A different version of Eve’s comments](#) appears on his blog.)

I confess, I wrote the Arsenic DNA paper to expose flaws in peer-review at subscription based journals That long title on [this October 3, 2013 entry](#) by Michael Eisen at *it is NOT junk* is an admitted lie. He

didn’t write that paper (he links to [a surprisingly good USA Today story](#) about the whole mess, which has its own links)—but the point is well taken: Even the most prestigious journals with the highest rejection rates have been known to publish articles that are fundamentally flawed.

Eisen (who, given his recently stated dismissive attitude toward libraries, is definitely not on my list of people I’d treat more favorably than they might deserve) links to the Bohannon article but quotes the *Science* press release:

Spoofer Paper Reveals the “Wild West” of Open-Access Publishing

A package of news stories related to this special issue of *Science* includes a detailed description of a sting operation—orchestrated by contributing news correspondent John Bohannon—that exposes the dark side of open-access publishing. Bohannon explains how he created a spoof scientific report, authored by made-up researchers from institutions that don’t actually exist, and submitted it to 304 peer-reviewed, open-access journals around the world. His hoax paper claimed that a particular molecule slowed the growth of cancer cells, and it was riddled with obvious errors and contradictions. Unfortunately, despite the paper’s flaws, more open-access journals accepted it for publication (157) than rejected it (98). In fact, only 36 of the journals solicited responded with substantive comments that recognized the report’s scientific problems. (And, according to Bohannon, 16 of those journals eventually accepted the spoof paper despite their negative reviews.) The article reveals a “Wild West” landscape that’s emerging in academic publishing, where journals and their editorial staffs aren’t necessarily who or what they claim to be. With his sting operation, Bohannon exposes some of the unscrupulous journals that are clearly not based in the countries they claim, though he also identifies some journals that seem to be doing open-access right.

Eisen’s not opposed to what Bohannon did: he calls “the formal exposure of hucksters...looking to make a quick buck...valuable.” But, he says, “it’s nuts to construe this as a problem unique to open access publishing.” Here it gets really interesting: After his note that there’s no control set of subscription-based publishers, Eisen has an update that Bohannon emailed him saying “while his original intention was to look at all journals, practical constraints limited him to OA journals, and that *Science* played no role in this decision.” I’ll take Bohannon at his word, but find it *really difficult* to accept that this year-long project could not have, say, only targeted half as many gold OA publishers with APCs and included, say, 100

subscription publishers and maybe a handful of gold OA publishers *without* APCs. And, as you'll see later, Bohannon's tune seems to change over time.

Eisen believes a large number of subscription journals would have accepted the phony paper—and notes that many such journals have business models based on “accepting lots of papers with little regard to their importance or even validity.” He also notes that Big Deal prices are based to a great extent on the sheer numbers of journals and articles.

What does Eisen think we should really conclude from Bohannon's study? “Peer review is a joke.” He notes the “reproducibility problem” in biomedical science, where people “have found that a majority of published papers report facts that turn out not to be true.” I won't quote some of Eisen's intemperate language about subscription publishers (you can read it in the original), but he does note that such publishers manage to deny access to good research even as they publish not-so-good research. “To suggest...that the problem with scientific publishing is that open access enables internet scamming is like saying that the problem with the international finance system is that it enables Nigerian wire transfer schemes.”

Eisen's post has *lots* of comments—88 of them.

Do I think Eisen overstates the problems with peer review? Since Eisen's given to overstatement, I'm inclined toward that—but I'm not a scientist, so I'm not qualified to say. In my experience in a humanities field (librarianship), peer review has worked reasonably well (I've been on both sides of it, as author and reviewer). But then, that peer review has also been double blind, and the one time I thought I knew who wrote a paper I was reviewing, I was dead wrong. True double blind refereeing may very well be impossible in some parts of science, for reasons stated in a couple of the comments.

John Bohannon's peer-review sting against Science I'm linking to [this October 3, 2013 post](#) by Mike Taylor at SVPoW mostly because Taylor includes a long set of links to other items about the sting, including some I don't discuss. As to Taylor's piece itself, it's borderline hilarious (intentionally so)—but in this case, I think *Science* pretty clearly labeled Bohannon's article as “news” rather than as a peer-reviewed article, so it's not quite as effective as it might be. Still, it's a fun read and has a fair number of comments and a long list of further readings.

Which is it?

The Library Loon asks that question in [this October 3, 2013 post](#) at *Gavia Libraria*. The Loon was *really*

upset that Bohannon's piece was not acceptable scholarly investigation:

Either John Bohannon did not know that standard investigative methods such as he used in [this jawdroppingly embarrassing article in Science Magazine](#) require some sort of control group (or if no proper control can be identified given the knottiness of the phenomenon under consideration, several comparison groups), or he knew better but his editors specifically demanded that he not compare open-access journals with toll-access journals.

The article is a worthless travesty either way, but leveling appropriate sanctions against the correct target or targets rests on the answer.

So. Which is it? Incompetence or conscious bias?

The Loon later added a third possibility: silencing or other influence by powerful toll-access publishers. There's only one comment, but it's a good one—from Björn Brembs, who says *Science* had the data but rejected it “in favor of this un-controlled anecdote.” The comment links to Brembs' own post; see below.

Science Magazine Rejects Data, Publishes Anecdote That's Brembs' title for [this October 4, 2013 post](#) on his own blog, and he says the original article appeared on October 3, 2013. Brembs doesn't mince words. His post is brief and he uses CC BY, so here's the whole thing, links and all.

Yesterday, *Science Magazine* published a [news story](#) (not a peer-reviewed paper) by Gonzo-Scientist [John Bohannon](#) on a sting operation in which a journalist submitted a bogus manuscript to 304 open access journals (observe that no toll access control group was used). *Science Magazine* reports that 157 journals accepted and 98 rejected the manuscript. No words on any control groups or other data that would indicate what the average acceptance rate for bogus manuscripts might be in general.

As [Michael Eisen points out](#), this story is merely the pot calling the kettle black, when *Science Magazine* is replete with bogus articles (such as that on #arsenic-life, for instance) and the magazine has one of the [highest retraction rates of the entire industry](#). Which brings me to the main point of this post: it should come as no surprise that *Science Magazine* publishes a news story on an ill-conducted sting operation, an anecdote without proper controls – that's what glamor magazines like *Science*, *Cell* or *Nature* do. The [data that we have on this fact](#) are quite unequivocal: hi-ranking journals like these retract many more papers than any other journal and a large fraction of these are retracted because of fraud. There is not even a single quality-related metric in the literature that would confidently express any advantage, quality-wise, of hi-ranking journals over others. However,

there are a number of metrics which suggest that, in fact, the quality and reliability of the science published in these GlamMagz is actually below average.

To make things worse, when we submitted this data to Science Magazine, they rejected it with the [re-mark](#) that “we feel that the scope and focus of your paper make it more appropriate for a more specialized journal”. Obviously, Science Magazine values anecdotes more than actual data. No surprise their retraction rate is going through the roof: rejecting data that make them look bad and publish anecdotes that make them look good.

You already know the first and third links; the second is to Wikipedia’s article on Bohannon. Let’s look at the other three:

- The first leads to an editorial/article in *Infection and Immunity* (the article’s free but it’s in a subscription journal from the American Society for Microbiology—albeit not a wildly expensive journal), “Retracted Science and the Retraction Index.” It’s an interesting discussion of the journal’s own retractions, why journals need a retraction policy (and why retractions are important)—and a modest study of fairly well known journals, plotting retractions against impact factor. The study found a strong positive correlation between retractions and impact factor, with only the *New England Journal of Medicine* topping *Nature*, *Cell* and *Science*. (The retraction index is a straightforward calculation: Retractions between 2001 and 2010 multiplied by 1,000 and divided by total articles with abstracts during that period.)
- The second link is to “Deep impact: unintended consequences of journal rank,” a review article in *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience* (June 2013) by Brembs, Katherine Button and Marcus Munafò. This journal is a gold OA journal (one of many *Frontiers* journals) with moderate APCs for some, but not all, articles. It’s an odd venue, given that the authors argue that *all* journals should be abolished in favor of a “library-based scholarly communication system,” but of course no such system yet exists. I won’t attempt to summarize the statistics-heavy paper, but here are the conclusions (IF is Impact Factor):

While at this point it seems impossible to quantify the relative contributions of the different factors influencing the reliability of scientific publications, the current empirical literature on the effects of journal rank provides evidence supporting the following four conclusions: (1) journal rank is a weak

to moderate predictor of utility and perceived importance; (2) journal rank is a moderate to strong predictor of both intentional and unintentional scientific unreliability; (3) journal rank is expensive, delays science and frustrates researchers; and, (4) journal rank as established by IF violates even the most basic scientific standards, but predicts subjective judgments of journal quality.

- The final link is to an earlier post on Brembs’ blog that tells the story of how the article above came to be published where it is and how it was treated by what Brembs calls GlamMags (and one PLoS journal).

All in all, interesting, and (to me) fairly devastating if there’s a claim that the “top” subscription-access journals are more reliable than others, including OA journals, but it’s actually *not* equivalent to the Bohannon work (I’m increasingly reluctant to call it a “study”). Given that there are serious ethical issues involved in submitting deliberately fraudulent articles and expecting editors and peer reviewers to spend time on them, it’s unlikely that we’ll see a broader study.

On the other hand: While “Deep impact...” isn’t equivalent to Bohannon’s work, I can only see two circumstances under which *Science* could reasonably reject the first for being too narrow and publish the second as a lead article: either *Science* wanted to undermine OA or it was doing its best to ignore critics of traditional publishing. Otherwise, the combination seems implausible.

Sixty-one percent of open-access science journals accept hilariously flawed ‘paper’ for publication

This Scott Kaufman article, [appearing October 3, 2013](#) at *The Raw Story*, may be indicative of the kind of coverage the Bohannon piece received in the broader journalistic sphere. It takes as a given that Bohannon’s paper is indeed “hilariously flawed” (I didn’t find it quite that obvious, but Scott Kaufman’s scientific credentials may be better than mine: he has a PhD in English Literature).

It’s a relatively brief article. Kaufman highlights one journal that wanted \$3,100 as an APC, not noting that such a charge is *extremely* atypical for the journals studied: most of those that supposedly accepted the journal have two-digit or three-digit APCs, with four (I could find) in the \$1,000 to \$2,200 range. Actually, Kaufman gets the name of that particular journal wrong—and certainly fails to note that it’s published by a big trustworthy commercial publisher, Sage.

Kaufman offers two paragraphs of commentary about the dangers of predatory publishers (*of course*

he quotes Beall) and suggests that papers like Bohannon's "could lead to the death of hundreds of the most desperate and vulnerable patients."

I included this brief piece partly to highlight some remarkably bad comments—but once I resorted them to chronological rather than reverse-chronological order, I wasn't hit in the face by what turns out to be the most recent (and I hope stupidest):

Just to clarify, as pointed out below, "open access" is essentially pay to publish, the vanity press for researchers and corporations who may not be published otherwise, as shown by this study.

Which is, I believe, *exactly* the sort of anti-OA FUD that was a predictable and possibly intended result of the Bohannon article.

Predatoromics of science communication

There's a mouthful of neologism from Fabiana Kubke [on October 4, 2013](#) at *Building Blogs of Science*. Kubke offers a strong comment on the cycle under which (she at least implies) every paper *eventually* gets published, but with a cost—specifically a cost in scientists' time:

The increased pressure to publish scientific results to satisfy some assessors' need to count beans has not come without a heavy demand on the scientific community that inevitably becomes involved through free editorial and peer review services. For every paper that is published, there are a number of other scientists that take time off their daily work to contribute to the decision of whether the article should be published or not, in principle by assessing the scientific rigor and quality. In many cases, and unless the article is accepted by the first journal it is submitted to, this cycle is repeated. Over. And over. Again. The manuscript is submitted to a new journal, handled by a new editor and most probably reviewed by a new set of peers, this iterated as many times as needed until a journal takes the paper in. And then comes the back and forth of the revision process, modifications to the original article suggested or required through the peer review, until eventually the manuscript is published. Somewhere. Number of beans = $n+1$. Good on'ya!

Kubke seems to say the process almost assures peer review won't be rigorous, especially for articles that cross disciplines. To her, the appropriate response is:

If the system is so broke, it costs so much money in subscriptions and publication fees and sucks so much out of our productive time – then why on earth should we bother?

Kubke suggests putting the data out there immediately—and posting draft articles in places where they're available, not worrying about peer review

and formal publication until later. An interesting proposal (not quite the same as Brembs)...

OASPA's response to the recent article in Science entitled "Who's Afraid of Peer Review?"

This post by Claire Redhead [appeared October 4, 2013](#) on OASPA's site. Redhead notes that one reason for OASPA was the "emergence of a group of publishers that were engaging in open access publishing without having the appropriate quality control mechanisms in place." As to the article itself:

The "sting" exercise conducted by John Bohannon that was recently reported in *Science* provides some useful data about the scale of, and the problems associated with, this group of low-quality publishers, which is an issue that OASPA has worked to address since the Association was first created. While we appreciate the contribution that has been made to this discussion by the recent article in *Science*, OASPA is concerned that the data that is presented in this article may be misinterpreted. We will issue a fuller response to this article once we have had a chance to review the data in more detail (and we applaud the decision to make the data fully available), but for now we wish to highlight what can and cannot be concluded from the information contained within this article.

The greatest limitation of the "sting" that was described in the *Science* article is that "fake" articles were only sent to a group of open access journals, and these journals were not selected in an appropriately randomized way. There was no comparative control group of subscription based journals, despite the exhortation from Dr. Marcia McNutt (the Editor-in-Chief of *Science*) in the accompanying [Editorial](#) that publishing models be subject to rigorous tests. In contrast, more rigorously designed studies that have been peer-reviewed prior to publication provide evidence of the rigor and benefits of open access journals relative to their subscription counterparts... [\[here\]](#) and [\[here\]](#).

Another limitation of the study described in *Science* concerns the sampling of the journals that were chosen as targets for the "sting," which were drawn from two lists – [Beall's list](#) of 'predatory' open-access journals, and the [Directory of Open Access Journals](#) (DOAJ). Publishers were selected from these lists after eliminating some on various grounds, including a journal's language of publication, subject coverage, and publication fee policy. Ultimately the "fake" articles were sent to 304 journals, out of which 157 journals appear to have accepted these articles for publication. Given the selection criteria that were used in determining where to submit these "fake" articles, it is not possible to draw any meaningful con-

clusions about the pervasiveness of low-quality open access journals in the wider publishing ecosystem.

