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Hobbling Scholarship: A Librarian's Perspective on Inequitable Access to Calls for Papers for Publication and Presentations

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Those of us in the academic and library communities are at least somewhat familiar with the Open Access (OA) movement. Discussion (sometimes quite heated) about Open Access abounds in discussion lists in librarianship, in Twitter, and in the librarianship, science, and academia-related blogosphere. Until recently, the discussion has taken place mainly among those in the sciences and medicine and librarianship. But now historians and others in the digital humanities are increasingly joining in. Additionally, the last few years have seen such developments as the rise of “predatory publishers” (i.e. publishers that dupe scholars into agreements to publish that turn out to entail heavy fees for the scholars or their institutions) and pro-Open Access activity at the federal level in the US at the Congressional and White House levels. Open Access impassions people. The Open Access movement even has in the late activist Aaron Swartz what some call its first martyr. Clearly, this is a movement that matters. This article will focus on one aspect of that debate: the need for Open Access to apply to calls for papers (CFPs) for periodicals and conferences.

Open Access advocates argue for the purported need for free access to scientific journal articles arising from taxpayer-funded research. They argue that expanding access to journal articles would accelerate the research process and increase the return on government investment in scientific research. Likewise, the Open Data movement is pushing, in part, for journals to facilitate the public posting of research data or, failing that, for scientists or librar-

ians to do so themselves via institutional repositories or other venues.

I would like to add a third scholarly content source that deserves attention from the Open Access community. CFPs (both for periodicals and conferences and other professional gatherings) are also often limited in their access and distribution and sometimes are seen only by those who are members of the sponsoring professional association, by members of the personal professional network of the person issuing the CFP or by those that can afford personal subscriptions to expensive journals or who have access to a library that has an institutional one. Why is that a problem? Because if only a privileged subset of scholars has access to CFPs for journal submissions and for meetings, inequity is introduced and reinforced producing serious consequences for scholars, for scholarly discourse, and for entire disciplines.

But a bit of background first. I am the Web administrator of ResearchRaven, a free online database of CFPs in the health sciences and the health and medicine-related social sciences and humanities as well as notices of meetings in those fields. My colleagues and I at the Center for Health Research and Quality at Samaritan Health Services started ResearchRaven because we wanted to provide our own researchers with a single, comprehensive resource that listed opportunities and vehicles to present on, publish and otherwise disseminate the results of their research. We realized that the listings on ResearchRaven would be



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valuable to researchers elsewhere. Therefore, we decided to make ResearchRaven freely available on the Web.

As I scour Google looking for CFPs (particularly for those for journals—less so for CFPs for conferences as the latter are easier to find) to list on ResearchRaven, I often come across a few words in Google indicating that a CFP has been issued by a journal but upon further investigation find that the announcement itself is locked up behind a paywall. Thus, only individual paying subscribers or the ever smaller number of research and college libraries that can afford subscriptions to the journals can gain access to the journal and, therefore, to the announcement. Everyone else has to pony up for access to just that CFP.

Naturally, the publishers want to make profit from every word in their publications to the fullest extent possible. Business is business, after all. But I would argue that this tight lock on CFPs is detrimental not only to the scholarly community but, due to the debilitating, insulating effect it has on the journals themselves, to the publishers themselves. After all, if only a tiny slice of the academic community knows about a CFP, only those aware of these opportunities will become conversant with the topic, let alone develop widely-known expertise in it. Publishers will not profit in the long run by preventing lively discourse and the cultivation of new voices in the plethora of disciplines in academia these days.

The rise in journal prices is creating a situation in which only libraries at the wealthiest institutions can afford subscriptions. That means that scholars at poorer schools will often never see a specific CFP. They are thereby deprived of the opportunity to contribute to their fields, with dire consequences for their careers and for the health of their respective disciplines. It is also not healthy for the US as a society for academia to become dominated by a handful of richly endowed institutions made ever richer by the prestige their faculty members acquire by access to CFPs. Publication, after all, leads to grants, which lead to research which leads to publication and more grants...

As budgets for faculty tighten and academic jobs disappear, there will be an ever greater number of independent scholars who have no access whatever to research libraries. These scholars, even if they have set up free table of contents alerts to journals in their field, will have to pay out of pocket (and this is not an inconsiderable expense, given that many toll access journals charge \$30 and up

for every download) for copies of the CFP or prevail on colleagues that do have such access to send them a PDF of the CFP. This is a dismal scenario vis-à-vis the vitality of scholarly discussion in the US.

When CFPs are locked up behind paywalls, interdisciplinary interactions decrease. After all, the fewer people that are able to see a CFP, the fewer are the people that can respond to it. That means, for instance, that an independent scholar in, say, disability studies, may hesitate to purchase for \$35 or more a CFP in a journal of postcolonial studies even though the CFP is directly related to both fields and her work could enrich each.

Also, scholars who never see a certain CFP and only several years afterward learn that a special issue of a journal on the topic of interest has been published are set back professionally. Furthermore, the topic in question may not have been addressed by a truly representative group of researchers. Thus, discussion is stifled and scholarship hampered. A bland homogeneity of thought can result.

Thus, there is a need for Open Access for CFPs. How might this be brought about?

The most obvious way would be for the publishers to simply make CFPs openly accessible on each journal's Web site, either in text form on the site itself or downloadable as a PDF. This would be relatively easy for the publishers to do and would be in their interest, given that wide dissemination of CFPs raises awareness among audiences heretofore ignorant of the very existence of some of their lesser known journals. And goodness knows in the wake of the PR debacle that was the Research Works Act in 2012 the publishers could use some good will among scholars, particularly early career ones who tend to be more in favor of Open Access than their older, already established peers. If publishers want to head off ever greater defection to Open Access journals by this cohort, rendering CFPs Open Access would be a relatively painless way to win hearts and minds.

When I see an Open Access CFP, for instance, not only do I get warm fuzzies about the publishers but I list it on ResearchRaven and often send it out to some of the lists (e.g., in women's studies, medical anthropology, the history of science, medicine and technology) of the H-Net discussion list network. Those announcements are eminently findable in Google and in other search engines.

What an easy way for publishers, large and small, to increase their visibility on the Web. Win win all around. The more scholars that have access to CFPs, the greater the level of an invigorating diversity vis-à-vis methodologies, points of view/worldviews, interdisciplinary synergy, and research findings and greater the level of representation of groups and regions historically underrepresented in certain fields.

In short, if you care about your field and want to advance it and to assist younger scholars and those in journal-poor environments please do whatever you can to ensure that your CFP (be it for a conference or a periodical) is Open Access-friendly and as widely disseminated as possible via Twitter, discussion lists, the blogosphere, and the electronic newsletters and other member publications of scholarly societies and professional organizations. Far better to let the world know of the CFP instead of a tiny, insular, sterile, self-serving elite clustered behind a paywall. Let's liberate the CFP!

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