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Elsevier, bepress, and a Glimpse at the Future of Scholarly Communication

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Balance Point

Elsevier, bepress, and a Glimpse at the Future of Scholarly Communication

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Abstract

The acquisition of bepress by Elsevier in August 2017, while unpopular among many librarians, provides both companies opportunities for expansion and growth. This Balance Point column outlines some of the benefits to both companies and the reaction by the library community. Also addressed is the announcement by the Penn Libraries that they are searching for a new open source repository potentially to replace bepress's Digital Commons. The column concludes with some discussion of Elsevier's relationship with open access content and the impact of the acquisition on the scholarly communications infrastructure.

On August 2, 2017, Elsevier announced its acquisition of bepress, the provider of the Digital Commons institutional repository platform. Digital Commons “allows institutions to collect, organize, preserve and disseminate their intellectual output, including preprints, working papers, journals or specific articles, dissertations, theses, conference proceedings and a wide variety of other data” (Elsevier, August 2, 2017). bepress’s other major service, the Experts Gallery Suite, focuses on showcasing the expertise and scholarship of faculty. At the time Elsevier acquired the company, bepress had more than 500 customers using Digital Commons, and over 100 institutions using the Experts Gallery Suite. More than 1400 journals were published via the Digital Commons (DC) platform, and the DC network held over 2 million articles and had 100 million annual downloads (Elsevier, August 2, 2017).

Well known in the library world as a publisher of scholarly journals and books, Elsevier’s content platform, ScienceDirect, boasts almost 4000 journal titles, more than 2500 of which are either completely open access (OA) or provide some degree of OA content. The acquisition of bepress by the publishing giant offers each company and their customers clear benefits and opportunities for integration. Jean-Gabriel Bankier, president and CEO of bepress, addressed some of the reasons that lead the company to look for help from a larger partner like Elsevier during a session at the Charleston Conference in November 2017. Bankier explained that, while bepress had built and managed the service on its own for many years, it had become clear that many of its customers were looking for functionality that bepress did not have the manpower to implement on its own. Large schools were asking for specialized integrations into campus systems, ORCID, and Shibboleth, and smaller schools were requesting to consolidate content

onto a single platform with the need to support streaming and content from other providers such as ContentDM (Bankier, November 8, 2017).

Bankier told *Inside Higher Ed* that, while bepress spoke to a number of potential partners, “Elsevier were the ones who really saw us. They saw our vision and what it is we are doing for our customers” (McKenzie, 2017). Elsevier’s press release announcing the acquisition indicated that “By joining Elsevier, bepress will be better able to address institutions’ promotional needs, such as attracting students, faculty and grants, and preserving research data and outputs” (Elsevier, August 2, 2017). Citing just one possible integration of Elsevier data into the bepress platform, Bankier said “institutions would be able to know, for example, how many times a paper in their repository had been cited elsewhere, or how many times it had been tweeted about” (McKenzie, 2017).

Elsevier in turn gains access to bepress’s Digital Commons network of content and, more importantly, a platform through which that institutional content can be promoted. Olivier Dumon, managing director for Research Applications and Platform at Elsevier, explained the interest in bepress to Roger Schonfeld for the Scholarly Kitchen blog (August 2, 2017), saying “We thought we were missing this institutional promotional platform — we had a tiny bit of it in Pure — but it was really a very small set of features, and we are far from what bepress are doing... We’ve had them on our radar for a long time.”

Schonfeld, director of the Libraries and Scholarly Communication Program at Ithaka S+R, theorizes that both links and content will be integrated across the Elsevier and bepress systems

and interfaces. “We can expect extensive links between Digital Commons preprints via Scopus and ScienceDirect, leveraging DOI and ORCID infrastructure, and services to auto-populate abstracts, content, metadata, and/or social media mentions and other alt-metrics into the institutional repository” (Schonfeld, August 2, 2017). Schonfeld goes on to explain that by integrating bepress’s portfolio of institutional repositories with Elsevier’s content platforms and workflow suite, there is a significant opportunity to incorporate preprints, and analytics about their impact, with the published versions (Schonfeld, August 2, 2017).