Overall, although the data undoubtedly support the view that a substantial number of poor-quality journals exist, and some certainly lack sufficient rigor in their peer review processes, no conclusions can be drawn about how open access journals compare with similar subscription journals, or about the overall prevalence of this phenomenon.

The post goes on to say that OASPA will contact any members with journals that accepted the paper and terminate membership if that proves necessary—and that the most important lesson from Bohannon’s article is “that the publishing community needs stronger mechanisms to help identify reliable and rigorous journals and publishers, regardless of access or business model.”

Looking at those links, we encounter an editorial that hadn’t been part of the discussion—and, frankly, it doesn’t make *Science* look better. The editor says this:

Much of the growth in journals has been in open-access titles, a trend that has improved access to scientific information. But **the open-access business model depends on a high volume of published papers for financial viability**, leaving little time for the deliberative process of traditional peer review. Some open-access journals that promise peer review fail to deliver it (see the News story by Bohannon...) [Emphasis added.]

That’s a *direct* attack on the ethics of OA, and it is simply false for the majority of OA journals—while, at the same time, being relevant for subscription publishers pushing Big Deals and using number of papers as an argument or pricing mechanism. Of the two articles cited (I replaced the full URLs with “here”), one finds that—after various normalization—the impact factors for gold OA journals with APCs that *have* IFs are comparable to those for subscription journals. The second, looking at biomedical literature, finds that “Open access literature does not differ from fee-for-access literature in terms of impact factor, detection of error, or change in postretraction citation rates.” That article is, however, in *JASIST*, so it’s behind a paywall. You may find the comments that follow Redhead’s article interesting, even if a couple of Constant Commenters are here as well. (I have now seen “Where the fault lies” at least a dozen times...)

Inside Science Magazine’s ‘Sting’ of Open Access Journals

This story by Jason Koebler [appeared October 4, 2013](#) at *Motherboard*—and I’m discussing it because,

by now, the issue was as much emphasis, motivation and interpretation as the Bohannon paper itself. I recommend reading this piece—it’s well written in journalistic-style—because I’m mostly going to pick at a few things.

First, Bentham, cited in the second paragraph as “one of the world’s largest publishers of science journals.” Is it? Bentham Science isn’t one of the ten largest STM publishers. Bentham Open claims to publish more than 200 OA journals, which is quite a few, but I could establish 400 OA “journals” in less than a week, given enough money to set up a website. (Figure one day to generate a set of unique journal names and about ten minutes for each “journal” to clone-and-modify a “journal” home page.) Bentham’s also an odd choice for first mention because Bentham Open has been regarded as a sketchy operation for *years*—and is notably not a member of OASPA. That Bentham Open accepted a questionable paper would surprise nobody.

After that, we get open access, open access, open access: Clearly the thrust of the discussion. Consider this paragraph:

Open access journals’ collective credibility has come under fire before: Critics say that many journals are out to make a buck and don’t care about the science. Others say that their review processes simply aren’t up to the standards of subscription journals like *Science* or *Nature*. Since publishing the results of his experiment Thursday, Bohannon has gotten plenty of hate mail from people who say that *Science*, a subscription journal (and one of the most prestigious in the world) simply has it out for open access. That’s not the case, he says.

What follows is the now-familiar claim that (a) Bohannon did this all on his own, (b) that he doesn’t have it in for OA, he just had to start somewhere—and he wanted to recreate the experience of a Nigerian friend who had problems with OA.

Now consider placement:

The target of open access journals was probably a good one. Many people have criticized even the most well-known open access journals, such as *PLOS One*, as having a “[publish first, judge later](#)” mantra. That journal has, in just a few years, become the world’s largest peer reviewed journal.

Earlier this year, ecologist Andrew Tredennick said [he’d probably stop publishing in PLOS One](#) because “there is still too much negative bias against the journal and against people that have ‘too many’ *PLOS One* papers on their CV.” A conversation on Twitter earlier this year called publishing in *PLOS One* “career suicide” for a scientist and Ted Hart, an ecologist

and open data proponent tweeted that “for better or ill most of my peers look at *PLOS One* as the dumping ground for papers rejected at ‘real’ journals.”

If this isn’t enough, there follow screenshots of two tweets to emphasize Hart’s statement. Then, after this series of attacks on *PLOS One*, we get the reality: an explanation that *PLoS One* rejected the paper for appropriate reasons.

Bohannon says again he doesn’t have it in for OA and respects *PLOS One*—and specifically says “Nowhere do I claim that open access is worse than traditional subscription.” But, to be sure, he only targeted gold OA journals with article processing charges—and spent a certain amount of effort to put together a list of several hundred such journals, with a focus on those likely to be sketchy. Then, of course, it was *simply too much effort* to include any non-APC OA journals or any subscription journals. I call that bias by omission.

Then the article goes back to Bentham as though it’s a fine exemplar for OA in general. The conclusions of the article are fine—it’s the way the article’s presented that I find troublesome.

Science Mag sting of OA journals: is it about Open Access or about peer review?

This self-answering question is the title for Jeroen Bosman’s [October 4, 2013 post](#) at *I&M/I&O 2.0*. Bosman recounts the story, says the 157 acceptances are very serious (but not surprising), then states clearly two strong reasons why the sting says *nothing* about OA in general (or, really, even about gold OA with APCs). Then comes Bosman’s take:

So, this study shows there are 157 Open Access journals with failing peer review. That’s it, and that is serious enough. To me this also shows the potential benefits of finally **opening up peer review**. That way the rotten journals could be weeded out much more easily, although there are more important reasons for introducing open peer review. But that is another story.

It’s a story I’m not dealing with here or elsewhere. Another reason to include this: a dense set of links to several *dozen* other reactions, relatively few of which are discussed here. If you want to get deeply into this, the set of links is another way to continue—noting that these are all nearly immediate responses.

A Little Bit Later

What follows is a group of selected items from among the many that appeared after October 4, 2013—not necessarily *much* after that, but somewhat later. As with the first two days, I’m skipping a

lot of items that, on reflection, don’t add much new to the discussion, even though I found some of them well written and once in a while couldn’t resist the temptation to cite them.

Science gone bad

Fabiana Kubke had an immediate response (discussed earlier) and came back to the story [on October 5, 2013](#) (again at *Building Blogs of Science*) after seeing some other reactions to Bohannon’s article. Kubke was able to read Bohannon’s story as an embargoed early release, “which gave me a chance to read it with tranquility.”

I have to say I really liked it. It was a cool sting, and it exposed many of the flaws in the peer review system. And it did that quite well. There was a high rate of acceptance of a piece of work that did not deserve to see the light. I also immediately reacted to the fact that the sting had only used Open Access journals – cognizant of how that could be misconstrued as a failure of Open Access and detracting from the real issue, which is peer review.

Kubke notes that what Bohannon did was “an anecdotal set of events,” *not* a scientific study—and adds:

One of the things that I found valuable from the sting (or at least my take-home message) was that there is enough information out there to help researchers navigate the Open Access publishing landscape they are so scared of and provided some information on [how to choose good journals](#). The excuse that there are too many predatory journals to justify not publishing in Open Access is now made weaker. It also provided all of us with an opportunity to reflect on the failures of peer review and the value of the traditional publication system.

The link in this paragraph is to the OASPA response (discussed earlier). That’s an interesting take from the whole thing...and it’s followed with “Or so I thought.” as a large bold subhead. Partly because Kubke started to see various reactions—but also because it was now possible to read the [whole special issue](#) and see the problems in it.

There were lots of articles talking about science communication. Not one of them could I find (please someone correct me if I am wrong!) that took on the sting to refocus the discussion in the right direction (that is, peer review), nor to reflect on how Science and the AAAS behind it measure up to those issues they so readily seemed to criticize.

I never liked the AAAS – or rather I began disliking it after I got my first invitation to join in the late 1980’s. It seemed that all I needed to do to become a member was send them cash. There was no reason to do that – since obviously, without requiring

anyone to endorse me as a “proper scientist” I could not see what that membership said about me other than having the ability to write a check. I was already doing that with the New York Times, and if I couldn’t put *that* down in my CV, then neither could I put down my membership with AAAS. Nothing gained, nothing lost, move on.

What I didn’t know back at that time, was that that first letter would be the first in a long (long!) series of identical invitations that would periodically arrive in my mailbox where they were be quickly disposed of in the rubbish bin in the corner of the room. I am sure one would be able to find plenty of those in the world’s landfills.

“The vitality of the scientific meeting has given rise to a troubling cottage industry: meetings held more for profit than enlightenment.” (Stone, R., & Jasny, B.)

Wut? Let’s apply the same logic to the AAAS membership – Would we consider that predatory behaviour too?

Here I have to mention that I’ve received a number of complimentary issues of *Science*, each accompanied by an invitation to join AAAS—for an amount that, if I wanted to read *Science*, would be fairly reasonable. I assumed that such membership was similar to becoming a Smithsonian “associate”—basically a fancy name for a subscription. I’m no scientist. (I am, at times, a researcher wholly dependent on OA because I lack institutional affiliation.)

What follows is a rather good takedown of the sting itself. To wit: It involved sending *one* article to each journal and using the results as the basis for judging that journal (or the field as a whole). Well, Kubke points out, there’s the “arsenic life” paper...which *Science* published. (Not to pick on *Science*: *Nature* has published its share of defective articles as well.)

So, if n=1 is enough, does that mean *Science* magazine is ready to add their name to the list of journals that don’t meet the mark? I could not, on their issue, find any reflection on that (please someone correct me if I am wrong!).

Kubke draws somewhat invidious comparisons between *Science* and even the presumably predatory OA journals. AAAS’ stated mission includes enhancing communication among scientists, engineers and the public and some other goals—all of which would appear to be furthered by making *Science* OA.

Now, if they can’t provide a scientific argument as to why we should give them so much money to be members or access their publication, then how are they any different from the “cottage industry” they

seem so ready to criticize? Is preying on libraries or readers less bad than on authors? If I purchase a “pay per view” article and don’t like it, or it does not contain the data promised by the abstract, do I get my money back? Or do these paywalled journals just take the money and run? Because, as much as I dislike the predatory open access journals, at least they are putting the papers out there so that we can all crowdsourc on how much crap they are.

I only skimmed titles of the rest of the special issue. Kubke says it shows a bias against OA, and I will certainly claim that *Science*’s handling of the Bohannon article (and the article itself) suggests such a bias.

How Embarrassing was the ‘Journal Sting’ for Science Magazine?

Yes, Björn Brembs has an axe to grind, but [this little October 6, 2013 post](#) on his blog is at least fun, with a point behind the fun. It’s short enough to quote in full:

By now, everybody reading this obscure blog knows about the [so-called sting](#) operation by John Bohannon in [Science Magazine](#) last week. As virtually everybody has pointed out, the outcome of this stunt is entirely meaningless. Here are a few analogies that could serve to demonstrate about how embarrassingly inane this whole project really was:

Science Magazine journalist exposes bank transfer scam by sending bogus bank account numbers.

or:

Science Magazine journalist demonstrates efficiency of homeopathy by treating over 300 patients with cold symptoms – 62% feel fine five days later.

or:

Science Magazine journalist proves that accepting a single fraudulent/erroneous article invalidates all scholarly papers a journal has ever published.

Who can come up with some more?

Seventeen responses include trackbacks and a couple of other suggestions—and a complaint from Jeffrey Beall. Brembs’ response is interesting, although he shows more respect for Beall’s list than I would at this point, now that it’s clear just how extreme Beall’s bias is.

Unscientific spoof paper accepted by 157 “black sheep” open access journals - but the Bohannon study has severe flaws itself

I’m not going to discuss [this October 5, 2013 piece](#) by Gunther Eysenbach at *Gunther Eysenbach’s Random Research Rants* in detail—partly because I think it’s one you should read yourself. Briefly, Eysenbach is the editor and publisher of a gold OA journal, the *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, which charges submission fees (but has institutional membership that waives

those fees) and has a high IF; he's also an OASPA founder. His journal was a target of the sting—*until it wasn't*. (He rejected the article summarily—out of scope—and says it would not have survived review.)

As Eysenbach notes, it's *not possible* to replicate the sting for subscription or non-APC OA journals because it would be regarded as unethical to do so.

While I appreciate that this study generated a list of open access publishers which have low-quality or no peer-review (see below), it should also be said that the overarching implied conclusion - that open access as a business model is flawed, or that OA journals are of generally lower quality than subscription journals, is outrageous.

What bothers me most is that we can't even refute/replicate this study (by also sending the spoof paper to subscription journals) as no ethics board in the world would approve such a blatantly unethical "study" (using deception and wasting the time/resources of hundreds of journals and academics), so it remains what it is - a piece of bad, sensationalist journalism, unfortunately published in a journal called "Science", implying a scientific study.

He also says legitimate OA publishers are the main victims of scammers, calls the scam journals "largely criminal organizations," notes that problems with peer review aren't unique to OA journals and makes other points. Worth reading.

Anti-tutorial: how to design and execute a really bad study

Mike Taylor on [October 7, 2013](#) at *SVPoW*—and this is another one I think you should read directly. I'm including it because the *next* piece links to it—and because Taylor's picture of the sting isn't a pretty one. At this point, Taylor's viewing the whole project as result-based "journalism": once you know what you intend to prove, how do you go about "proving" it?

Bohannon says he wasn't out to discredit OA. Taylor makes an awfully good case here. He does note that, while Bohannon was acting as a self-described "free-lance journalist" in preparing this sting, he's also a scholar with a PhD in molecular biology, so it's hard to use ignorance of appropriate methodology as an excuse.

A veritable sting

This, by the Library Loon [on October 8, 2013](#) at *Gavia Libraria*, is the reason I included Taylor's piece: the Loon links to it in the opening paragraph:

Now that [we all know](#) that Bohannon's Science "sting" was embarrassing pseudo-science, it seems well worth considering how to do better and fairer ones.

The Loon says the traditional means used to judge journal quality "are rapidly proving untrustworthy and gaming-prone," and explains that. She also notes why negative indicators (cancellations, retractions) aren't ideal either.

Would *systematic* stings work? She discusses that. Quite apart from being unethical, they'd be enormously time-consuming and difficult. She suggests that a plagiarism sting might be plausible. But who would fund such work?

An interesting discussion that goes beyond Bohannon; worth reading. Mike Taylor nominates open peer review (and there's a discussion of whether that's a solution); there are others.

Can we "fix" open access?

