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The Academic Library in Times of Change
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Scholarly Communication in a Time of Change: Considering the Impact of Bias, Diversity, and Traditional Publishing Structures as Scholarly Communication Moves to New Platforms and Systems

Just like legacy cataloging can be a barrier to discoverability and access, traditional publishing structures that are carried into today’s new scholarly communication technologies and systems can persist across academic peer review and publication. As librarians, publishers, and library publishers, we can take steps to subvert existing inequalities and biases in the scholarly communication ecosystem.

[start of talk]

Good afternoon everyone and Happy National Library Week!

Thank you so much to the CARL organizing committee for having me here. My name is Charlotte Roh and I’m the Scholarly Communications Librarian at the University of San Francisco, a small Jesuit University next to Golden Gate Park with a social justice mission.

I like to get a sense of the audience, so how many here are library workers in
- Instruction and reference?
- Technical services?
- Metadata and cataloging?
- Circulation and access?
- Scholarly communications?

How many of you would say that scholarly communications has an impact on your work in some way?

I know some of you have heard me speak already, but just a quick show of hands if you have already?

That’s great to know, because essentially, I’ve been giving the same talk, in one form or another, for the past two years. If you’ve already seen me present, or read any of my publications, then you won’t be hearing anything new.

And while I’ve been saying much the same thing for the past two years, typically, I speak to a scholarly communications audience – for example, American University’s Colloquium on Scholarly Communication, San Jose State’s Open Access Conference, PKP’s International Scholarly Publishing Conference.

Most of my audiences, therefore, are open access advocates. So it was a bit of a shock to learn, just three days ago, that the sponsor for my session was Elsevier.

I was told that the sponsors got to choose the sessions after the program was set, so there’s no way I could have known, that it was not my fault. And while I very much doubt that anyone at Elsevier is paying attention to my work, possibly they could have noticed that my job title says that I’m a scholarly communications librarian.

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One of my friends asked if it was a conspiracy on their part, whereupon I responded that probably not, but then again, I wouldn’t put it past them – Elsevier is admirably good at conspiring, and we all know that commercial publishers have purchased open access journals, platforms, and publications in the past, why not presentations and people.

And we know just how much people cost, because, as the industry publication *Bookseller* reported just last month, Elsevier has a gender pay gap of 40% which is “more than twice the UK average of 18.4%”.

The report said, “The reason for the total pay gap at Elsevier Limited, is that there are more men than women in senior roles, which are higher paid roles, and more women than men in lower paid roles… Many factors contribute to this. For example, Elsevier Limited recruits a lot of employees from STEM (science, technology, engineering and maths) industries, which attract more men than women.”

I’m going to repeat that last line one more time, “Elsevier Limited recruits a lot of employees from STEM industries, which attract more men than women.”

People aren’t paid less because they’re women. They’re paid less because women are not in STEM fields.

To be fair, Elsevier is not the only company that blames the gender gap in technology for the gender pay gap in their corporations, although Elsevier, along with many other publishers, have been rebranding themselves as technology information providers – you might not have noticed but nowhere in the introduction did they call themselves “publisher.”

The *Bookseller* also reports that
- Pearson has a 21% mean gender pay gap
- Springer Nature has a 15.12% pay gap
- Wiley’s pay gap for its UK workforce is a median of 21.5%.
- At Cambridge University Press (CUP) the median gender pay gap is 19%
- At SAGE the median gap is 14.5% but the median bonus pay gap is 20.7%, which pushes up that gap to almost Elsevier levels.
- Taylor & Francis has a median pay gap of only 8%, but the mean pay gap is 24.2%, and their parent company Informa has an overall median pay gap of 23%.

To read from one of their several articles on the gender pay gap, the *Bookseller* reports that, “As with all the other publishers cited here, [at CUP] women are over-represented in the lowest pay quartile, at 67% of the quartile compared with the workforce percentage of 60%, while they are substantially under-represented in the top pay quartile, at 41% - with men substantially over-represented at 59%.”

You may have gathered by now, that this not is not what I usually talk about, and it’s not exactly what the program description promised. You didn’t come here to find out that Elsevier’s gender pay gap is twice the percentage of any other commercial publisher and the UK national averages, and that if we do include bonuses, other commercial publishers are similar, which is not great for a profession with strong female representation. The numbers that I’ve just quoted are from the UK, but in a 2015 survey of publishing

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professionals, Greco, Wharton, and Brand found that 63% of total scholarly publishing professionals identified as female and 35.36% as male.\(^5\)

That same study also found that publishing is not only very female, it’s very, very white.