It is clear that Elsevier is no longer simply a publisher of scholarly content. In recent years, the company has been expanding beyond publishing into what is described on the Elsevier website as “a global information analytics business.” The purchase of bepress is just the latest in a string of acquisitions that have positioned the company to provide a full spectrum of publishing, workflow, and analytics services. With the purchase of Mendeley in 2013, the 2016 acquisitions of both Hivebench (a digital laboratory notebook) and SSRN (the open access online preprint community specializing primarily in social sciences), and the acquisition of Plum Analytics in early 2017, Elsevier is actively developing its services for data analytics and content distribution. The company “has been expanding its suite of products and services to include the entire academic research lifecycle, rather than simply creating and providing subscribed journal content to users via the library as it did in the past. The company’s range of services to academia has grown to include software and data-management, instruction, and assessment tools” (Schonfeld, February 2, 2017).

Reaction by the library community to the acquisition

Response from librarians and open access advocates regarding Elsevier's acquisition of bepress was swift and overwhelmingly negative. One unfortunate misstep, acknowledged by Bankier during his presentation at the Charleston Conference, was that, while bepress waited on a press release from Elsevier to make their own announcement about the sale of the company, it was the Scholarly Kitchen blog that initially broke news of the sale. Consequently, the majority of bepress customers heard about the acquisition via Twitter, listservs, or other library-related new sources, rather than directly from bepress. News of the acquisition hit Twitter fast and hard. Kevin O'Keefe documented many of the tweets about the merger on his blog, LexBlog, and summed up the responses by saying "Librarians find the purchase of bepress troubling, at best" (O'Keefe, 2017).

With the purchase of bepress, Elsevier now owns and has access to the data generated by Digital Commons institutions and stakeholders. Many librarians feel betrayed by bepress's willingness to sell themselves to a company that is widely viewed as an adversary of libraries. Barbara Fister (August 8, 2017) explains that "One of the reasons so many librarians felt angry about Elsevier's acquisition of Bepress is that Elsevier has become an enemy of libraries and what they stand for. Elsevier would, naturally, disagree, but their business practices...seem predatory and destructive from the library perspective. As they have grown bigger, their power has grown, and their prices and negotiating power makes libraries incredibly vulnerable." As Terry Fishel, library director of Macalester College told *Inside Higher Ed*, "How could Bepress, an organization that has around 500 members, be so clueless about how we felt about Elsevier" (McKenzie, 2017)?

Heather Joseph, executive director of the Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources Coalition (SPARC), and Kathleen Shearer, executive director of the Confederation of Open Access Repositories (COAR), jointly penned an open letter expressing disappointment in Elsevier's acquisition of bepress. In the letter Joseph and Shearer (2017) reference Elsevier's obstruction of open access and repositories and "the company's long term strategy to stake an ownership claim in all the functions vital to the research cycle -- from data gathering and annotation, to sharing and publication, to analytics and evaluation."

Penn Libraries leaving bepress

In his August 2, 2017 blog post for the Scholarly Kitchen, Schonfeld indicated that the biggest risk factor in this acquisition for Elsevier and bepress was whether libraries would abandon Digital Commons. "The institutional repository managers who are probably the core customer community for Digital Commons are among the librarians most hostile to Elsevier," explains Schonfeld (August 2, 2017). On October 9, 2017, the Penn Libraries became the first bepress customer to announce publicly that they are officially exploring alternative repository platforms as a result of the sale. The Penn Libraries' press release describes Elsevier as a "business with a history of aggressive confidentiality agreements, steep price increases, and opaque data mining practices" (Penn Libraries, 2017). The announcement goes on to cite concerns about consolidation and monopolization of products and services impacting all areas of the research lifecycle as some of the reasons for severing Penn Libraries' 13 year relationship with bepress.

To replace Digital Commons, the Penn Libraries are exploring open source solutions for hosting their institutional repository, and they are calling on other members of the academic community

to partner and collaborate with them in this endeavor. The Penn Libraries are documenting their process and transition on a wordpress site at <https://beprexit.wordpress.com/> and on Twitter @beprexit. On the day they announced their departure from bepress, the hashtag #beprexit took off on social media.

