

Scholarly Publishers Unite to Stake Their Position in the Research Enterprise

Nina Hoffman and Erin Landis

The value scholarly publishers provide their communities has become a source of debate for more than a decade. Consider that in 2012, Kent Anderson of Caldera Publishing first penned “A Proposed List—60 Things Journal Publishers Do”¹ for the *Scholarly Kitchen*, which has been regularly updated to currently include more than 100 attributes in its most recent version (2018).² Yet, here we are at the start of 2022, and we still find ourselves in the position of needing to prove the worth of scholarly publishers to the scientific community at large.

Pressures on scholarly publishers have come to bear from various directions. Funders who want and need to have their funded research published are now becoming publishers themselves and doubting the significance of publishers’ peer-review processes; for example, the Wellcome Trust encourages its grantees to publish their research on the Wellcome Open Research Platform. Funders are also questioning the significance that publishers bring to disseminating research; these same funders often want to dictate the publishing ecosystem and invalidate the editorial process that curates the content and provides access to the data in multiple formats. In some cases, these funders remove the ability for an author to select their journal of choice for publishing their research. Given the continued reliance on the Impact Factor in the academic promotion structure, forcing authors to publish in less-regarded journals could negatively affect their career. When these actions are considered in relation to the rise of the CC-BY license³ (a Creative Commons license that allows use of content without permission so long as attribution is provided), it calls into question the merit of protecting intellectual property by negating copyright credit; this dismisses the role publishers play in protecting an author’s right to their scientific discoveries. Copyright protection is an author’s first line of defense.

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There are also the pressures stemming from the Open Access movement and the momentum it has gained, spurred largely by cOAlitionS and its myriad demands of researchers funded by its signatories. Additionally, cOAlitionS stipulates that publishers share their cost structure to prove their services are worth the price. Furthermore, the growth of predatory publishers in the marketplace also threatens the scholarly communications system, leading to confusion among readers and authors. Then there’s SciHub, which scours the Internet looking for ways “in” to co-opt content from respected scholarly publishers because it too knows and values the contributions made by established brands. All told, these various sources of threat ultimately devalue publishers, ignoring the “Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval” that brand association brings. Arguably, this results in diminished confidence in science.

It was against this backdrop that the Publishing Professional Group (PPG) of the Council of Medical Specialty Societies (CMSS) set out to educate the scholarly communications community of the value scholarly publishers bring to the research enterprise. A small workgroup of the PPG tackled this issue over the better part of 2020, engaging in a deliberative process to carefully define the value scholarly publishers bring to the table. The members of that group are Nina Hoffman (American Society of Hematology), Christine Laine (American College of Physicians), Erin Landis (American Gastroenterological Association), May Piotrowski (American Academy of Ophthalmology), and Justine Turco (American College of Cardiology). The workgroup set out to accomplish 3 goals: 1) reach a common understanding of the unique value of scholarly publishers; 2) educate the various stakeholders in the publishing enterprise about that value; and 3) create standard language to articulate that value across formats and scholarly publishers.

To begin our work, we first identified the various stakeholders in scholarly publishing. The list we developed was exhaustive, leading us to realize that we needed to start small and focus on a select number of stakeholders. How did we narrow our focus? We used an “Interest vs. Power” matrix (see the Figure). We plotted each of the 30+ stakeholders against the axes of Interest (the degree of interest a stakeholder has in the scholarly publishing process)

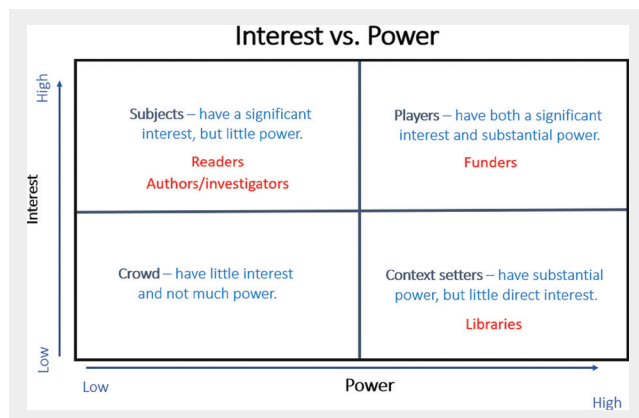


Figure. Interest vs. Power Matrix used to help prioritize stakeholders in the scholarly communications ecosystem.

and Power (the degree of power, or influence, a stakeholder has to affect the scholarly communication process). We then determined we would develop value proposition statements for any stakeholder that fell in the “Players” quadrant—these are groups that have both significant interest and substantial power. As a result, we chose to focus on readers, authors/investigators, funders, and libraries.

Our next step was to engage in a process to develop statements for these specific groups. A value proposition statement is defined as a “promise of value to be delivered, communicated, and acknowledged.”⁴ With this definition in mind, we used a value positioning template designed by Geoffrey Moore, who is an organizational theorist, management consultant, and author.⁵ In brief, the template asked us to identify our “target customer;” their main “problem” or need; how we, as scholarly publishers, solve that problem; and our key elements of differentiation from others in the field attempting to solve the problem. We ran through this cycle for each of the 4 stakeholders.

From there it was on to the writing process. After we drafted the statements, we shared them broadly with the full CMSS PPG for their review and feedback. After incorporating that feedback, we finalized the statements and sought endorsement from the president of CMSS. The final statements are below:

Readers

For readers who need high-quality, trustworthy information related to their areas of expertise, scholarly publishers deliver peer-reviewed journals of curated and relevant content that is scientifically vetted, easily discoverable, and accompanied by important supplemental content.

Authors/Investigators

For authors and investigators who need their research reviewed, published, and disseminated, scholarly publishers

provide peer-reviewed journals that offer fair and constructive feedback, provide production value, and promote the published work.

Funders

For funders that need the research they support to be published and disseminated, scholarly publishers deliver peer-reviewed journals that provide a home for scientifically vetted research output, help authors comply with access mandates, and augment visibility of the published work through promotion.

Libraries

For libraries that provide scientific and medical literature to researchers in varied disciplines, scholarly publishers supply peer-reviewed journals that provide a reliable, ethical, archived, and easy-to-access source of vetted content.

We are now in the process of collecting endorsements of these value proposition statements from the 40+ member societies of CMSS. These statements are discipline agnostic—although developed under the auspices of a medical specialty society, societies, publishers, and journals from any field of study, whether they be in the life or physical sciences, humanities, or biomedicine, can endorse these statements. We encourage you to ask your leadership if your society will consider becoming a signatory. To express your interest, please include your society or publisher details on this list.⁶ In the early spring of 2022, we will provide all signatories with a social media toolkit so that we can collectively publicize the value proposition statements.

As stewards of the scholarly publishing enterprise, it is incumbent that we stand united and use our collective voices to demonstrate the value we add to the research ecosystem. We hope that you consider joining this critically important effort. For questions, or to let us know you have included your details in the above link to become a signatory, please email us at elandis@gastro.org and nhoffman@hematology.org.

References and Links

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