Here's Kevin Smith, writing on [October 7, 2013](#) at *Scholarly Communications @ Duke*—and he offers an answer of sorts. Before getting to that, and skipping over the stuff you've read more than once already (including the bias issues with the study), here are a couple of gems:

This [the sting] has set off lots of smug satisfaction amongst those who fear open access — I have to suspect that the editors of Science fall into that category — and quite a bit of hand-wring amongst those, like myself, who support open access and see it as a way forward out of the impasse that is the current scholarly communications system. In short, everyone is playing their assigned parts.

[Quoting from a post he'd done elsewhere, after discussing the study's bias]:

The internet has clearly lowered the economic barriers for entering publishing. In the long run, that is a great thing. But we are navigating a transition right now. "Back in the day" there were still predatory publishing practices, such as huge price increases without warning and repackaging older material to try and sell it twice to the same customer, for example. Librarians have become adept at identifying and avoiding these practices, to a degree, at least. In the new environment, we need to assist our faculty in doing the same work to evaluate potential publication venues, and also recognize that they sometimes have their own reasons for selecting a journal, whether toll-access or open, that defy our criteria. I have twice declined to underwrite OA fees for our faculty because the journals seemed suspect, and both time the authors thanked me for my concern and explained reasons why they wanted to publish there anyhow. This is equally true in the traditional and the OA environment. So assertions that a particular journal is "bad" or should never be used needs to be qualified with some humility.

So what's Smith's solution, specifically for librarians who think there's a problem? He quotes Andrew Dillon: "The best way to predict the future is to help design it." So, he says, libraries should be more involved in scholarly publishing.

Many libraries are becoming publishers. They are publishing theses and dissertations in institutional repositories. They are digitizing unique collections and making them available online. They are assisting scholars to archive their published works for greater access. And they are beginning to use open systems to help new journals develop and to lower costs and increase access for established journals. All these activities improve the scholarly environment of the Internet, and the last one, especially, is an important way to address concerns about the future of open access publishing. The recently formed [Library Publishing Coalition](#), which has over 50 members, is testament to the growing interest that libraries have in embracing this challenge. Library-based open access journals and library-managed peer-review processes are a major step toward address the problem of predatory publishing.

That's just part of a fairly long post, and if you're an academic librarian not yet involved in library publishing, you read the whole thing and think about it.

The Sting

I can't resist mentioning Barbara Fister's [October 10, 2013](#) "Library Babel Fish" column at *Inside Higher Ed*, but I will avoid recounting her well-told story to the extent that it repeats what you've already read. There are new perspectives here. For example:

We often judge information by the company it keeps. A story in *The New York Times* is more likely to be taken seriously than a news story that was published in a small town paper. A university press's reputation is built by the strength of its list. It's the principle underlying the "impact factor," as flawed as that measure is for assessing the worth of any particular paper published in a "high IF" journal. An article in *Science* has a lot of clout because it's published in *Science*.

As Fister notes, *Science* and *Nature* both publish lots of news and opinion pieces alongside scientific research—but she doesn't note that most readers probably wouldn't spot the fact that Bohannon's "study" was *not* scientific research. She picks up something from Sal Robinson: Bohannon specifically chose to make the "authors" and "institutions" from an African nation and to do a two-translation Google Translate process to make the language somewhat substandard. To some extent, this "makes it seem the problem is at least in part the fault of third world authors getting in over their heads."

It is undeniably true that a lot of silly scam operations apparently are profiting from the way we measure value of researchers in units of publications. One could argue that the proliferation of niche journals with tiny potential readerships and very little impact on the advancement of science only exist because they rake in money for publishers as filler for the "big deals" that eat library budgets and soak up some of the excess supply of authors desperate to publish. It's not surprising, given the relative ease with which websites can be created with the unwitting assistance of witless and desperate authors, that scammers will find ways to make money from people foolish enough to fall for their nonsense. Even [the obviously questionable offers](#) from Mrs. Sese-Seko and her son Basher must find some gullible business partners, or why else would they continue to show up in my inbox?

Fister also notes other sorts of publishing scams—e.g., the pseudobooks generated directly from Wikipedia articles (I call them pseudobooks because, in most cases, the book will never actually exist unless some ~~sucker~~ knowledge-seeker buys it).

Do read Fister's column itself; she's talking about much more than just this sting, and it's worth reading. As are some of the conversations in the comments.

The Bohannon "Sting"; Can we trust AAAS/Science or is this PRISM reemerging from the grave?

Here's another angle, from Peter Murray-Rust [on October 10, 2013](#) on *petermr's blog*. I'd managed to forget PRISM, an odd effort in 2007-2008 by AAP and others to undermine OA. (I wrote about it [in October 2007](#).)

My concern is whether Science/AAAS can be regarded as neutral in this issue. Some years ago legacy (non-open-access) publishers hired a consultancy firm to denigrate Open Access ("Open Access is junk science") – the activity was called PRISM (not to be confused with the current PRISM). This included the AAP and some of us asked publishers if they wished to dissociate themselves from this. I cannot remember immediately what Science's / AAAS did. I believe there are still legacy publishers who will use lobbying and money to try to discredit OA and I would need assurances from Science/AAAS that they distance themselves from such attempts. Bohannon's study can be seen as such an attempt.

Even if I'm charitable enough to accept Bohannon's claims of neutrality, there is *no way* I can regard *Science* as neutral, given the way it handled the story.

There's more here, including a useful note that you should not equate non-profit (or not for profit) with neutral or fair. (He notes that, as of 2007, some

ACS officers were paid more than \$1 million—pretty nice pay for a nonprofit employee, and it's fair to assume some of that came from ACS' very expensive, very profitable publishing arm.)

Post Open Access Sting: An Interview With John Bohannon

I rarely cite *the scholarly kitchen* for what I regard as good and obvious reasons, but this interview by Phil Davis, [posted November 12, 2013](#), is irresistible—if for no other reason than that Bohannon's explanations seem to change over time. Before, he said there was no control group because it was too much work; now, he says he was only interested in how fee-charging OA publishers deal with peer review, so no control group was needed.

It's quite an interview. He denies that there are ethics issues. He claims that it's a *complete* study, not just a sample. He denounces DOAJ. He says there's no ethical issue because he's been advised that there's no ethical issue regarding experimentation on human subjects.

After reading this, I find I'm much less charitably inclined toward Bohannon and his intentions. You might feel differently. On the other hand, the single most obvious "fact" I'd glean from the interview and Bohannon's focus on publishers is this: Elsevier, Wolters Kluwer and Sage accepted the paper. PLoS, BioMed Central and Hindawi rejected it. Therefore, if it's fair to assume that one bad paper accepted by one bad journal indicts the entire publisher, the lesson is clear: *libraries and scholars should reject Elsevier, Wolters Kluwer and Sage and embrace Hindawi, PLoS and BioMed Central.* And since we know that *Science* has published fraudulent papers, whoops, there goes *Science*!

If that's not fair—if you *can't* condemn a publisher based on one paper in one journal—then what, exactly, *can* you conclude from Bohannon's sting? After reading this interview, I'm increasingly inclined to say he either proves too much (findings that should shut down the largest STM publisher of all as well as the magazine it was published in) or he proves essentially nothing.

On the Mark? Responses to a Sting

This piece, [appearing December 9, 2013](#) in the *Journal of Librarianship and Scholarly Communication* (JLSC) [which itself is a gold OA journal that does not charge APCs] is a set of responses from Martin Paul Eve, Graham Steel, Jennifer Gardy and Dorothea Salo with an introduction by Amy Buckland—an introduction that makes a point or two on its own:

The current scholarly publishing system is unsustainable. Financially, libraries can't continue to pay rising subscription rates for big packages (there is no such thing as doing more with less). Ethically, using taxpayer money for research that taxpayers can't read without a subscription is unacceptable. If we all believe that research deserves to be shared...the system must evolve. Yes, business models will have to change—just as they have in many industries now that online life is the norm. Those who still believe this change doesn't affect scholarly publishing and academia are naive, and need to quit putting up road blocks for the rest of us who understand how many opportunities are now open to publishing.

The set of short commentaries is worth reading on its own, and I won't quote most of them. (I could: It's CC BY.) There does seem to be general agreement that Bohannon's sting says more about problems of peer review than it does about OA in general (about which it says *nothing*). Jennifer Gardy ends her comments with this:

Whatever the solution, virtually every scientist with at least a handful of publications to their name will agree that the system as it currently stands is fundamentally flawed and wildly inconsistent. Were peer review to be peer reviewed, it would almost certainly be rejected.

The Critics of OA and Acknowledging "Predation" Martin Eve, this time [on February 25, 2014](#) and moving beyond Bohannon and Beall. He accepts one premise: "In a publication system driven by article processing charges, there are players present who are out for a quick buck, who will disavow quality control mechanisms in the service of profit and who will behave in ways that are incongruous with standards for ethical publication."

The problem, however, with many of these arguments is that they are only ever framed from one side. The anti-OA crowd point out the potential for "predatory" publishers, find the examples and then try to make them into metonyms for the entirety of gold open access. Conversely, those who are pro-OA (a group in which I include myself) often dismiss such problems out of hand. I think there are sometimes good reasons why we should dismiss them which have been covered elsewhere. We do, however, have to be open to the possibility of such practices and to work to put them to bed.

Which leads into a rather astonishing February 2014 development (noted below), where two highly-regarded sources, Springer and IEEE, found themselves retracting *more than 120* articles published in subscription journals because it was demonstrated

that these articles were gibberish, generated by [SciGen](#) (a rather wonderful computer program that generates nice but random computer science research papers; all you have to do is give it author names). Full disclosure: I once used SciGen or a similar generator to generate “Positivity Methods in Non-Standard Lie Theory” by W. Crawford, S. Abram, D. Salo and B. Fister. You can read the paper [here](#), but it’s never been submitted for publication.

If the publishers that accepted Bohannon’s paper are predators, aren’t those that accepted the 120-odd nonsensical SciGen papers? Ah, but they’re subscription-based predators:

In the two potential scenarios here – an open journal and a closed journal each publishing bogus papers – different groups seem to lose out. It is clear that, in both scenarios, readers are disadvantaged. They may invest time in a work and only realise that it is bogus after a substantial degree of effort. Economically, however, there are some differences.

In both setups, publishers make money from user content. They expect remuneration for the work that they put into the production of a paper. If, however, one of these services includes thorough peer review and a publisher accepts a large number of fake papers, it could be argued that they are not performing this function well enough (or their reviewers are dysfunctional, or peer review simply isn’t good enough to tell the difference) and are, therefore, predatory. This label should surely hold whether they are paid from the supply side in a service model for their work (OA) or whether they make money through the sale of a commodity object. After all, both claim to fulfil a function (quality control) that they are simply not giving to their clients.

However, in a model where the supplier pays (OA on an APC basis), apart from readers who may have wasted their time, the only financial loser is the person who paid the one-time fee.

In a model where many libraries are paying for access to material, each of these institutions is financially hurt. Will they receive a refund for the space taken by these articles and the amount they paid? No. Will they have any recourse to remedy for buying a product full of falsehoods? No. Will they cancel their subscriptions? Unlikely: these journals hold the big-name prestige.

Indeed.

Publishers withdraw more than 120 gibberish papers

This is the underlying news story behind Eve’s discussion, posted by Richard Van Noorden [on February 24, 2014](#) at *Nature*. The papers were from

conference proceedings, more than 30 of them between 2008 and 2013; sixteen were published by Springer and more than 100 by IEEE. They were uncovered by Cyril Labbé.

Among the works were, for example, a paper published as a proceeding from the 2013 International Conference on Quality, Reliability, Risk, Maintenance, and Safety Engineering, held in Chengdu, China. (The conference website says that all manuscripts are “reviewed for merits and contents”.) The authors of the paper, entitled ‘TIC: a methodology for the construction of e-commerce’, write in the abstract that they “concentrate our efforts on disproving that spreadsheets can be made knowledge-based, empathic, and compact”.

It’s an interesting news report, and there’s this:

Labbé emphasizes that the nonsense computer science papers all appeared in subscription offerings. In his view, there is little evidence that open-access publishers—which charge fees to publish manuscripts—necessarily have less stringent peer review than subscription publishers.

Set aside the fact that *most OA publishers do not charge fees to publish manuscripts*, since I now assume Big Subscription Journals will *never* get that right. These nonsense papers were all published in subscription offerings. I guess by Bohannon’s standards, we now need to shut down IEEE and Springer as well, right?

You’re not seriously suggesting that Elsevier, IEEE, Springer, Kluwer, Sage and Science should all shut down, are you?

No. I am suggesting that, *at least by Bohannon’s apparent standard*, they could be judged inferior to, for example, PLOS, Hindawi and BioMed Central.

Just the Tip of the Iceberg

After I wrote the first draft of this piece and conducted the testing discussed in “The Three-Minute Test,” Kevin Smith wrote this “Peer to Peer Review” [on March 13, 2014](#) at *Library Journal*. He looks at the 120 gibberish computer papers discussed above and sees parallels to Bohannon’s sting.

The parallels between this situation and the “sting” about peer-review in open access journals that was published by *Science* last year make it inevitable that the usual suspects would line up to make markedly different assertions about the Labbé study. Those who tend to defend traditional publishers point out that the papers were in conference proceedings and that publishers typically have less control over those types of publications than they do over journals. Advocates for newer models of publication—and I guess I am one of these “usual suspects”—point out

that what is sauce for the open access goose is sauce for the toll-access gander.

It's what follows this paragraph that makes this column especially worth reading. Smith makes the point that, while the Bohannon articles were at least superficially plausible, the 120 computer science papers *were not*: "the words are connected grammatically but not logically, so that any competent reader should know she is not reading anything with substance." He also notes that conference proceedings *may not* be handled as rigorously as regular articles—but the items are nonetheless marketed as being peer-reviewed and used to justify price increases.

This is why I have called these studies the tip of an iceberg. They have shown us, in my opinion, that peer-review has a systemic problem. When a journal calls itself peer-reviewed or a database marks some sources as "scholarly," we actually know nothing about what that means for individual articles. And we should remember that the salesperson who tells us how many peer-reviewed articles are in his database and then justifies the price increase by the growing number of articles is contradicting himself, since the increasing number of papers, as even Springer seems to admit, cuts against quality peer-review. I have no doubt that we have seen just a small part of systemic and growing failure of peer-review, at least as a label and as a marketing tool.

There's more, mostly issues with peer review and ways to improve it, best read in the original.

The Three-Minute Test

Having now read through nearly 50 commentaries and noted two dozen of them, I find myself compelled to try to answer a different question, one I believe is important in determining whether Bohannon's findings are significant.