It is important to note, though, that, while the acquisition of bepress by Elsevier was the catalyst that prompted the Penn Libraries to start their investigation, the decision to leave bepress is based primarily on the services that the Penn Libraries provide their patrons, says Sarah Wipperman, scholarly communications & digital repository librarian (S. Wipperman, personal communication, November , 2017). Over the 13 years that the Penn Libraries have been bepress customers, they have built up a number of services affiliated with the institutional repository, including faculty-assisted submission, project consultation, and electronic theses and dissertations. As Wipperman explains, the approach at the Penn Libraries is services first, platform second. This decision to explore alternative and open source repository platforms gives them the opportunity to think about the type of platform that will best support their particular services (S. Wipperman, personal communication, November 16, 2017).

bepress

For its part, bepress recognizes the backlash from the library community regarding their sale to Elsevier and has taken steps to address it. Two days after the announcement of the acquisition, bepress put out its own press release answering a few questions about the Elsevier transition. Topping of the list of questions was “What prevents Elsevier from sabotaging our open access work?” In their response, bepress press indicated Elsevier has no interest in disrupting bepress’s

current business model, and that they have worked with Elsevier to confirm this in writing (bepress, 2017). However, Elsevier's own press release stated that the terms of the acquisition are not being disclosed, so libraries have no way of ensuring the the terms of the agreement.

A few weeks later, on August 24, 2017, Olivier Dumon sent out a message to those institutions using bepress's services to assuage concerns about the future of both bepress and Digital Commons. Dumon indicated in his message that under Elsevier bepress will retain the core characteristics of what has made it successful and popular with its customers. He specified that bepress customers will continue to communicate with and be served by the bepress staff in Berkeley. In addition, bepress will retain the same pricing model that provides for unlimited services, and libraries will control their content in the same way that they always have (Dumon, 2017). Dumon noted that, while Elsevier does see an opportunity to make Digital Commons better for customers, any improvements or expansions to the existing Digital Commons platform will come with no change to the core pricing, service model, or bepress staff relationship.

Jean-Gabriel Bankier posted an update on the Elsevier website on October 3, 2017, reflecting on what had happened in the 2 months since the announcement of the acquisition and starting to outline the future plans for bepress. In that message, Bankier acknowledged the segment of bepress's customer base that is concerned that both the product and the company's open model will be compromised, stating "We need to show our customers that we are the same bepress in order to earn back the good will and enthusiasm we have enjoyed up to this point" (Bankier, October 3, 2017). In his presentation at the Charleston Conference, Bankier emphasized that bepress is an open company and will remain so. Bankier also highlighted the ways in which

Elsevier has already demonstrated its commitment to support bepress, such as the addition of two new IT staff and assistance with APIs (Bankier, November 8, 2017).

So, where does scholarly communications go from here?

On the same day that Elsevier announced its acquisition of bepress, a preprint examining the prevalence and impact of open access articles was posted on *PeerJ*. The *PeerJ* study is unique in that it classifies OA articles algorithmically, rather than manually, which allowed the authors to sample 300,000 articles, rather than a few hundred (Poynder, 2017). In the study, articles were divided into a five category classification system: Gold, Green, Hybrid, Bronze, and Closed. Bronze OA articles were defined in the study as publisher-hosted OA where access was provided on a gratis basis - no license existed to extend the reuse rights beyond simply reading (Piwowar et al., 2017).

The *PeerJ* study estimates that almost 27.9% percent of all journal articles are available OA, and that percentage goes up to 47% for more recent literature (Piwowar et al., 2017). One particularly unsettling fact is that almost half of the articles identified as OA by the study are classified as Bronze OA - “articles made free to read on the publisher’s web site, without an explicit open license” (Poynder, 2017). This could include Delayed OA from toll-access publishers, but the authors of the study found that “nearly half were hosted on journals that published 100% of content as free-to-read but were not listed on the DOAJ and did not formally license content (using CC-BY or any other license” (Piwowar et al., 2017). As Poynder (2017) points out, without an OA license in place these articles and this category of OA content are particularly vulnerable to losing their OA status.

It is this kind of fragility and lack of security that has librarians and OA advocates up in arms about the acquisition of bepress by Elsevier. As Barbara Fister explains (2017),

Bepress is just a very attractive but empty platform without the stuff that we put in it. Libraries that chose it did so in order to help their communities make things - and make them public. We paid for a useful box to put stuff in, and because it's our labor and our stuff that made Bepress worth acquiring, it feels as if somebody stole our stuff.