The big blue bar in this graph, at 90.79%, is white/Caucasian. This is for scholarly publishing, specifically, and it’s actually much less diverse than mainstream publishing.

How many people here are familiar with the Lee and Low Diversity Baseline Survey? If you haven’t taken a look, I highly recommend it, because it breaks down the demographics of publishing not only by ethnicity and gender, but also by orientation and disability, and also breaks down those categories by job role: executive, editorial, marketing, book reviewers.

The publisher, Lee & Low Books, collaborated with Dr. Sarah Dahlen Park, who is a professor at the Master of Library and Information Science Program at St. Catherine University in St. Paul, Minnesota.

Professor Park has done fantastic work with children’s literature and representation. How many of you have already seen this infographic?

You’ll see here that white characters are at 73.3% of those represented in children’s books, and animals, trucks, basically non-humans are represented at 12.5%. Everyone else is in the single digits.

These statistics are from the Cooperative Children’s Book Center at the University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Education, and they’ve been tracking statistics since 1985, when they only had 18 African American authors to nominate for the Coretta Scott King book award.

Here’s the most recent statistics from the CBC, and I like to point out that these are the books received by the CBC, so this does not mean that books by and about African Americans, American Indians/First Nations, Asian Americans, and Latinx are being purchased and circulated by libraries or sold in bookstores.

And I like to use children’s publishing as an example because it’s one of those places where in publishing, we can see the impact of whiteness.

We can see how having an industry that is 80% white results in representation that is so very sad, and how authors of color also are not being heard, that they do not have a voice.

And this is not new.

This quote is from an article in Publisher's Weekly called “Publishing's Holding Pattern.” The following year the title was, “A Younger Workforce, Still Predominantly White”. It’s a yearly salary survey, but I don’t cite the numbers often because it’s very informal and the numbers stay pretty much the same, in the high 80s in terms of the percentage of people that identify as white. The 2017 report did say that, “Despite the lack of meaningful change, 37% of respondents thought progress had been made in hiring

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On the other hand, 31% of white respondents and 45% of respondents who did not identify as white said no change had been made."

So keeping this in mind, that in mainstream publishing we see a knock-on effect with representation in the publishing ecosystem impacting authors and readers and the content of publications, how does this relate to academic publishing?

Let’s look again at academic publishing.

I want to note that when I received this survey, there was no category for Asian or Asian American. Since I am an Asian American who worked in publishing, I contacted the researchers to let them know that, Hey, this is a problem.

The immediate response back was that, because the survey was intended to be international (even though it was in English), they had decided against the category because it might be confusing. They suggested that I choose the category “Mixed/Multiple.” A few days later they reversed course and let me know that they had decided to include the category of “Asian” and that I could go fill it out.

But before we throw stones, we might want to think hard, because as academic librarians, we should actually find these demographics familiar.

Because we should all know by now that librarianship is horribly, tragically lacking in diversity. That 86% of librarians in higher education are white. The majority of us are able-bodied, with graduate degrees.

And the same is true for faculty.

This slide shows the demographics of full time faculty, which is itself problematic because of course there is a lot of contingent labor that tends to be female and people of color. According to Vitae’s JobTracker, 61 percent of available tenure-track jobs in 2013-14 went to men.

So this data is not fully representative of all faculty, but in my personal experience in editorial at Taylor & Francis, one of the things that I was taught when looking for peer reviewers was to look at the status of faculty in institutions in order to determine authority and expertise.

Who’s a qualified reviewer? Someone who has tenure.

So this is the slide that I use when I hold publishing workshops for graduate students and new faculty. This is CC-BY, please feel free to use it. I think it’s helpful even for those who have already gone through the publishing process, to see a visualization and where they fit into this process.

I think this visualization would also be helpful to undergraduate students in understanding what the peer review process is, for those of you that are mostly at teaching institutions like myself.

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I also think it’s helpful to include librarians in that role as purchasers, particularly in higher education. It often doesn’t occur to faculty authors that a big part of the audience that is purchasing their books is us, the librarians.

And really my agenda is to make people think about who has power, and who each of the players are in this system.

Because if we think back to the demographics that we just saw for publishing professionals, full-time faculty, and librarians, what does this mean for the output of scholarship and authors who are not white men?

Unfortunately, we don’t have to guess, because there are plenty of examples.