The question: How many of these journals pass the "three-minute test"?

You could call this the "sniff test" if you like. What I mean is a simple test that can be done by any potential author by looking at a journal's home page and investigating for two or three minutes.

I thought this question was interesting enough that I committed to doing the investigation and publishing the results *before* having any sense how it would turn out, whether for good or bad. Here's what I'm doing (written beforehand; "Initial results" and the rest will be written after I finish):

Bohannon provides a spreadsheet of his sting, including not only the results but also the journal's URL and name and the publisher's URL and name. I

downloaded the spreadsheet, *hid the columns* containing the results and publisher's name and URL, and added columns to note the results of looking at journal sites.

This is important: While doing this, I did not know whether the journal had accepted or rejected the sting paper. I simply tried to determine whether I, as a naïve user, would be inclined to believe this was a journal that might be worth submitting a paper to.

Initial results

I wrote the preceding before I did the testing (and other than replacing one semicolon with a period, I'm deliberately not editing it). I did *not* have a result in mind, just a hope that I'd be able to refine Bohannon's results somewhat. Oh, sure, if I found that 90% of the journals with acceptances were so obviously defective that no sensible author would ever submit to them, I'd be pleased—but I didn't think that was likely. Nor was it the case.

Excluding two journals flagged as "duplicate" in the "outcome" column of Bohannon's spreadsheet (I couldn't figure out what made them duplicates—neither the journal title nor the journal URL duplicated another row—but I deleted them anyway) there are 315 journals in the spreadsheet. I looked at the home page for each journal long enough to determine a few things, partly subjective, partly objective (e.g., excess "activity" on a page, quality of language on the page itself, garish colors, whether the page seemed to emphasize the publisher more than the journal, citing impact factors other than the traditional IF...). I also attempted to locate the APC and jot it down, and counted the number of articles in 2014 and 2013 (or 2012 if there were none in 2013), up to a maximum of 20 (if there were more, I just recorded ">20"). I looked at the first year of publication noted on the archival page and usually tested one article to make sure they actually were visible. Of course, that all assumes I could *reach* a home page.

Here are the categories I finally assigned to journals and the number and percentage of journals that fall into each category:

- **X: Unreachable or explicitly shut down**: 30, 9.5%
- **N: Not open access**: 11 or 3.5%
- **H: Hybrid** (with few or no OA articles detected): 10 or 3.2%
- **F: Few or fading** (fewer than 15 articles in 2013 or 2014): 34 or 10.8%
- **E: Empty** (no articles or so few as to be nearly none): 16 or 5.1%

- **D: Dead or dying** (very few or no *recent* articles): 39 or 12.4%
- **C: Very questionable**: 15 or 4.8%. These are journals where the home page would inspire so little confidence that a sensible author would either move on or at least investigate further, checking out the editorial board, etc., etc. I'd call these red-flag journals: Your best bet is to ignore them.
- **B: Plausible**: 87 or 27.6%. These are journals "in the middle"—where the home page raised questions enough that *sensible* authors would investigate further. These are yellow-flag journals: An author really should find out more.
- **A: Good**: 73 or 23.2%. These are journals that, based on the home page, seem like real and reasonably good candidates. Consider these the green-light journals, noting that I'm a very easy grader.

Those are the results of my scan—but not the results that matter. It is fair to note that some "X" journals may have shut down as a result of Bohannon's article. It's also fair to note, as you'll see below, that he found different "dead" journals than I did—possibly because, if Bohannon's journal URL didn't work, I searched for the journal title in Bing or Google before giving it up as nonexistent. (I'd usually find something, if only Bohannon's notes or some compendium of journals, and *occasionally*—apparently 20 times in all—I found what appeared to be a live journal where Bohannon did not.)

As a sometimes supporter of OA, I would be happiest if very few A and B journals accepted the paper (I'd be happiest if *none* of the A journals accepted it), but I wasn't expecting results that encouraging. Giving away some of the story, I wound up with a half-and-half situation for A and B combined: exactly the same number of acceptances and rejections. (But that's for A and B combined, not A alone.) That's sad and discouraging, even though it should be clear that one accepted bad article can't condemn a journal or a publisher, not unless we're to shut down nearly all major journal publishers.

Let's look at the nine groups in more detail, especially the final three—in reverse alphabetic order because the first few don't require a lot of discussion.

X: Unreachable or explicitly shut down: 30 journals
Bohannon only found nine of these to be dead. Among others, 17 accepted the paper, three rejected it and one was still reviewing it. That's effectively an 85% acceptance rate—which turns out *not* to be the

worst in the study. I assume that several of the 17 shut down as a result of the sting; that's fairly clear in two or three cases.

For most of these, the home page was either unreachable (404, 403, parking page, site never responded) or had fatal flaws. One explicitly said it was not accepting submissions; one was not OA at all but also had no recent content; two or three had home pages but any attempts to find actual articles or issues failed.

Perhaps worth noting: 19 of these were on Beall's list; eight were at the time in DOAJ; none was in both. I should mention that one journal *might* have been live, but my browser identified the home page as a malware attack page, so I didn't investigate further. Maybe you'd submit a paper to a journal with a malware-heavy site, but I sure wouldn't!

N: Not OA: 11 journals

I don't know of any definition of OA that allows a publisher to require that you register with the site or become a society member in order to read articles, and it's hard to accept as true OA journals that will let you read articles but not download them for redistribution. Of these journals, seven accepted the article, two rejected it, one had it under review and one required a submission fee. Call it a 78% acceptance rate—but these aren't really OA journals. (Most wouldn't even let you *read* articles without being a member or registering.)

H: Hybrid: 10 journals

Hybrid journals aren't Gold OA journals and raise other questions. Of these, one accepted the article and six rejected it; Bohannon considers three of them to be dead. I found very few actual OA articles on any of the sites. (Full disclosure: I am not a fan of the hybrid model. Unless it can be demonstrated that hybrid journals have actually lowered subscription and bundle prices in response to OA articles, I think it's a form of double-dipping.)

F: Few or fading: 34 journals

Now we get to one of the more important groups—journals that are alive, at least to some extent. These journals all had 14 or fewer articles in 2013. A majority (24) had fewer than *ten* articles. Most of the latter had more articles in 2012 (and only three had more than one in 2014), so I'd call them "fading."

Would a thoughtful author submit an article to a journal with so few papers without doing a *lot* of additional checking to see whether it was a viable outlet? I don't believe so, but I could be wrong.

The overall numbers: 19 accepted, 11 rejected, three in review, one excluded because a submission fee was required. Call it a 63% acceptance rate.

Looking at the acceptances, five journals had very broad titles and coverage; six sites were so garish or busy or compromised (e.g., the same journal having different titles at different points) that I can't imagine how they get submissions; I couldn't find a stated charge in five (one explicitly did *not* charge APCs); and three used questionable impact factors. Five were in DOAJ and not Beall's list and two were in both; the other 13 were only in Beall's list.

E: Empty (or nearly so): 16 journals

I think of these as "journals" rather than journals—none of these has any articles later than 2011, and most have none whatsoever.

Bohannon found eight acceptances, three rejections, one in review—and three he considered dead. Call it a 73% acceptance rate, if you like—but if Bohannon had paid the APC his would have been the *very first article published by the journal*, or at least the first within three years. If an author's going to submit a paper to a journal that's never published an article and says its editorial board is "coming soon"—well, a fool and his \$200 (Canadian) are soon parted. To my mind, five of the eight acceptances also showed enough "journal factory" indicators on the home page to suggest caution.

Dead or dying: 39 journals

All of these could equally well be in "E" or "F." Most are here because they were around for a few years or had strong activity in earlier years, then seemed to die. Overall, 15 journals supposedly accepted the paper, seven rejected it, Bohannon considered eight of them to be dead, seven had the paper under review, and two charged submission fees. Call it a 68% acceptance rate—but none of the acceptances came from a journal with more than six papers in 2013.

The seven that rejected the article aren't necessarily doing much better. Three have had a total of 3 articles each since 2011; one society journal that began in 1992 had five articles in 2013 (and I could find neither an APC nor any instructions for submitting articles); one university-based journal began in 2004 but has had *no* articles since 2011; and so on.

The Tougher Cases

Up to here, we're dealing with "journals" and other cases that either aren't OA, are defunct or nearly so, have so few articles that you'd *really* want to take a hard look before submitting—or are hybrids with few

if any OA articles. That's slightly less than half of the total considered. These last three groups are tougher cases: journals where a scientist *might* plausibly submit an article without further research in the belief that the journal was at least a going concern.

C: Highly questionable: 15 journals

When I started working on this research, I heard Tina Turner in my mind singing "We Don't Need Another Journal." As I look at this group of journals, a different song comes to mind (and this one exists!): Dionne Warwick singing "Walk On By." I think that's good advice for all of these, based only on what I found on the home pages *with no knowledge of how they'd done on Bohannon's sting*. I found an awful lot questionable about each one, enough to make me want to investigate the editorial board, look at more papers...or just walk on by these red-flag journals.

That would have been sensible, as it turns out: Excluding one Bohannon considered dead and two that required submission rather than acceptance fees, *all but one* of these journals accepted the paper: a staggering 93% acceptance rate.

It's probably worth noting that this is another Beall-heavy group: all but two of the acceptances were from journals on Beall's list and not in DOAJ. Of the two acceptances that *were* in DOAJ, one had an "American" title and was clearly India-based (\$250 APC), and one was such a mess I couldn't take it seriously (\$20 per author). Lots of journals had wildly broad topical areas. Most of the websites were garish or otherwise unsightly (moving text? really?). Two explicitly did *not* charge APCs. The single rejection came from a journal where I couldn't find an editor's name or a stated APC—and that one also had a very broad topical area, the *Journal of Medical Science* from ANSINetwork.

B: More plausible: 87 journals

The most troubling group of all, and I now think of these as yellow-flag journals. A thoughtful author would want to investigate these further before submitting. With the exception of one startup (established in 2014, with seven articles as of early March—it rejected the paper, probably as out of scope), all of these were fairly busy in 2013, many of them with quite a few papers already out in 2014. All had at least plausible websites—although usually with *something* about the website that caused me to drop it into "B" rather than "A." And yet, 60 of these journals apparently accepted the paper, compared to 20 that rejected it, four that still had it under review,

two that require submission fees...and one that Bohannon thinks is dead. That's a 75% acceptance ratio, and that does say that, *for Gold OA journals with APCs dealing with this particular subject area*, there are issues with quality control.

Although a closer examination may also suggest that Bohannon was going looking for trouble. When I sort the group by list and then by outcome, I find this:

- 23 journals on Beall's list accepted the paper; two rejected it and one still had it under review.
- Four journals on both lists accepted the paper; two rejected it.
- 33 journals in DOAJ (at the time) and not on Beall's list accepted it, while 16 rejected it, three had it under review, two required submission fees and one was called "dead." Admittedly, 33 out of 49 is *still* an awfully high acceptance rate (67%), but it's a lot better than the 92% acceptance rate for Beall-only journals.

What else distinguishes acceptances from rejections? Not the use of a questionable impact factor: I saw 16 of those among acceptances—but also seven among rejections. Maybe the sense of pushing a journal factory: 26 of those so flagged accepted the paper, while seven rejected it. Maybe the quality of the language on the site: of 26 journals I graded "C" or "D" (both meaning *substantial* problems with wording and syntax), all but five accepted the paper, while of the two dozen I explicitly flagged as "A" for language, 15 did—still too high, but not *as* high. Society or university affiliation generally seemed to be a good sign; broad scope generally seemed to be a bad sign.

A: Good: 73 journals

These are reasonably active journals where I couldn't find much fault with the home pages. These are journals I can believe people might submit articles to without further inspection. Think of them as green-light journals. In this case, noting again that *I assigned these grades before looking at outcomes*, the results are more encouraging: 17 acceptances and 45 rejections (also four under review, five requiring submission fees and two Bohannon considered dead). That's a 27% acceptance rate, and that's not bad.

Of 11 journals on Beall's list and not in DOAJ, six accepted the paper, four rejected it and one required a submission fee. Another four were both on Beall and in DOAJ; two accepted the paper, two rejected it. What that also means: Of those in DOAJ and *not* on Beall's list, only nine accepted the paper, compared to 39 that rejected it, a 19% acceptance rate.

Rosy conclusions?

Only 17 journals out of 315 studied have convincingly good websites but shoddy peer review practices: That's just over 5%. (Actually, I gave five of those 17 "Fair" for overall website, but didn't find enough other troublesome factors to downgrade them.) Oh, and most of those aren't hitting the authors up for huge fees. One explicitly *does not* charge APCs, half a dozen charge \$100 or less and only one charged more than \$600. That's true across the board: the majority of these journals charge low APCs, some so low as to be nuisance fees.

I think that's too rosy. But I also think that *any* sweeping conclusions are nonsensical. For one thing, one article does not a journal make or break, especially in a field where, apparently, more than half of published results can't be replicated successfully. Generalizations are iffy.

Here's what I do believe. If a scientist can't take the time to do a superficial inspection of a journal's website before submitting a paper (all that you'd need to eliminate 132 of these journals) and to check further if there's something "off" about the site (thus exposing another 109 to heightened scrutiny)—then the scientist would, if he or she wasn't publishing Gold OA, probably persist with commercial journals until the paper was published. And *it would be published, sooner or later*: I've never heard anybody seriously argue against the old saying that peer review doesn't determine *whether* an article will be published, only *where*.

Summary results and closing thoughts

Here's a summary version of the results, for those inclined to tables:

Grade	Acc.	Dead	Rej.	Rev.	Sub\$	Total
A	17	2	45	4	5	73
B	60	1	20	4	2	87
C	13	1	1			15
D	15	8	7	7	2	39
E	8	4	3	1		16
F	19		11	3	1	34
H	1	3	6			10
N	7	1	2		1	11
X	17	9	3	1		30
Total	157	29	98	20	11	315

Seventeen failures out of 73 good-quality journal websites: That's too many, but it's such a small sample that it's anecdotal. Even 77 out of 160 (combining A and B), while far too many, is still a small group that condemns neither the journals nor OA.

What would the percentages be in less frenzied fields? What would we find for subscription journals? For no-fee gold OA journals? I suspect we'll never know, both because a sting like this is ethically questionable and because it's extremely time-consuming. But, at least for the A group and probably the B group, I also suspect that this comment in Bohannon's article is worth repeating:

Some say that the open-access model itself is not to blame for the poor quality control revealed by Science's investigation. If I had targeted traditional, subscription-based journals, Roos told me, "I strongly suspect you would get the same result."

