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Special Issue: The Role of Scholarly Communication in a Democratic Society

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Why has the *Journal of Librarianship and Scholarly Communication* produced this special issue on the role of scholarly communication and democracy? The pillars of a democratic society (equity, a free press, fair elections, engaged citizens, and the equal application of laws) are directly impacted by the availability, accessibility, and accuracy of information. Additionally, engaged, critically thinking individuals require an understanding of how knowledge is produced and shared, who has the power to make that information available, and how they—as information consumers and producers—are involved in those processes.

Proposed¹ and adopted government policies and actions² that limit transparency and engagement, the increasing commodification of learning,³ the framing of education as a measure of return on investment (ROI) in real dollars,⁴ and the rapid transition of the research landscape to an increasingly monopolized walled garden⁵ have been in motion for some time but come into sharp focus through the lens of scholarly communication. Scholarly

¹ <https://www.factcheck.org/2018/05/debate-over-epas-transparency-rule/>

² <http://time.com/5075265/epa-website-climate-change-censorship/>

³ <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2016/03/the-commodification-of-higher-education/475947/>

⁴ https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/higher-education-is-more-than-a-return-on-investment/2013/03/14/2bae3660-8a94-11e2-8d72-dc76641cb8d4_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.51ce028f8999

⁵ <https://scholarlykitchen.sspnet.org/2017/08/02/elsevier-acquires-bepress/>

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communication is a broad domain that covers how information and knowledge are created and shared, what levels of access to that information are available, and how economic factors influence information communication. This system affects both the production and consumption of information and knowledge. As such, the question of democratic or equitable processes is internal (Is the scholarly communication domain democratic and equitable?) and external (How does scholarly communication affect a democratic society?). The scholarly communication and research landscapes have never been level playing fields for all interested parties. Funding constraints, prejudices, and politics have all been factors in the amplification and suppression of people's perspectives. In this special issue, I wanted to investigate how librarians and other information professionals are interrogating those practices and situating their scholarly communication work within the frame of an equitable and democratic society. What are the challenges and the opportunities? Where are we making progress? Where is there disenfranchisement?

I am grateful that the Editors-in-Chief, Melanie Schlosser and Mark Newton, found value in this desire and worked with me to bring this special issue to fruition. Our call for proposals brought in a wide variety of submissions, reflecting the broad nature of scholarly communication and the various methods of democratic engagement. With one exception, this issue is populated completely by practice articles. In these articles, authors demonstrate the ways they have engaged with scholarly communication topics and how that engagement relates to democracy, either for society at large, or for the scholarly communication system. The work of these authors covers such diverse areas as teaching (Buck & Valentino), governance (Cantrell & Johnson), access (Schweik, Smith, & Meyer), data ethics (Wheeler), and representation (Kostelecky). The commentary (Ghamandi) provides a stirring call to action, identifying threats to a participatory society and a proposed means to resolve them. This work is not happening in isolation. There are several efforts underway to help reconcile the work we do in scholarly communication, the impact that it has on society, and how we can improve access, engagement, and authentic, democratic representation. With support from the Andrew Mellon Foundation, MIT Libraries recently hosted a summit titled "Grand Challenges in Information Science and Scholarly Communication."⁶ While the summit did not mention democracy by name, the topics (scholarly discovery, digital curation and preservation, and open scholarship) and associated keynotes tied back to ideas critical to a democracy: access, representation, and participation. The Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) Research and Scholarly Environments Committee has recently announced⁷ a process to create a new research agenda to help accelerate the transition to more open, inclusive, and equitable systems of scholarship. In 2018, the Scholarly Publishing and

⁶ <https://grandchallenges.mit.edu/>

⁷ <http://www.acrl.ala.org/acrlinsider/archives/15595>

Academic Resources Coalition (SPARC) established advocacy for community-controlled infrastructure as a key priority.⁸ The goal of this priority is to strengthen community-supported scholarly communication infrastructures, while recognizing that open systems do not always promote democratic or equitable participation—as evidenced by the theme of OA Week 2018: “Designing Equitable Foundations for Open Knowledge.”⁹

These initiatives illustrate that the connection between scholarly communication and the components of a democratic society is a topic of investigation. Moreover, the ways that scholarly communication both supports democracy and is a democratic system are also ripe for scrutiny. This special issue brings forward the practices and philosophies of a diverse group of librarians who are interrogating and strengthening that connection and scrutinizing the democratic opportunities within scholarly communication. It is my hope that as this field continues to evolve, we will continue to strive toward democratic scholarly communication practices, which can have a positive effect on our society. This work requires dismantling existing systems and structures that disenfranchise populations and limit engagement, while building and supporting more equitable approaches and practices. It will take many complementary efforts to attain this goal. The contributors to this special issue have my thanks for sharing their work with others, thus furthering our movement toward a more democratic and participatory society—including our systems of scholarly communication.

⁸ <https://sparcopen.org/who-we-are/program-plan/>

⁹ <http://www.openaccessweek.org/profiles/blogs/theme-of-2018-international-open-access-week-to-be-designing-equi>