Last year, in 2017
- *American Historical Review*, a leading history journal, apologized for assigning a review of a book about urban inequality to a white supremacist.\(^1\)
- *Hypatia*, a feminist philosophy journal, apologized for and retracted a paper that analogized Rachel Dolezal to transgender people.\(^2\)
- *The Journal of Political Philosophy* apologized for an issue devoted to the Black Lives Matter movement that included zero black authors.\(^3\)
- *Third World Quarterly* had 15 members of its editorial board resign because it published an article that was pro-colonialism. It was rejected by peer reviewers but the editor decided to publish it anyway, and has refused to take it down, even at the request of the author himself.

This all sounds horrible, but these publications are actually unique in having apologized, and all of them identified that something had gone wrong in the editorial process. There were a range of reasons: the editors had not fully understood, they had chosen reviewers who were not appropriate, they had chosen to support particular authors and ideas without considering fully the implications.

But all these journals that apologized (some more sincerely than others) did so in the wake of publicity and outcry – how many peer review processes and published articles have there been that were not so transparent, that went unreported in *Inside Higher Ed* or *The Chronicle of Education*?

And what does that mean when “publish or perish” is a very real thing? When publication is one of the items on which the success of someone’s career depends?

And again, this is not to say that we don’t have the answers to these questions. There are a million first person pieces, and all the data you could ever want. You actually don’t need to look further than your own institution.

For example, this composite image shows the faculty of color who have left Dartmouth over the last 15 years. If you’ve ever wondered why your institutional demographics remain the same while hiring faculty of color every year, well here is your answer. Professor Aimee Bahng, mentioned in this post, is now at Pomona College, after Dartmouth denied her tenure based on her publication record. Let me be fair and say it was not her department, who unanimously voted to give her tenure, but higher administration, who claimed her publication record was insufficient, despite high popularity and a book contract with Duke University.
Also, as a caveat, there are problems beyond scholarly publishing and its biases – there are plenty of stories of people who have demonstrated traditional success at every level and yet are still denied fair and equal treatment. Whose voices have been shut out of the narrative of scholarship, who have been denied authority by people like myself. Why do I say “like myself”? Because as a publisher and a librarian, I’m in a position of gatekeeping.

And as librarians, we all know what it’s like to see people shut out of spaces.

And we all know that shutting people out of spaces, and privileging others in those spaces, hasn’t really stopped.

That we all work in institutions that heavily regulate and sanitize their physical and online spaces, regardless of whether they are public or private.

This is because of something we don’t like to admit – that academic institutions are commercial institutions, too.

Some of you may have heard me say this: the reason that Oxford University Press is the largest university press in the world is because the sun never set on the British Empire.

Similarly, Elsevier’s success as the largest academic publisher in the world can be correlated with the success of the Dutch Empire. In fact, as some of you know, Reed Elsevier was involved in the international arms trade until outrage from the medical community forced it to divest.

In the United States, our higher educational systems were, frankly, funded and built on slavery. As academics, we in the United States have a history of swooping into countries, taking knowledge and information, then reporting on it as if it was entirely our creation.

This doesn’t even begin to address, of course, the theft of knowledge, property, and people from those who originally stood on this land.

Which, in Redwood City, is the Ohlone (ah-lone) and Ramaytush (Rah-may-tush). If you’re not familiar with the website Native Land, I highly recommend it.

So, colonialism, capitalism, and scholarly communication. What does it mean for us?

It means we have to try harder. Tressie McMillan Cottom is a digital sociologist at VCU, and this is one of my favorite lines of the last year. She says in her book, Lower Ed, “For me, perpetuating the inequalities resulting from intergenerational cumulative disadvantage doesn’t require intent. In fact, racism and sexism work best of all when intent is not a prerequisite.”

I think I’ve already shown you how the systemic biases around representation in publishing can hurt people, not just as individuals but as bodies of knowledge.

In our efforts as librarians and actors in the scholarly communication ecosystem, we claim that our work as librarians is a positive good, that we’re fighting the good fight by working towards open access as a social justice issue. But librarianship – and scholarly communication – does not exist in a vacuum. Just like cataloging, access services, and technology in all its biases, scholarly communication also has problems with equality. And we’re all complicit in this, myself included. I am here, sponsored by Elsevier and I didn’t bother to ask about it in advance. I work at a library that uses BePress as its institutional
repository platform. We certainly subscribe to Elsevier journals, and other commercial databases, and I’m sure we’re not the only ones.

Well, not in Germany, where around 200 institutions have refused to subscribe to Elsevier journals. They have access anyway, which is very strange to me. It’s almost like they don’t want us to know that we can do our work without them.