Do note once more that this paragraph calls it "Science's investigation," not Bohannon's investigation. *Science* bears responsibility for the ethics and slant of the piece; if that's not true, then the magazine has utterly failed in its editorial task.

A note about ethics and two Beall followups

Ethics enter into [the Beall discussion](#) in two ways: The obvious ethical issue of predatory publishers—but also the ethics of claiming to label bad players in a field when you apparently despise the entire field. For this article, the ethical issues are also multiple: Failure to conduct decent peer review when your journal says it does so, but also the ethics of submitting hundreds of fake articles and of *Science* in publishing and promoting a piece in such a way as to increase negativity about open access

One Beall followup is a mistake in the original article: I said Hindawi (at one point called predatory by Beall, although since removed from his list: this established OA publisher's journals rejected the Bohannon paper) was an Indian publisher, when it's actually headquartered in Egypt. Sorry about that.

The other is an analogy that came to mind in mid-March 2014, a couple of weeks after the Beall essay appeared. What follows appeared in *Walt at Random* as "[The steakhouse blog](#)":

When I finished editing "Ethics and Access 1: The Sad Case of Jeffrey Beall," the lead essay in the April 2014 *Cites & Insights*, I didn't worry about the fact that I failed to reach clear conclusions about Beall or his list or blog. As with most essays of this sort, I was trying to paint a picture, not come up with a Declaration of Belief.

But I did think about why I found the situation so troubling—especially since it was and is clear that many librarians continue to assume that Beall is a reliable and worthy source. Last night, it came to me.

The steakhouse blog

Let's say someone with some credentials as a judge of good meat starts a blog called **Steakhouses**. (If there is such a blog, this has nothing to do with it: I didn't check.***) It gets a fair amount of readership and acclaim, even though every post on it is about bad steakhouses. After a while, there's even a **Bad Steakhouse List** as a page from the blog.

Some people raise questions about the criteria used for judging a steakhouse to be bad, but lots of people say "Hey, here's a great list so we can avoid bad steakhouses."

The big reveal

After a couple of years, the author of the blog—who continues to be judge and jury for bad steakhouses—writes an article in which he denounces all meat-eaters as people with dire motives who, I dunno, wish to force other people to eat steak.

I will assert that, to the extent that this article became well known and the blog author didn't deny writing it, the **Steakhouse** blog would be shunned as pointless—after all, if the author's against all meat-eaters, why would he be a reliable guide to bad steakhouses?

Bad analogy?

So how exactly are the *Scholarly Open Access* blog and *Beall's List* different from the **Steakhouse** blog and **Bad Steakhouse List**? And if they're not, why would anybody take Beall seriously at this point?

Note that dismissing the **Steakhouse** blog and the **Bad Steakhouse List** as pointless does not mean saying "there are no bad steakhouses." It doesn't even mean abandoning the search for ways to identify and publicize bad steakhouses. It just means recognizing that, to the **Steakhouse** blog author, all steakhouses are automatically bad, which makes that author useless as a judge.

Full disclosure: I haven't been to a steakhouse in years, and I rarely—almost never, actually—order steak at restaurants. I am an omnivore; different issue.

One final thought: Given Beall's assertions as to the jillions and jillions of "predatory" journals (OK, thousands, with more than 500 publishers and 330 independent journals as of early March 2014), wouldn't it be interesting to similarly grade those journals and see how many are actual journals publishing a significant flow of articles—how many might fool any but the most desperate author into submitting a paper? Which are predatory (*maybe*) journals, which are "journals" and which are in between? It would be a fair amount of work, but might yield interesting results. And on that note, I'll stop.

Libraries

Future Libraries: A Roundup

I was sorely tempted to title this “Future Libraries: Dreams, Madness & Reality,” but been there, done that, a joint authorship that was unlikely even at the time. (The book is 19 years old. I prepared the camera-ready copy. *Nineteen years ago.*) In any case, this isn’t my thoughts about future libraries; it’s another futurism roundup, focusing on thoughts from other folks.

I don’t anticipate that this will be as snarky as my usual futurism-and-forecast roundups, although I’ll have opinions to offer here and there. Most of the people offering these thoughts are *active* as librarians in libraries. I’m not a librarian and haven’t worked in a library for 36 years. So, to a great extent, these are people on the ground; I’m just noting some interesting pieces over the past few years (“few” means up to five in one case—I haven’t done a roundup like this for a *long* time) with comments as appropriate.

Futures change

Since I am quoting some folks from years back in this loosely-chronological roundup, it’s fair to note that thoughtful people who aren’t Pundits and Thought Leaders can change their perspectives over time. And, of course, likely library futures shift just as likely other futures shift.

A note on subheadings: This is a flat roundup (it’s a bunch of items with discussion), I believe, so most article titles will appear as centered “Heading 2” (like “Thinking about the future” below) subheads rather than left-aligned italic “Heading 3” (like “Futures change” above) sub-subheads. The sub-subhead above violates normal Layout Rules: it’s a Heading 3 with no preceding Heading 2. I’m *so* ashamed...

I’ll try to remember to flag each piece in terms of the *kind* of library being discussed. There’s no such thing as *the* future of libraries; there are many futures for many libraries, and different types of libraries have different sets of issues to deal with. (Compare the per-capita spending of, say, a “poor” academic library, e.g., one at the 25th percentile of that group, with a “rich” public library, e.g., one at the 75th percentile. The former figure for 2012 is \$159; the latter figure for 2011 is \$47. In other words, a relatively poorly funded academic library spends about 3.3 times as much per potential user as a relatively well-funded public library.)

One other note on form, which is generally true for anything in *Cites & Insights*: unlike some esteemed

publications (cough *the Economist* cough), if I’m quoting somebody from, say, Australia or Great Britain, I don’t change their spelling, orthography or even punctuation around quote marks to conform to my own version of English (American English). See, for example, the very first quoted/indented paragraph below.

Thinking about the future

Kathryn Greenhill [on September 2, 2009](#) at *Librarians Matter*. Greenhill, an Australian librarian, was changing jobs at the time, working two days a week in a new public library. She admitted that she didn’t yet know the team, the needs of the community or the budget process, but had a bunch of “dreams and speculations” on what she thought possible.

It’s a fairly long post with a number of good questions and good ideas; I think it still bears reading nearly five years later. I’ll quote a couple of paragraphs that may deserve comment.

We have a community of non-users who are paying for our library via their property rates. They are going to be checking out the new building when it opens – out of curiosity if nothing else. How can we make these non-users into passionate users? Should we try? Should we start trying to canvass their opinions now? Do we need to be all things to all rate-payers or do we have greater obligation to some groups in our community? If so, which groups – our existing loyal users? people in the most vulnerable parts of our community? our online community?

One commenter noted that some (I’d guess many) non-users are also supporters. For those, I think one answer is that you don’t spend *too* much effort trying to make them either users or passionate users. (I’m not a *passionate* library user, I don’t think, but I’m certainly a supporter and user.) Problems arise when the community of actual users is shrinking and, worse, when the community of library *opponents* is growing. That’s a somewhat different issue.

During community consultation about the new library in the last few years, the requests have been for books, books and more books. Some of the new libraries I most admire have created more room for users and less room for books. There are so many new formats, accessed so many different ways. To me much of print publishing has morphed into a “push that product, move those units” cynical marketing exercise, that often does not give or expect sustained intellectual effort by either writer or reader. How can I support what the community obviously wants while bringing to them also the online, alternative and exciting content that exists in other formats and via other channels?

As you might expect, I have trouble with both the second and fourth sentences here—after all, that *much* of print publishing is trash (and always has been) doesn't make it all worthless, and for that matter a good public library offers a whole lot of material that's used for reasons other than "sustained intellectual effort." Or at least I hope it does. Steven Chabot commented on the first half of this paragraph:

I will never understand the mindset of my colleagues in this respect. If these people are advocating for something that is opposed to what people have been telling you over and over—books, books and more books—why do these librarians have your admiration?

People say the library is getting out of the book business, but I don't think it is because people are into books. Librarians want to be on the cutting edge, and are choosing what is new and shiny over what is working and sorely needed.

Greenhill offered this response:

The librarians have my admiration because when I have visited their libraries, they were lively places with many users who are obviously getting what they want :) I agree that we won't be out of the book business soon – but can see that like travel agents, Virgin megastores and video shops, we do have to adjust what we do in response to our users changing what they do.

I'm dwelling on this because it comes up so often, both in public and academic libraries: Patrons want books—but (some) librarians seem to want to run away from them. Saying you need to "adjust what we do *in response to* our users changing what they do" only works if, in fact, the users *are* changing what they do. Getting out ahead of your users on a forced march away from books is a tricky thing... (I'm *not* suggesting Greenhill intends that).

There's quite a bit more here, much of it good and sensible. Greenhill discusses the library as third place or (a better phrase, in my opinion) the "community's living room," issues of teens in the library and more.

Annealing the Library

This [April 17, 2012 piece](#) by Eric Van de Velde at *SciTechSociety* is one of those I find infuriating, largely because it proceeds from an assumption that's taken as a given, despite growing evidence that it's unlikely. The assumption, in this case: *it's all going digital, and soon*. Thus these first two paragraphs:

What if a public library could fund a blogger of urban architecture to cover in detail all proceedings of

the city planning department? What if it could fund a local historian to write an open-access history of the town? What if school libraries could fund teachers to develop open-access courseware? What if libraries could buy the digital rights of copyrighted works and set them free? What if the funds were available right now?

Unfortunately, by not making decisions, libraries everywhere merely continue to do what they have always done, but digitally. The switch from paper-based to digital lending is well under way. Most academic libraries already converted to digital lending for virtually all scholarly journals. Scores of digital-lending services are expanding digital lending to books, music, movies, and other materials. These services let libraries pretend that they are running a digital library, and they can do so without disrupting existing business processes. Publishers and content distributors keep their piece of the library pie. The libraries' customers obtain legal free access to quality content. The path of least resistance feels good and buries the cost of lost opportunity under blissful ignorance.

Van de Velde appears to be talking about *all* sorts of libraries, in which case this sentence—"The switch from paper-based to digital lending is well under way"—is nonsense. But it's the basis for the rest. He regards "library-mediated [digital] lending" as "more cumbersome and expensive than direct-to-consumer lending."

There's more discussion, but it's so heavily based on "if it's not digital, it's history" that I find it difficult to evaluate. For that matter, it appears to be based on the premise that it's *not possible* for libraries to actually *purchase* digital materials, a premise that Douglas County and others are busily undermining.

Van de Velde wants to see acquisitions budgets go away. He suggests instead that libraries subsidize creation—but only for open-access works. In a purely digital world, some of this might make sense. The real world isn't purely digital and isn't likely to become so. To me, the whole thing seems terribly simplistic.

Future U: Library 3.0 has more resources, greater challenges

Can we just agree for starters that "Library 3.0" in the title of this Curt Hopkins piece [on May 20, 2012](#) at *ars technica* is gibberish? Once we get beyond that, the piece—which is about both public and academic libraries—is interesting, as are the comments.

For ladies and gentlemen of a certain age, the library is changing too fast. For kids, it's not changing fast enough. University students are caught in the middle. Their library experience must be like

surfing: riding the edge of a moving wave, never quite cresting, never quite crashing. Such a state has to be thrilling, but ultimately exhausting.

Hopkins seems to hold a “*the* future” perspective, and of course *the* future is all digital, thus this:

Transition is underway: from a place where you go to get information to a place you go to create; and from a place you go to create to a service you use.

Well, no. For some users in some libraries, maybe; as a general rule—especially for public libraries—not so much. I found this quote from Sarah Houghton, who I know and admire, a little odd, as she speaks of what “the little kids who come into her library” expect:

“Every screen is a touchscreen,” she told Ars, “and when it’s not they get confused as hell. Kids expect instant delivery of everything. If you can’t get it right that second, it doesn’t exist. When you tell them that a thing they want doesn’t exist digitally, that it’s a physical thing and that’s it, it blows their mind. If there is some book they need to write a report on, say, Mayan culture, and it’s not online, they get mad.

“I’ve encountered people in their mid-late 20s who have that same expectation.”

Huh. Maybe San Rafael (in Marin County) really is a different world. The figures on (print) book readership by kids and young adults would strongly suggest that there are still a few younger folks whose minds aren’t blown by books being physical...

This is a fairly long piece and I won’t attempt to summarize it all. Chris Bourg of Stanford has interesting and sensible things to say (especially toward the end of the article). As noted earlier, the comments are interesting, especially an exchange in which one “joshv” makes it clear that *he knows the future*...but damn little about libraries.

Alexandria Burning; or, The Future of Libraries, and Everything Else

Greg Johnson and Brent Wagner wrote this “Backtalk” piece, appearing [on October 8, 2012](#) at *Library Journal*. I could summarize it as saying, “maybe there should be room for older and current uses and users alongside the hot new stuff,” but that’s unfair to the piece. Or maybe not:

As we breathlessly race toward a sci-fi future, questions inevitably crop up about the meaning and usefulness of reading an actual book. And, while traditional modes of reading inexorably erode, the very existence of libraries seems to be at stake. Now before you assume this will be a diatribe against new media and a fist-shake at those damn kids on our

lawn, it’s really not. The world is a big place, and there is plenty of room for all types of flora, fauna and techna. This article is more a plea for respecting the old forms, rather than merely trashing it in heedless favor of the new. Libraries can provide a sanctuary, a place of repose and meaning outside the silicon buzz of contemporary life. No amount of Apple products can replace the basic human comfort of curling up with a book, turning pages with your fingers, inhaling the aroma of a new binding, and weighing a hefty tome in your hands while you relax in bed.

That’s the lede, followed by some Kurzweilian/dystopian stuff and the note that not everyone’s thrilled to be propelled into the all-digital future.

While libraries unquestionably need to stay up with current trends—providing Wi-Fi access and downloadable ebooks—they can also cater to the needs of those who are less eager to embrace the new gizmos of the moment. And, in our experience, there exists a silent majority on this front. Libraries in the future might even become bicameral in their architecture, with one area for cell phones and laptops, while the other has a fireplace, comfy chairs and physical books and magazines. If nothing else, a peaceful atmosphere will be appreciated by many who tire of being wired and plugged in. In this way a library will be seen paradoxically as “old fashioned,” but with a positive connotation.

I’m hoping that majority is getting less silent, but I also think it’s more subtle than that. Most people own smartphones (I think) but it’s still true that most book readers read print books most of the time. I spend all day at a notebook computer; I read my daily newspaper on a Kindle; 99% of my books come from the local library. In print form. We’re complex creatures, we humans are—a complexity that all-digital futurists tend to ignore or simply can’t accept.

