

*Responding to the Challenges Facing Scholarly Communication*

**Scholarly Societies and Scholarly Communication**

(Endorsed by the Academic Council on April 19, 2006)

**Discussion Statement**

Most scholarly societies help enable the development and dissemination of new knowledge in their disciplines by publishing scholarly books and journals, and sponsoring research and educational conferences, with great benefit to their members and the public. However, faced with rising costs of operating their organizations, some societies have begun pricing their scholarly works above what is needed for maintaining the publication to provide additional income for the society. For many societies the complexities of publication production have led to partnerships with profit-maximizing commercial publishers, often leading to further price increases. Rapidly rising prices inevitably create barriers to access and reduce the impact of the scholarly work. In recognition of their critical and singular ability and self-proclaimed responsibility to advance knowledge within their discipline and to make this knowledge affordable to the widest audience, we recommend that scholarly societies facilitate access to scholarship by;

1. reaffirming that development and dissemination of scholarly information is the or one of the most important purposes of the society;
2. setting their publications policies to sustain publication and dissemination of knowledge, without requiring high or rapidly rising subscription prices to support other society operations;
3. acquiring only those copyrights for scholarly works that demonstrably protect their investment in publication, while allowing scholars to retain rights which will facilitate other non-commercial use and dissemination of new knowledge;
4. working collaboratively with universities and publishers to develop and adopt the most economical and technologically effective methods of publishing that also maximize quality, dissemination, and impact; including placing work in open access for a;
5. and providing organizational and financial innovations, and transparent society and publication finances to promote efficient and economical resource use in scholarly communication.

**Background**

*Societies are a critical contributor to and stakeholder in scholarship and scholarly communication.* They have served the public well for centuries, beginning with learned societies in antiquity, and entering more modern history with such bodies as the British Royal Society (founded in 1660), the five académies of the Institut de France (all founded in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries) and leading to more than 4,100 societies serving contemporary scholarship.<sup>1</sup> They have largely been led by academics and have fostered open and intellectual inquiry into virtually all fields of scholarship from aesthetics and archeology to zoology. Many of their deliberations have been made public through the societies' meetings and publications, and these efforts remain at the heart of the work of many societies today, These groups often sponsor education within their discipline for all levels of students and the public, and often act as advocates for public and private support of their discipline.

*Societies were founded and run by scholars and still depend upon their intellectual contributions; for good reasons many outsourced their publication activities, yielding what should and could be successful partnerships that still support the societies' missions.* While many societies published

---

<sup>1</sup> As documented by the Scholarly Societies Project at the University of Waterloo Library, <http://www.scholarly-societies.org/>.

their own books and journals for centuries, in the past 50 years, the complexities of modern publishing and the focused academic interests of the society leaders led to increasingly close relationships between some societies and commercial publishers. Academics generally are responsible for founding and maintaining society journals and other publications, and organizing conferences whose scholarly work often is published. They usually write articles and books, referee and edit their colleagues' work, and often provide important society leadership. Publishers bring their organizational skills to producing the scholarly works, and achieve some important economies in printing and marketing among others.

*Transfer of limited copyrights in scholarly material from author to society (via copyright transfer) can assist that part of the society's mission to spread and advance knowledge, which itself has been and could continue to be subsidized by other society activities when necessary.* While full copyright transfer was a convention it never was and no longer is required to fulfill the mission. Societies used to require that authors transfer copyright to them to facilitate production and dissemination, and some still do. Those in this latter group maintain control of their publications from solicitation and acceptance of scholarly work, to editing and coordinating refereeing of the material, to printing and distributing the final work. Because of the importance that they attribute to dissemination of scholarship, these societies sometimes produce this work at a financial loss that is borne by other society income sources such as membership dues or conference income. This model was followed by most societies from their inception, until the last thirty years or so when new methods of producing scholarly work began being adopted.

*Copyright transfer is subject to abuse, particularly when societies partner with profit-maximizing commercial publishers and therefore cede control of the material, with resulting constraints on dissemination and impact.* With the economics and effort of publishing, in some societies, scholars increasingly are transferring copyright to publishers and have little control on costs and prices. Faculty now write the material, edit it, referee it and then give it to publishers who sell it back to scholars and their universities, often making substantial profits and rapidly increasing costs of the publications. If there are any profits accruing from the books and journals, the societies usually share them, but the publisher controls the large parts of costs including corporate development and overhead over which the society has virtually no control, and often little knowledge. Publishers vary in their management of costs and profits. Some control costs very effectively and require only modest profits, while others follow more traditional corporate practices of charging what the market will bear and maximizing profit for shareholders, at the expense of their market which are faculty, academic institutions and the public. Societies similarly vary in the costs of and profits from their publications, across nearly the same range as commercial publishers.<sup>2</sup>

*Societies are in unique positions to improve scholarly communication within their discipline by creating and fostering new publication methods.* Through the enlightened leadership of scholars, societies can help define productive areas for advancement in their discipline, and can foster research and new thought by focused conferences and publications in developing topics that they feel are likely to benefit their members and society more generally. To enhance the availability of knowledge, societies can orchestrate the organization of information across publications where neither the individual scholar nor separate journal has the motivation or ability to do so. Societies should use their particular broad and powerful position as shepherds of their discipline's knowledge to not only encourage the development and organization of that knowledge, but to also encourage extending that knowledge through eased and improved access to it. Emerging technology can facilitate efforts by societies and their scholars to organize and enhance

---

<sup>2</sup> See Bergstrom, Carl and Bergstrom, "The economics of Scholarly Publishing," 2001, for data and analyses that document this variation and the mix of society, commercial, and society-commercial hybrid publishers that characterize several disciplines. Available at <http://octavia.zoology.washington.edu/publishing/intro.html> (accessed 12/6/2005).

substantially their discipline's scholarship and its availability, tasks that societies are uniquely positioned to undertake.

There are many current society experiments and successes in evolving healthy scholarly communication to meet the needs of scholars, societies, and academe.<sup>3</sup> All societies who have the advance of disciplinary knowledge as a priority goal should study and replicate these experiments, and create their own technological, organizational, and operational innovations in support of that goal.

*Societies are accountable to their membership and to the academy for the ways in which they fulfill their scholarly communication mission.* Transparency in business models that support publishing and other society efforts is a necessary part of this accountability. A transparent presentation of a society's finances will allow its membership to determine whether or not profits from publications are needed for the work of the society. The prices of access to new knowledge will be lowest if they are set to meet the core costs of production and dissemination of new knowledge, and are not inflated by the society's need for other income. A society might choose to curtail some of its activities if its members have to bear all the associated costs, rather than relying on its scholarly publications to defray some of these non-publication costs. The societies must recognize that increased costs of publications slows the spread of knowledge that the societies themselves hold as a crucial societal function. We believe that societies should examine carefully their policies on publication costs and the use of that income, and place a very high value on spreading knowledge widely.

---

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, the publication program of the Optical Society of America and its *Optics Express* open access journal (<http://www.opticsexpress.org/>), the American Anthropology Association's integrated knowledge portal *AnthroSource* (<http://www.anthrosource.net/>), or the series of "virtual" journals in the physical sciences has been jointly developed by the American Institute of Physics (AIP) and the American Physical Society (APS) (<http://www.virtualjournals.org/>).