As an aside, this is actually the same article, which is so weird. The left is the title on the website, but if you click on the link that says “PDF version”, you get the title on the right. I’ve seen this kind of thing before, but not to this extent, and it kind of blows my mind for science journalism, citation, and version control.

But I was talking about how I am complicit, how it is so easy to forget that, even though I work at a university with a social justice mission, it’s actually a Catholic institution and that comes with some very real baggage.

And as an editor at Oxford University Press, I was proud of the work that I did on English language learning materials. I was completely caught up in what my colleague Fobazi Ettarh calls “vocational awe”, the idea that my profession was, to quote “as an institution, as a field, is inherently good. And therefore assumes that some core aspects of the profession cannot be critiqued, is beyond critique.”

Some of you have worked with English language learners, international students, and international faculty at your institutions, and you are acutely aware of how the quality of English or the ethnicity of the name of the author has an impact on how the content and work is perceived, and there have been quantitative studies affirming this experience.

As an editor, it was my job to enforce what my colleague Nicole Gonzales Howell calls “a prestige dialect and power code,” aka, “standard edited academic English.” My friend Peter Sokolowski, Merriam-Webster editor-at-large, calls grammar “the last acceptable form of snobbery.”

To any of you whom I might have shamed because of grammar, usage, and vocabulary, I apologize.

So as someone so deeply complicit in these structures, I am still learning how completely ignorant I am of the ways in which capitalism, colonialism, and academia work together, and how our systems are set up to reinforce those in power. And we can see this in how, even with the success of the open access movement, corporations are subverting open access models: acquiring journals, platforms, software, preprints servers, and copyrights over not only articles but conference proceedings, and our personal and professional data.

And here are some examples of purchases over the past few years. You might be familiar with some of these, but the one I like to point out is the acquisition of journals published by Hindawi and the National Autonomous University of Mexico. These journals are and have always been open access because they are through publicly funded, now they have been contracted to Elsevier under terms that have not been made public.

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8 [https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-018-00093-7](https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-018-00093-7)
So in addition to big purchases like Mendeley, SSRN, and BePress, there have been quieter journal and platform purchases here and there, as publishing companies have been transforming themselves into what our sponsor calls “strategic research management workflow”.

The result has been that, as of 2015, when this study was published, over 50% of published papers are owned by the top five publishers. Not just in the United States, but internationally.

And again, this ownership of scholarly communications structures by certain peoples has an impact on content. I’m really fortunate to be in a position where I can lead with issues around diversity, because I’m the liaison to International Studies and the Master of Migration Studies program. When I am brought in to talk about research and citations, I pull up this graph, and all the students always gasp when they see it. It’s never occurred to them to think about where the people they are citing are coming from.

This beautiful graph is from an article in Nature called “Global gender disparities in science”, and it’s actually interactive on the website, since its goal is to illustrate, not global inequities in publishing provenance, but gender inequities. So if you click on the bars on the website you’ll see the breakdown of authors by gender, which is of course not great. This article was published in 2013, and was actually one of two studies that addressed the overrepresentation of men in scholarly publications. The first study examined 5.4 million peer-reviewed, scientific articles between 2008 and 2012, and found that 70% of the authors were men. In the second study, researchers reviewed 8 million papers from JSTOR—across the natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities—and found that only 27.2% of authors were women. For more on that topic, I suggest that you look up the work of Cassidy Sugimoto. There is lots on that topic around authorship and citation, the latter of which is important of course because it demonstrates academic impact to promotion and tenure committees.

And speaking of citation and impact, one of the things that is within the sphere of scholarly communication is altmetrics.

I’ll be honest, I don’t really trust corporations and technologists to provide me with personalized data without commodifying me.

And we’ve seen plenty of evidence that while altmetrics are helpful, they can be gamed at low and high stakes. This really is a time of changing attitudes toward technology, privacy, and trolls, and I think it’s therefore a great time to talk with our institutional colleagues about how their experience of research is mediated, even in the library catalog, by algorithms that aren’t perfect.

So again, what can we do? I feel that we’re at a unique point in libraries and scholarly communication. Many of us are already aware that, through open access publishing, we have been able to create space for different voices that have been told that the market is not there for the work – people in new and emerging interdisciplinary fields, students, and community members. I’m very excited about the newest journal that I’m working with, Conexión Queer, a journal on queer theology published in Spanish, Portuguese, and English.

And essentially, not matter what your job and where it lies in connection to scholarly communication, I ask for two basic things: cultural competencies and intentional action.