The next paragraph describes a visit to the library in a “tiny Midwestern hamlet,” and it’s a sad scene: a library *full* of bedlam with no quieter areas. Johnson and Wagner think it’s reasonable to have both quiet and noisy spaces and that it’s “important that we preserve this [quiet] aspect of libraries.” Fortunately, the libraries I use *do* have multiple spaces, with relative quiet the norm in the stacks, computing areas and reading room.

I like the piece. I suspect the authors speak for thousands of librarians and millions of patrons who aren’t always heard from.

Libraries: The Next Hundred Years

I’m not quite sure what to say about [this November 14, 2012 article](#) by Brett Bonfield at *In the Library*

with the *Lead Pipe*. It's an article (pretty much all the fortnightly things on that blog are articles); it's based on a keynote, it's *not* "all digital, all the time"—and I found it difficult to deal with. That's partly because of things like this:

I think we can imagine the hundred-year library and begin designing that library now. I think the people who rely on your library today would be thrilled if it suddenly transformed into the library of 2112. And I think you would love to work there. Which is a good thing. Because in 2112 you will still be alive and you will still be working. Maybe at the library where you work today.

Speak for yourself, Bonfield; I'm pretty damn certain I *won't* be alive in 2112—and yes, I think the idea that much of anybody who's working now will still be alive in 2112, much less alive *and working*, is "preposterous," to use Bonfield's term. (As a long-time programmer, I frankly find the idea that "we" can and should design *the* programming language that will be used in 2112 is fairly preposterous as well. Even more so: The idea that this hundred-year language will be a dialect of Lisp. *Lisp?*)

But here's the thing: there's also some good stuff in Bonfield's essay.

I suggest skimming over the woowoo (you're going to *live forever*—and you'll be working forever! Americans will keep most of our houses around for a century or more! A Lisp dialect—*seriously?* *a Lisp dialect?*—is *the language of the distant future!*) and focusing on the rest of the essay. For that, which is most of the essay, I think it's sufficiently interesting that I don't feel the need to comment.

Defining what I do: What makes a technology emerging or disruptive?

I suspect Chad Haeefele will be surprised to see [his December 3, 2012 post](#) at *Hidden Peanuts* appearing in a roundup on future libraries. He's not making grand sweeping projections, he's not really saying "This, this is what libraries *will* be." He's doing something more modest and in some ways more useful: He's trying to define his job as the Emerging Technologies Librarian at UNC (an academic library).

To be honest, as the years go by I'm less a fan of that term. "Emerging" is too broad. Any new technology emerges, just by virtue of being new. Solar power is an emerging technology, and even something as simple as seatbelts once was too. I can't keep an eye on everything. Instead, I find myself looking at a new technology and asking: Is it disruptive to libraries? "Disruptive" does a better job

of defining what I deal with on a day to day basis. The technologies I look at tend to be new and emerging, but as they emerge they also disrupt that context and the way we do things.

But Haeefele's smart enough to define "disruptive" in what some would consider a non-disruptive manner.

It's when an actual or likely use impacts libraries that I pay more attention.... So now I have to define what makes a technology disruptive for my purposes. My definition is a bit hard to nail down, but I think I've settled on something close to "a technology that could change the way academic libraries deliver services and information."

"*Could* change the way." Not "will entirely or mostly replace the way." It's a modest definition; maybe that makes it a more valuable one. A new technology or medium may be meaningful enough that a good library *should* (maybe must) accommodate it and, if possible gain from it. That may *or may not* mean that it will replace part or all of an existing technology or medium; the latter is to a great extent an independent factor. Maybe it's a great new way to provide services that only supplant existing ways to the extent that budget room must be made: that's certainly disruptive, but it may not be revolutionary or extreme.

Haeefele looks at "universal adoption" and I think he'd *like* to see such things happen, but I may be putting words in his mouth. He used an unfortunate sentence in describing those who still use CDs, vinyl and other music distribution method (he said we lacked technical literacy); when I called him on it, he agreed it was a poor choice of words.

Are his proposed phases of disruption useful to think about? I think so. Is a disruptive technology only "fully emerged" if it *replaces* existing technologies? I don't think so, and the more I read Haeefele, I don't think he does either. It's a good read and includes points worth thinking about. If you haven't already done so, [go read it](#).

Where is Library Technology going?

I show this one—by Alan Cockerill [on December 4, 2012](#) at *JCU Library Technologies*—under the Haeefele piece because it's a direct response to Haeefele's post. It's an odd one, from an academic librarian who is not certain there will be any need for academic libraries in the future. I'm sure he's not alone in that. Frankly, once an academic librarian decides that books are pointless, that reference isn't needed and that patrons can handle "collection" development...well, you can pay the Student Union to manage the "information commons" and pay one bursar to manage all those online databases and Big Deals, and you'll save a whole

heck of a lot of money. If you define yourself out of a job, you may wind up without a job.

My disruptive influence is that I don't think the library's survival is paramount; I think the meeting the user's need is. Sometimes we have to acknowledge that we just get in the way, for at least some users. I'm happy for people to make the case for the continued mystic aura of the library - but the justification shouldn't be based on 'the library is a good thing' it should be about why the library is best placed to meet a valid user need.

What libraries fear is being bypassed, so we watch each new technology enter the hype cycle and we ponder how we can use it, if we should, who else is, and how we would manage it with all the other kit-tens we're herding.

I'd like to think this is wrong. To the extent that an academic library is at least partly about the long view, about collecting, preserving and making available the records of our civilization, I think this is nonsense. ("For at least some users" is *of course* true, and probably always has been.)

There's a little more here, and I find it discouraging; in the comments, there's also a "library as business" bent that I find discouraging. You may feel otherwise.

Do We Still Need Libraries?

This one is *not* from a library person; it's from John Palfrey, the "Head of School at Phillips Academy." posted [on December 30, 2012](#). He'd been reading one of those *New York Times* "debates" on this topic and wonders why there is such a debate.

It's a debate because too many people think that we don't need libraries when we have the Internet. That logic couldn't be more faulty. We actually need libraries more (as Luis Herrera points out) now that we have the Internet, not less. But we have to craft a clear and affirmative argument to make that case to those who don't work in libraries or focus deeply on their operations. Librarians have to make a political and public case, which is too rarely being made effectively today.

These days, in most towns in America, the same debate recurs each year when budget time rolls around: what's the purpose of a library in a digital age? Put more harshly: why should we spend tax dollars, in tough economic times, on a library when our readers can get much of what they need and want from the Internet? In the era of Google and Amazon, the pressure is on libraries. Every year, as more and more library users become e-book readers, the debate rages a bit more fiercely.

The annual conversation about libraries and money is hard in the context of academic institutions, too. Libraries have long stood at the core of great schools and universities. In many fields, the library is in fact the laboratory for the scholars, whether in the humanities or in law. The texts, images, and recordings in these libraries are the raw materials out of which scholars and their students make new knowledge. But increasingly, scholars are turning to digital sources – databases, commercial online journals, Google Scholar – to do their work. Does every university and every school need to invest millions of dollars each in buying the same texts and bringing them to their campus?

He follows that with "The future of libraries is in peril." Maybe—and he's clearly looking at all types of libraries. I think he's wildly universalizing when he says that "the same debate" over the use of a public library today occurs "in most towns in America" each year. I'm nearly certain that's *not* true; with the exception of a few libertarians and extreme digiphiles, I suspect there really isn't a debate about "do we need a public library?" in most years in most towns. "Should we provide the library with more funds?"—now, *there's* a debate. Most public libraries spent more per capita in 2011 than they did in 2009, so it's clearly *not* a debate that libraries are losing everywhere.

He's right that it's important for librarians and library supports to make the case for good, vibrant, well-supported libraries. I'd like to see that "most spent more" (about a 2% median increase) become a "nearly all spent significantly more" (let's say a 5% increase for at least 75% of public libraries, just to offer a nice dream); I think good examples help. But we start out from too negative a space if we believe that most U.S. public libraries are actually under constant threat of extinction. I know it's an old refrain that I keep singing, but libraries do better when you build from strength, not fight against weakness.

Palfrey offers ten prescriptions for what libraries should do. I'll refer you to the original post. I find some of the ten entirely sensible, some a little questionable, at least one or two somewhat at odds with one another.

Catastrophe and Common Sense

This "Library Babel Fish" piece by Barbara Fister [on January 10, 2013](#) at *Inside Higher Ed* also springs from the *New York Times* "debate" as well as a book about "catastrophism" and the usual end-of-year "flurry of 'end of libraries' pronouncements, which are as popular as 'books are dead' and 'nobody reads' jeremiads."

Librarians are more likely than anyone to predict the end of libraries. Not too long ago I pointed out to a colleague that “change – or die!” was an all-too common message we send to ourselves. (We then started adding “or die!” to the end of sentences for fun, instead of “in bed,” which is another common way to reduce a conversation to totally useless absurdity.) That message usually comes from people who support a particular change and gleefully predict catastrophe unless their pet idea isn’t adopted. It’s not just libraries; it’s endemic to higher education. *We’re doomed!* Unless . . . [insert commercial message here].

Fister’s primarily concerned with academic libraries here, but her call for, well, *calming the hell down* and using some common sense applies across the board. (That spirited language is my own, but I’m fairly sure she’d agree.) Her discussion of this is so good that I’m unwilling to paraphrase it: [go read it yourself](#).

I’m pretty sure Fister’s saying that doomsday’s not around the corner *and* that librarians should continue to foster sensible change, and maybe resist panicked responses to unfunded demands. But that’s oversimplified. Read the original.

The Library is dead, long live our library

Read that title—at the top of this lengthy post [on April 18, 2013](#) by Roy Kenagy at *What would Ranganathan do?*—carefully. Word by word. Pay attention to orthography.

Kenagy is *not* using the dreadful “X is dead; long live X!” cliché; he’s thrown a curve that’s at the heart of his discussion and is, I think enormously useful. (I believe I would think so even if this post did *not* quote me favorably.) To wit: you may misremember Ranganathan’s Fifth Law.

The Fifth Law is: A LIBRARY IS A GROWING ORGANISM.

Kenagy believes that fifth law is frequently misquoted; he’s done it himself. The misquote? *The* rather than *A*. And that’s the gist of this charming discussion.

The Library as a monolithic ideal is probably dead, and a good thing, since there never was any such thing as The Library (Kenagy says “its amorphous ontological status is a compelling reason not to care”). *Our* library—the library in my small city, the library at your college, the library at her school (if she’s lucky) is neither dead nor dying.

We are grammatically motivated to place “THE LIBRARY,” without further qualification, in a familiar but vague class of semi-eternal cultural institutions. THE LIBRARY hovers with THE CHURCH, THE MILITARY, THE ARTS, THE ACADEMY, THE MEDIA, THE BOOK, THE GUVMINT and other baggy

mental constructions in the sociological middle distance, objects of dismay or veneration, righteous concern, and fluffy New York Times op-eds.

On the other hand, “A LIBRARY” asserts a more down-to-earth class of stubbornly real objects, entities that we can physically walk into and examine up close, testing whether they are in fact dead, or as good as dead, or not dead yet.

I find myself nervous when pundits start talking about One Big Library or networking all public libraries, or DPLA as *in any way* being a or the public library or any of that stuff—because to me, a great strength of America’s public libraries is that there are 9,000-odd “our libraries” (or 16,000-odd “our branches”), not One Library System.

The good news: pretty much every one of us cares, many of us earnestly, about the fate of Our Library.

Over the decades I’ve spoken at length with hundreds of readers from all sizes and sorts of libraries. Early on I noticed what I thought was an endearing but throwaway whimsy in the relationship between readers and their libraries. No matter what my own, exquisitely professional sense of a library’s quality, the mere readers I talked to typically judged their home library as distinctly above average. Libraries are without question in the same revered class as the children of Lake Wobegon; even the most miserable, begrimed, and wayward specimen is a beloved beneficiary of familial and community pride.

As my respect for puzzling evidence and mere readers has matured, I no longer bracket this recurring anomaly as a throwaway. I have attained rock solid faith in the proposition that, as Tip O’Neill no doubt quipped in his standard library christening remarks, “All libraries are local.” THE LIBRARY may be under siege, but OUR LIBRARY remains at the heart of our community. Yes, libraries are under-funded, under-built and under-staffed, but they are not on the verge of mass extinction from under-love.

Then he quotes “the always-plainspoken Walt Crawford” in my close study of the nonsense about U.S. public libraries closing all over the place. I wish I was always plainspoken; it’s a worthy goal. He quotes from my comments about self-fulfilling prophecy as a primary reason librarians should avoid spouting false generalizations of library doom. He builds from that.

Kenagy offers three primary sources of library doomcrying, and that’s a fine, interesting, down-to-earth discussion that you really should read in the original. As you should the whole post, for that matter. It’s long (by blog post standards, not by my own wordy standards), it’s well written, it ends with lots’o’links and Kenagy says useful things.

The Future of Libraries: Beginning the Great Transformation

If I found Kenagy generally down to earth and worthwhile, I can say pretty much the opposite of Thomas Frey and [this dystopian essay](#) at *DaVinci Institute*, posted on or before April 29, 2013. Frey's one of those futurists who drives me nuts, particularly with his seeming assurance that he **Knows The Future** of institutions he seems to know little or nothing about, namely public libraries. (Or libraries of all sorts; it's hard to tell.)

Frey claims to have assembled “ten key trends” that affect the development of “the next generation library.” (Note *the* library—as becomes clear, Frey is a monotonic futurist.) What's odd in the set is that he seems incapable of understanding what he's saying. For example, he begins with a list of communication systems, listed to show “the accelerating pace of change”—and winds up with this:

Certainly there are many more points that can be added to this trend line, but as you think through the direction we're headed, there is one obvious question to consider. What is the ultimate form of communication, and will we ever get there?

While we are not in a position to know the “ultimate form” of communication, it would be a safe bet that it is not writing and reading books. Books are a technology, and writing is also a technology, and every technology has a limited lifespan.

But here's what I see from his list of 20 things (some of them wholly misplaced: the ENIAC computer was *not* a communication system): Eighteen of the twenty are *still in use*. I look at that list and say “there is no ‘ultimate form of communication,’ there are many forms of communication, most of which don't go away for a very long time, if ever.”

But he gets to Trend #2: “All technology ends. All technologies commonly used today will be replaced by something new.” If Frey doesn't know that technology and media typically do *not* work on an “X neatly replaces Y in a reasonably short time” basis, he should—but apparently some Proper Futurists ignore history and the present because, you know, The Future. (Not Many Futures, but **The** Future. See Kenagy above.)

It doesn't get better. He flatly asserts that “we will be transitioning to a verbal society”—that not only will keyboards die *soon* but also that literacy is on the way out.

There may be some sensible advice hidden in the midst of all this, and you might read it and say

I'm a tiresome old coot and Frey is The Future—but if that's true, why on earth are you still reading this? (The “extended bio” of Thomas Frey at futuristspeaker.com is remarkable; how can I possibly question this “powerful visionary who is revolutionizing our thinking about the future” and who calls himself “Google's Top Rated Futurist Speaker”? He's “part of the celebrity speaking circuit.” He has as one of his canned keynote topics The Future of Libraries—oh, but he'll tailor it to either community or academic libraries. He specializes in “the Thomas Frey Experience.” Have *you* ever been experienced?)

Don't Panic: Why Catastrophism Fails Libraries

Back to Barbara Fister, this time [on May 30, 2013](#) in a “Peer to Peer Review” piece at *Library Journal*. She points to examples of academic library catastrophism—librarians portraying doomsday scenarios—and notes that she doesn't buy it:

Okay, I admit, I'm resistant to catastrophism. Every time I turn around someone is telling me I'm doomed, on the verge of extinction, and had better change really fast or die. When doom is an everyday experience, it loses some of its pizzazz. After a while, crisis is just same-old, same-old. It doesn't even cure the hiccups anymore.

She discusses the whole “disruptive innovation” thing—not the understated way Chad Haefele views it (discussed earlier) but the “destroy your business” approach of “Mr. Disruption himself, Clayton Christensen.” (She points out some interesting things about Christensen; I refer you to the original.)

Fister points out that (academic) libraries *have* changed in ways that aren't necessarily great for the long term:

We have given up the rights we had with ownership in order to put fast consumer access to quantities of information first. We stopped buying books in order to feed the serials beast. (Walt Crawford has [done the numbers](#): the next person who accuses me of running an air-conditioned book warehouse is looking for a punch in the nose.) We betrayed our public trust because we didn't want to fall behind, because we wanted to keep consumers happy, because *we had to change!*

In case you're wondering, the link there is to Wayne Bivens-Tatum's discussion of the Big Deal and specifically *The Big Deal and the Damage Done*; that study, which I still regard as vitally important, has yet to sell 100 copies, so apparently most academic librarians either don't care or just don't deal with

this stuff. (The followup *will* reach a lot more people, thanks to ALA.) That is, of course, a digression. And to some extent Fister is deliberately overselling one set of attitudes. In the next paragraph, she offers reasons for a more nuanced view, including the diversity of academic institutions and libraries.

There's more here; it's good (hey, it's Fister) and you should read it yourself. She thinks libraries need to be about *values*, not just value—which, I believe, is in sync with my view that academic libraries need to be about civilization and the long term, not just what this year's students are studying (important as that is) and that going too far in sacrificing collections for access is a mug's game. But, of course, I'm not an academic librarian and not faced with their pressures.

Worth noting: Much of this column is based on a survey of (non-adjunct, non-two-year-college) faculty showing that a growing percentage didn't much care about libraries. That's no surprise (I was saddened but not entirely surprised when one high-profile open access advocate, *who should know better*, basically dismissed academic libraries as unimportant)—and it's probably worth noting the flipside, as one commenter does: 80% of faculty surveyed *did* think librarians and libraries are important and need budgetary support.

It Takes a Library

That's the start of the title of [this June 6, 2013 post](#) by Bobbi Newman at *Librarian by Day*. The rest: "It is Time to Change the Tone of the Conversation About the Future of Libraries #ittakesalibrary"

Newman's getting on board with something I've been grumping about for some time—and something Emily Lloyd also seems to be advocating: Libraries need to build from strength more than bemoaning weakness and doomcrying. Specifically, Lloyd (and Newman) want to see "#savelibraries" replaced with "#ittakesalibrary." I'm not a hashtag person, so I may miss some of the nuance, but I'm on board with what's being said here:

One of the things we can do is change the tone around the discussion of the future of libraries. How you frame your discussion matters and if librarians keep talking about how libraries need to be saved is it any wonder that our patrons and society believe we're dying? We are basically telling them we are! So stop! Stop right now!

Instead we need to start framing the conversation like the powerful partners we are! Let's make this

hashtag happen! It is much more positive and affirmative than the save libraries rhetoric.

I spent a fair amount of time and effort attempting to undermine the "public libraries are shutting down all over!" meme. I don't believe I succeeded: while the essay was picked up here and there, there's still a whole lot of doomcrying and I sometimes do believe that (many) librarians are so prone to negativism that they prefer to ignore the facts. Saying that almost no public library systems (in towns that aren't themselves dying) have shut down and stayed shut down is met with "but *it could happen any day!*" or something of the sort—and we have a variety of academic library doomcryers, most of whom I've deliberately ignored in this discussion. (If your message is "the future is doom," there's really not much to discuss.)

Predictions of the Library's Future

Time for a little fun—as in [this brief June 12, 2013 piece](#) by Wayne Bivens-Tatum at *Academic Librarian*. Actually, most of it's *not* by WBT—it's by Jesse Shera, from a 1933 *Library Quarterly* article in which Shera wrote confidently of future library policies and needs. I'll give Shera credit for getting one thing right and one case where, although his basis for a projection turned out to be dead wrong, his conclusion might be right.

Still, useful as a reminder that even the best library minds—among which Shera definitely belongs—aren't likely to get "the future" right. (Partly because there's no singular future, but I've run that one into the ground by now.)

The Public Library in 2020

[This item](#), by Clifford Lynch, is his contribution to a published collection, [Library 2020: Today's Leading Visionaries Describe Tomorrow's Library](#). I haven't read the collection and the chances of my spending \$45 for a 168-page paperback consisting of 30 brief essays by "leading visionaries" that leads off with The Annoyed Librarian are, well, not very large. But Clifford is Clifford—always worth hearing or reading and he makes his stuff available.

It's an interesting discussion, and while I'm not enthralled by Lynch's suggestions of more merged libraries, more "membership libraries" and some possible lessening of library locality, what he has to say about a *return* to stewardship and the likelihood that future public library collections will be less heavily weighted toward best-sellers and more re-

flective of local resources and broader views is a case where I hope he's right.

I'll quote two early paragraphs, just to note that Lynch is not a wild-eyed revolutionary:

Some things won't change much: the role of the library in helping people to access social services, to find jobs and start businesses, to acquire and refine various forms of literacy, to learn how to discover and evaluate information. Connections and partnerships with K-12 education and community colleges will continue to be important.

Physical materials – books, periodicals, video (DVDs), sound recordings (CDs) and similar materials will still be purchased for the library's collection, and will continue to circulate as they have for decades. But in 2020 that now very large sector of library patrons who want to download borrowed e-books, music or video onto their readers, tablets, players or computers, either in person at the library or from home across the Internet, are likely to be disappointed. Many works, particularly the new best-selling materials from the big content providers, may simply be unavailable from the library in electronic form; patrons will have to settle for a circulating physical copy. Or the library electronic versions may come with such long wait lists that they might as well be unavailable.

Digiphiles would scoff that surely *everything* will be digital and *everyone* will abandon print books by 2020. I'm guessing there are fewer such single-future types now than there were, say, five years ago. We don't know what that "very large sector" will amount to in 2020—but I'll suggest that 20% and 60% are both "very large sectors." (I'm guessing that those are roughly the outer limits of the segment of readers who will prefer ebooks to physical items in 2020; the download-only percentages are likely to be larger for music and video. I was about to say "digital-only," but CDs, DVDs and Blu-ray are all digital media.)

Gonsalves: Reading's demise greatly exaggerated

I thought I'd throw in a local newspaper item that *isn't* either doomcrying or the usual "we all know kids don't read print books" crapola. This one by Sean Gonsalves [appeared July 2, 2013](#) in the *Cape Cod Times*, and it's one of those neat cases where a writer combined one of Pew Internet's better pieces of work with on-the-ground followup. Gonsalves begins with on-the-ground anecdotes, to wit, two 19-year-olds (both nursing students) at the Hyannis Public Library, both of them there to "check out a

book—get this—for fun." And both of them seemed to prefer, you know, *print books* to e-reading.

Now, if you believe the pop wisdom about young people, Buckley and Beaulieu are an endangered species. But, according to a study released last week by the Pew Internet & American Life Project, the demise of the printed word and the imminent death of public libraries has been greatly exaggerated.

Gonsalves also talks to library directors who, gasp, say that print books continue to be their bread and butter and that circulation of print materials is still their public library's biggest service.

The next time you hear some out-of-touch geezer bad-mouthing the reading habits of "young people these days" or lamenting the demise of the printed word, ask them if they remember the predictions about the death of radio with the advent of television. Then, tell them to visit a library and read a book. They might just learn something.

And the next time you read a library pundit telling us that nobody really checks out books anymore—consistently without actual evidence other than maybe walking into one public library and finding one or two stack areas deserted—you might want to regard the pundit with skepticism. The library folks involved in this article aren't Luddites, aren't ignoring technology and don't believe libraries aren't changing or won't change—but they do appear to see that change as continuing to involve a healthy dose of traditional services.

Can't buy libraries love

I admit that I'm copping out to some extent. This post—by James R. Jacobs [on September 4, 2013](#) at *Free Government Information*—is a response to [an "issue brief" by Rick Anderson](#), a brief I've previously encountered in which Anderson basically writes off physical collections *even in research libraries* and argues that only special collections matter. I'm not willing to plow through Anderson's argumentation again, especially given Anderson's involvement in a particular hotbed of attempts to undermine open access. I find him unpalatable, and maybe that's my problem.

Which, of course, means I shouldn't give Jacobs much time either, but I find some of his thoughts particularly interesting. For example:

Libraries are collections built and organized for users. Bookstores are tiny selections built to only sell and make money for investors. One could always purchase what Anderson calls "commodity" publications. That hasn't changed. But no one person could ever purchase *everything* that he or she might ever want to

read or consult someday. That is where the library leveraged the economies of scale and addressed the needs of all users in a community of users — and continues to do so. The “readers can buy it” argument is a libertarian every-person-for-themselves argument that sees no value in fighting for the rights of the community. It is an argument that values the producer over the consumer, the publisher over the reader, the individual over the community.

That’s true for public as well as academic libraries.

There’s quite a bit more. If you’ve already read Anderson’s brief, I recommend Jacobs as one form of balance. If you haven’t, well, Jacobs has a link to it. Jacobs believes in the importance of libraries *and* librarians as something more than check-signers and archivists.

And, of course, read Anderson’s “rebuttal” of Jacobs in the comments. Oddly enough, I don’t find that Anderson refutes some or most of Jacobs’ key points—but then, I’m probably biased.

What Are Libraries, Anyway?

Barbara Fister considers both Anderson’s brief and Jacobs’ response in [this September 5, 2013](#) “Library Babel Fish” column at *Inside Higher Ed*—and, oh look, there’s an extended set of comments in which some odd screen name that’s apparently Rick Anderson keeps faulting other people for misreading his work (e.g., for reading a section head saying “Opting out of the scholarly communications wars” as meaning opting out of scholarly communications wars).

Fister is all too aware that, especially when it comes to Big Deals and other forms of access rather than collection, “We’ve all scoured our budgets for things not too many people will notice are gone in order to pay the rent on journal packages that every library tries to have. Anything from a small publisher, representing a minority interest, or not in demand from the loudest voices is at risk if it hasn’t already disappeared.”

But I also think it would be foolish for libraries to wash their hands of their community’s desire to gain access to knowledge from outside by saying “That stuff that rolls off the production line? The market provides it so much better than we can. It’s silly for us to even try to even pretend we can compete. And forget about changing publishing. Libraries have no control over scholarly communication — unless we’re providing access to something that we own exclusively and which nobody else wants to bring to the market.” Anderson argues this shift in focus from commodity goods will allow us to avoid getting involved in the open access movement, which is complicating publishing, or with OA

mandates that tie the hands of faculty who should be allowed to publish wherever they want. (For me, that’s where his argument went right off the rails.)

That’s only part of the column and it’s all worth reading. It’s in keeping with Fister’s general philosophy: “We somehow have to hang onto the core of what we’ve always been as we find new ways to carry out the work that will have enduring value.”

The comment stream is interesting. Will it surprise you to learn that Eric Van de Velde thinks Rick Anderson “has it exactly right”? It shouldn’t. Will you struggle with Rick Anderson’s claim that “side-step” and “avoid” are somehow fundamentally different, and that when he argues that libraries should “sidestep the whole Open-Access-versus-toll-access controversy” he’s *not* saying libraries shouldn’t be involved in the OA debate? (Yes, he says that’s the case; Anderson’s version of English is much more sophisticated than mine, Fister’s and Chris Bourg’s, apparently. Bourg responds to his comment in a way that suggests she reads English more the way I do than the way Anderson does.) Of course, since Anderson is now part of an anti-OA group (that never calls itself anti-OA), it’s reasonable for some of us to believe that he’s not big on OA. (A bit later, Chris Bourg says she read Anderson’s “entire paper at least 3 times” and it wasn’t clear what Anderson meant.)

Do read the rest of the comments as well. My personal quick take is that university libraries that focus *predominantly* on digitizing rare materials and basically ignore “commodity” print collections will turn into ghosts of themselves—that, for example, the current budget for Bancroft would become the *entire* budget for UC Berkeley’s library system. I consider that to be a doomsday scenario. (I find it heartening that UC Berkeley’s library system is apparently recovering one-third of the inflation-adjusted annual budget *lost* between 2002 and 2012; I find it less heartening that getting a third of the way back—and still having the largest loss of any academic library—is somehow a triumph.)

Looking for love in all the wrong places

Chris Bourg comments on Anderson, Jacobs *and* Fister in [this September 4, 2013 piece](#) at *Feral Librarian*. The post begins with an odd set of tweets, in which Anderson seems to be saying that a Debate is the proper way for him to respond to a blog post—but, of course, he eventually commented.

One thing that stands out to me in Rick’s original piece and in [his comments on James’ post](#) is how much of what libraries are and what libraries do (or could/should do) is “out of scope”. In a paper that

proposes an answer to the question of what significant roles remain for libraries, I find it strange that government documents, patron-driven acquisitions, and the role of subject specialists are explicitly out of scope. The role of libraries in the long-term preservation of what Rick refers to as “commodity documents” (and I call “a big honking part of the scholarly record”) also seems to be out of scope. Rick also appears to be declaring “the scholarly communication wars” out of scope by noting that his approach “allows us to sidestep the whole Open-Access-versus-toll-access controversy.”...