Some of you have been doing this work for a long time – interrogating purchasing decisions, critically examining our cataloging and discovery systems, and making space in our events and exhibits. For many, we are familiar with evaluating our collection decisions for the sake of budget cuts and rising costs, but we are still learning to wield that power pro-actively for the sake of representational equity.
And we are part of this ecosystem, not just in this last role, as librarians with purchasing and cataloging power, which are gatekeeping functions in and of themselves, but also as authors, reviewers, and editors, with the power to change representation in the systems in which we contribute and operate.

I mentioned that I’ve been talking about these topics for the last couple years, and I will say, that for the most part, the response has been positive, particularly from librarians, which I attribute to the long culture of self-criticism in the library profession. Libraries have for decades had diversity programs in place, and this year I am part of the Library Publishing Coalition (LPC)’s task force on ethics that includes diversity and bias as part of its charge as an inaugural LPC Fellow along with my co-fellow, Reggie Raju.v If you haven’t already looked at their website, I suggest you go read my co-fellow’s blog post on how the idea of predatory publishing has harmed publishing in the global south, particularly in Africa.

Publishing is also trying to change, largely in response to the 2015 Lee and Low Diversity Baseline survey.vi The Association of University Presses, funded by the Mellon Foundation, has established a diversity fellowship program with the goal of increasing minority representation in the profession. Three of the fellows have already been hired full time, and the program has engendered conversations within the presses themselves about the need for diversity in our traditionally white supremacist systems.vii I’m hopeful, but honestly publishing is juuuust moving out of the idea of “diversity” as being just about gender, about having equality for white women. For example, last year the Society for Scholarly Publishing put together its first ever diversity and inclusion committee.

Additional efforts to address these issues include the OpenCon Diversity Statement and a pledge from the Open Library of the Humanities to monitor and release reports on demographics. These are all signs of step by step change, what I consider allyship in action, and I am encouraged to see them.

And as I say this, I think of how recently, the University of California Berkeley deleted from public view, thousands of lectures, because they were not compliant with the American with Disabilities Act. It was the choice of the administration not to retroactively make these videos compliant.

Rather the decision was made to make them only accessible to Berkeley students. Having a disability is expensive, access to higher education is expensive. This is effectively another form of paywall. How would this have been different if these open education materials had been ADA compliant to start?

This is in contrast to the CalState Accessible Procurement Process, which really deserves recognition for its efforts to hold vendors fully accountable to their promises.

From this and other examples, I want to remind us all that the response from our institutions are not predictable, and not necessarily going to be in the public’s best interests. Our institutions are not necessarily going to be open access friendly.

And our open access environments aren’t necessarily going to be friendly to everyone either. At the VCU OpenCon last year, Tressie McMillan Cottom talked about how, in her program, they really wanted to make the entire program open educational resources, but they simply couldn’t because, to quote,

“[O]ne of the things we noticed, is that what we were really lagging in, even more so than like quality and rigor, were the open educational resource materials that deal in things we really care about, particularly race, class, and gender. And/or slash inequality. What we did not have were open educational resources that look at African American experiences, the experiences of women, gender wage gap, almost nothing about sexualities, almost nothing about sort of queer theory, some of the major sociological theories that have emerged over the last 30 years that are really driving the discipline. There were almost no materials

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about intersectionality, et cetera. Again really important things, critically open, to critical sociology. There was almost nothing. So we couldn't use open educational resources in that context.

- OpenCon: Tressie McMillan Cottom: Open in the Age of Inequality, starting at 21:30
  [https://youtu.be/v0omZY-z0yw](https://youtu.be/v0omZY-z0yw)

This is an example of a successful academic who believes in open access, in open education, who is well supported by her library, and who couldn't find any resources that were contemporary and critical of inequality. This is an example of why it is important, as open access advocates who do care, and who have dual roles as gatekeepers and enablers, that we learn more about the injustices around us. We have an opportunity, as we remake scholarly publishing, to look beyond the traditional systems of value and power for more inclusive, intersectional publishing processes for sustainable social justice outcomes.

Sometimes I'm asked, “Why is the library involved in this?” By “this” faculty often mean whatever I'm talking about at the time, which is frequently, “Please give me your preprint so I can put it in our repository.”

And the answer that I give is pretty simple – libraries are involved in repositories, or open education, or open access publishing, because we are social institutions that are committed to the preservation and dissemination of knowledge. This is something we've always done – preserved information and made it available – it might look a little different in the digital realm, but scholarly communication work as social justice work is in line with our core values and mission.

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5 In the interests of full disclosure, I am on this task force as the first Library Publishing Coalition Fellow.