I am skeptical of any proposal for the future of libraries that insists on focusing on one issue at a time. To my mind, the future of collections and collection development cannot be separated from a discussion of the role of subject specialists (that stuff doesn't collect itself, last I checked), or of who ought to drive acquisition decisions. Likewise, any discussion of the role of libraries in “enriching the scholarly environment” that explicitly sidesteps the role of libraries in engaging in the “scholarly communication wars” seems to me to be missing a big chunk of the picture.

Bourg's also concerned that there's too much focus on individual libraries rather than on The Library as a social institution. But, of course, Bourg doesn't mean The Library: she means “a network of great libraries across the nation and across the world.” Hard to disagree with that, even as one who treasures the diversity of both individual public and individual academic libraries, especially since “network” in this case does *not* mean centrally governed or uniform.

Thing called Love: Further thoughts on #lovegate

Chris Bourg says she wasn't planning on writing more about the Anderson piece but heard enough public and private comments to feel the need. Thus, [this September 8, 2013 post](#) at *Feral Librarian*. She urged people to read Anderson's piece, several times if necessary.

Bourg focuses on two aspects of Anderson's piece and at the end offers general thoughts about The Library as an ideal and a reality. The two aspects: how libraries ought to respond to the “more efficient marketplace for ‘commodity’ books” and whether libraries ought to opt out of (or “sidestep”) the “scholarly communication wars”—oh, hell, call it OA.

The first discussion is one I'd love to see emulated by more academic librarians, especially those at ARL institutions (Bourg's at Stanford, which I—of course—think of as the *second* best academic library in Northern California; if I weren't a Cal grad, I might think differently). I think you need to read this discussion in the original, but to me Bourg's saying that

well-thought-out book collections, *including* books that are readily available, are important to academic and other libraries and that saying “oh, you can get a used copy cheap from Amazon” is a terrible disservice to people and to society. Just two tidbits out of an excellent discussion:

The fact that libraries collect, preserve, and provide access to commodity books means that the ideal of equal access to information still exists. The degree to which libraries divert resources from commodity collections is the degree to which they contribute to increasing educational inequality, as individual access to information will become more dependent on individual financial means.

... I don't want anyone's research agenda or learning to be restricted because libraries prematurely decided that the market for commodity documents has become efficient enough that we can all fend for ourselves.

As to “sidestepping” OA and related debates, Bourg doesn't see building and digitizing local, noncommercial collections and supporting OA as being a zero-sum game (I'm paraphrasing badly here) and says:

Moreover, where Rick sees decreased attention by libraries to the debates over the future of scholarly communication as a benefit, I would see it as an abdication of a major social responsibility of libraries. Perhaps others are persuaded that side-stepping the scholarly communication debates would be a benefit of shifting focus away from commodity collections, but I am not convinced that it would either have that effect or that the effect would be a positive one if it did. Room for debate, I suppose.

I really do have to quote Bourg's final paragraph (noting as I do that 24% of U.S. academic libraries circulated *more* items *per capita* in 2012 than in 2002, and that the percentage with growth over any two-year period in that decade ranges from 34% to 45%):

Shifting resources from commodity documents to special collecting certainly seems like a rational way for libraries to prioritize limited resources in such a way as to enhance their own unique contributions to both local communities and to the public good. After all, maintaining large collections of commodity documents (especially in print) when fewer items are being checked out by fewer patrons is horribly inefficient. But I would argue that the fact that the provision of public goods is rarely efficient renders them no less important. In my opinion, a true radical shift would be for library leaders to focus more on promoting the value of libraries as a public good, essential to a healthy democracy and to promoting equal access to information, and less on seeking efficiencies as a way to save ourselves. It's a thing called love

... love of democracy, equality, community, and the ideal that public goods still matter.

Another post where the stream of comments is worth reading. Of course Rick Anderson is involved.

The End Of The Library

Oh, sigh. Here's MG Siegler [on October 13, 2013](#) at *TechCrunch*, and he's bitching about "a hailstorm of angry emails, messages, tweets, and comments" because "I dared wonder if libraries will continue to exist in the future."

So, having been alerted that maybe linking to a stupid *Wired* article as The Truth is not ideal, Siegler stepped back, looked at the actual evidence of how libraries are used, contemplated the reality that ebooks and print books are likely to coexist for a very, very long time, considered all the other things libraries do, and apologized. Right?

Wrong. Siegler doubled down—and, by the way, says flat-out that librarians are *not allowed to answer* his question of whether the death of libraries is a crazy notion. Which makes sense: librarians might point to the facts, and Siegler *knows the future*, so facts are irrelevant.

Given that *everything's ebooks all the way down*, that they're so cheap for regular people that *everybody* can buy everything they could possibly want, then it follows:

And so, with these things in mind, it's hard not to imagine a future where the majority of libraries cease to exist — at least as we currently know them. Not only are they being rendered obsolete in a digital world, the economics make even *less* sense. One can easily envision libraries making their way to the forefront of any budget cut discussions.

I know this sucks. Libraries have been an invaluable part of human history, propagating our culture and knowledge over centuries. But recognizing the changing times and pointing out the obvious shouldn't be considered blasphemy. It is what it is.

The internet has replaced the importance of libraries as a repository for knowledge. And digital distribution has replaced the role of a library as a central hub for obtaining the containers of such knowledge: books. And digital bits have replaced the need to cut down trees to make paper and waste ink to create those books. This is evolution, not devolution.

Note the tense on all these sweeping statements: It's not even *will*, it's "has" and "have." This isn't blasphemy or evolution, it's single-minded nonsense. What follows next is as predictable as day following night: "It's hard for me to even remember the last time I was

in a library." And, of course, as is usually the way with *TechCrunch*, *Wired*, and similar DigiPorn outlets, *as I am, so is everybody*. Poof. End of discussion.

Oh, there's more here, but it's not much better. Here's one of those sweeping statements that can almost bring me to tears or to toss my display out the window:

That's the thing: it seems that nearly everyone is actually in agreement that libraries, as we currently know them, are going away.

Bullshit. Just plain bullshit. Given where this appeared, you won't be surprised that at least some of the comments aren't much better. (Some are fine, of course. Some of them from those folks Siegler doesn't want to hear from.) No, I didn't read them all; I was amused by one or two who basically wanted to high-five Siegler but made the fatal error of actually visiting their libraries and seeing them being used.

The End of "The End of Libraries"

Jacob Berg commented on Siegler's piece in [this October 13, 2013](#) post at *BeerBrarian*. Berg's comment combines a bunch of tweets from various folks with a little of his own commentary. I won't go through most of it—it's a fun read—but maybe all that really needs to be said comes in the first paragraph:

On Sunday, October 14th, yet another "End of Libraries" piece appeared. Per usual, it was written by a white male with no use for libraries, because every single time this trope appears, that's part of the author's demographic background. Beyond that, it's a crucial part of the author's background. It is overwhelmingly affluent white men* who argue that because they do not use something, it has no value for anyone. Libraries. The Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program. Affordable health care. It's the same argument.

The asterisk? Leads to a footnote explaining that Berg is himself "for the time being, a financially secure white male."

Reflections on the Future of the Research Library

Kevin Smith posted this [on December 20, 2013](#) at *Scholarly Communications @ Duke*—and it's a case where I'm pretty much just saying, "This is interesting and worth reading if you haven't already done so." I don't think either of the definite articles in the title reflect single-mindedness on Smith's part; they're lower-case "the," not capital The, if that helps.

I'm going to quote one paragraph (discussing Ian Baucom's talk as part of a Duke University Li-

braries set of conversations on the future—a set of conversations that sounds awfully interesting and possibly inspiring to me!):

Ian challenged the Libraries to think about whether our fundamental commitment is to information or to knowledge. This immediately struck me, as I think it was intended to, as a false dichotomy. Libraries are not mere storage facilities for information, nor are they, by themselves, producers of knowledge. Rather, they serve as the bridge that helps students and researchers use information to produce knowledge. That role, if we will embrace it, implies a much more active and engaged role in the process of knowledge than has traditionally been accorded to (or embraced by) librarians.

But that's just one paragraph. [This is interesting](#) and worth reading if you haven't already done so.

The Future of Research Libraries, part 2

When you're done reading Smith's December 20, 2013 article (above), just click on the right arrow above its title to get to *this* sequel, [posted on December 23, 2013](#). I think it's both interesting and important. But I neither feel that I'm in a position to comment on most of it nor that I have the desire to do so.

I do wonder a little about the final paragraph, having to do with what ARL libraries count and measure. Maybe that's because I recently finished writing a *Library Technology Reports* issue bringing *The Big Deal and the Damage Done* forward two years and improving on its analysis—and because as soon as I finish this essay, I'll start preparing a self-published book also based on the things NCES measures (many of which are also the things ARL measures). I agree with Smith that neither size of physical collection nor spending on resources is a fully appropriate metric; as with public libraries, the *best* metrics have to do with the differences that libraries make in the lives of people and health of communities. (Smith phrases that nicely in terms that make sense for academic libraries.) “If librarians want to compete to feel good about our continuing role in the fast-changing world of scholarly communications, we should look at the lives we touch, rather than becoming too attached to the formats and costs of the resources through which we touch them.” I don't disagree...but I think there continues to be value in counting the things you *can* count and seeing where those lead you, not as the best or all of the metrics for a good library but as parts of them, especially given the difficulty of measuring the changes in users' lives. (I am *not* suggesting that

Smith would disagree with me: my point is somewhat orthogonal to his.)

5 Futures for Libraries

It's a listicle! It's in a somewhat techie environment! It must be horrific... or not. In this case, it's a piece by John Farrier [posted on January 1, 2014](#) at *Neatorama*...and given that Farrier is pretty clear about these being possibilities and aspects of libraries, not The Future for All Libraries, it's an interesting set of discussions.

The five? Briefly, patron-driven acquisition; discovery portals (e.g. Summon); makerspaces; embedded librarianship; and “More of What We're Doing Now.” It is, of course, a fairly conservative list, since those are all things many libraries are *already* involved with—and maybe that's the point.

The final discussion is in part a takedown of “an established genre of journalism that may be called ‘the end of libraries.’” The example Farrier links to is...well, we've already been there, and as Farrier notes, these articles are “usually written by a wealthy, technologically sophisticated person.”

Here's what the futurists are missing: they possess the latest mobile devices and sophisticated computer skills. But most people don't. The futurists project themselves as typical library patrons. But there are a vast number of people with very limited computer skills or computer access. And don't assume that it's confined to older people. College students usually [prefer print books to e-books](#). I routinely encounter 18-year olds who don't know how to access the internet or use email. The digital divide remains huge and will continue to provide a market for libraries.

There's more; it's good. Farrier is, guess what, a librarian.

Schism in the Stacks

That's the first part of the title of this Roland De Wolk article in *California Magazine* (the Cal alumni magazine), [posted January 21, 2014](#). The rest: “Is the University Library As We Know It Destined for Extinction?”

The article doesn't answer that question; I don't think it even intends an answer. It offers some perspectives—and, frankly, it's how I'm now aware that the Doe stacks, in which I labored throughout most of my undergraduate career and for years later, is now gone. Sigh. (Yes, I know, they were seismically unsound and had to go, and I'm sure female employees won't miss the glass floor tiles on one side of the stacks. Still, you know, nostalgia.)

More sigh: this is the article that caused me to lose a *lot* of respect for Michael Eisen. The following quotations are from Eisen.

“Fifteen years from now you won’t need a library,” he says, his office cluttered with a 52-inch flat screen monitor, a collection of beer cans and a bike. The 46-year-old says “I’m not sure we’ll even have a one” when he’s 60. And he says he won’t miss it. . . .

Those who advocate saving the central stacks, in his view, are guilty of the “fetishism of print.”

Just being a professor doesn’t mean you can’t suffer from the “I don’t need it therefore nobody does” syndrome.

Otherwise, it’s an interesting piece.

Taking a Longer View

As this too-long roundup slows toward a halt, it’s time for a little more Barbara Fister, this time [on January 30, 2014](#) in a “Library Babel Fish” column at *Inside Higher Ed*. Fister’s in a somewhat negative mood here, probably for good reason. . . .if only because Fister really does believe in the broader and longer-term goals of academic (and other) libraries, and sees short-term planning and budgeting undermining those goals.

The more business-like our approach to education, the more each thing we do is measured by return on investment, the harder it is to reconcile local, immediate and broader long-term needs.

That’s followed with examples of the conflict, and you should read those in the original.

Fister concludes:

We need to focus further out, more broadly on what all of this is for, and see how to align what we have to do to survive for one more day with what we want the world to look like five years from now, or ten. Because working toward a healthy future – which may mean sacrificing immediate local need for a longer-term good – is the only way we’ll have one.

[Go read the article](#). Also the comments, one of which I found ineffably sad (I think you’ll spot it without my highlighting it).

Thirty trends shaping the future of academic libraries

Let’s close with this article by David Attis and Colin Koproske, [which appeared](#) in the January 2013 *Learned Publishing* (a subscription journal) but is freely available. (The link above takes you to the landing page, which has a PDF link.)

It is a listicle. It involves lots of generalizations about academic libraries that don’t hold true for all of them. It’s firmly based in *The Digital Revolution* where Everything’s Going E. It’s based on a “research initiative” by the Education Advisory Board.

I found it terribly sad. So sad that I can’t bring myself to pick it apart. It is probably worth noting that neither of the authors is a librarian—but of course, the Education Advisory Board works at Higher Levels. Maybe you’ll find more to it; I found it depressing.

Building from strength

As usual, I have no real overall conclusions, especially for a roundup in which some pieces are entirely about public libraries, some are entirely about academic libraries, some are pretty much about the ARL subset of academic libraries. . . .and a few seem to cross areas.

I’m confident that, at least for as long as I’m alive, the United States will have thousands of public libraries that are being heavily used and circulating both print and digital materials, along with all the other things good public libraries do. I’m hoping they’ll be better supported (it’s not *all* negative now: most public libraries spent more per capita in 2011 than they did in 2010). My best guess is that the number of public libraries in 2020 will be within 2% of the number in 2014 (and it’s quite possible the deviation will be on the upside), and that circulation in 2020 will be higher than it was in 2011 (when it was more than two billion).

As for academic libraries: I’m confident that hundreds of them will still have major actual collections in 2020 (or 2030 or 2040), not just access to digital resource; it’s probable that thousands will. Beyond that. . . well, I’m not in the field.

Masthead

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