It is especially difficult to take when, up until now, it felt like bepress was on the side of the libraries in fighting big publishers like Elsevier. In April 2015, Elsevier announced a new sharing policy that restricted scholars ability to share their content if published in an Elsevier journal. According to COAR, "The policy imposes unacceptably long embargo periods of up to 48 months for some journals. It also requires authors to apply a "non-commercial and no derivative works" license for each article deposited into a repository, greatly inhibiting the re-use value of these articles" (COAR, n.d.) In response COAR issued a statement arguing against Elsevier's sharing policy, strongly urging the company to reconsider, and bepress was one of the 285 organizations to sign the statement.

The author of this column raised the question of the COAR statement and bepress's stance on Elsevier's sharing policy during Bankier's presentation at the Charleston Conference, asking how bepress intended to work with Elsevier on open access from inside the company. Bankier responded that he views this as an exciting opportunity to help Elsevier understand how to talk

about open access, stating that Elsevier knows the future is open, but it is a large organization and it is hard to get them to move. Bankier went on to say that there is a lot of education that has to happen. “That is the thing I am most excited about - the opportunity to change a large organization” (Bankier, November 8, 2017).

Bankier’s desire to change Elsevier from the inside may not be enough, though. In the wake of Elsevier’s acquisition of bepress, a common refrain from the scholarly community is that libraries, authors, and institutions need to take back ownership of the scholarly communication process, rather than leaving it in the hands of commercial enterprises like bepress and Elsevier. Several blog posts, articles, and papers have been published calling for action on behalf of the library community to join together to preserve scholarly communication.

Posada and Chen (2017) analyzed Elsevier’s expansion into data analytics and how that ownership impacts the scholarly communications infrastructure. Through their investigation, they found that Elsevier has both launched and acquired products that impact all stages of the academic knowledge production process.

At first sight, there is an obvious concern of a conflict of interest. This is especially true when the supplier of academic journals is also in charge of evaluating and validating research quality and impact (eg: pure, plum analytics, Sci Val), identifying academic experts to direct to potential employers (eg: Expert Lookup), managing the research networking platforms through which to collaborate (eg: SSRN, Hivebench, Mendeley), managing the infrastructure through which to find funding (eg: plum X, Mendeley, Sci Val), and controlling

the platforms through which to analyze and store your data (Eg: Hivebench, Mendeley). The conflict of interest has direct implications to the power and control that publishers have over the content and methodological approach of the research being produced (Posada & Chen, 2017).

In their joint letter issued on behalf of SPARC and COAR, Joseph and Shearer (2017) state, “We believe that an international network of next generation repositories, collectively managed by the scholarly community, has the power to transform our system for communicating research—making it more research-centric, and open to and supportive of innovation. The use of open source platforms, with appropriate community governance, is also critical to this goal and to preventing greater commercial control of scholarly content and associated services.” Sarah Wipperman at the Penn Libraries echoes this sentiment, emphasizing that the scholarly conversation needs to be not about bepress or Elsevier, but about repositories in general and how libraries can support faculty. “We need to have conversations between libraries about how we can collaborate and share to develop a shared understanding of what an institutional repository is,” says Wipperman (personal communication, November 16, 2017).

In a post for the London School of Economics and Political Science’s LSE Blog, Jefferson Pooley, associate professor and chair of Media & Communication at Muhlenberg College, argues that scholarly communication should not only be open, but be non-profit as well. Pooley (2017) suggests that a publishing ecosystem centered on scholarly values is within reach, but, for that to happen, institutions have to throw their weight behind non-profit publishing entities, before it is too late. He goes on to say “The first set of challenges, around sustainable funding for a non-

profit infrastructure, has a viable answer: the key is to redirect the billions - even a fraction of those billions - that libraries currently spend on subscriptions to the new scholar-run platforms. These dollars are crucial, too, to underwrite an OA future for the university presses and scholarly societies” (Pooley, 2017).

David W. Lewis, dean of the Indiana University - Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) University Library offers a potential solution to achieve Pooley’s goal of sustainable funding for non-profit scholarly publishing infrastructure. Lewis’ paper, “The 2.5% Commitment,” published via IUPUI’s institutional repository, ScholarWorks, in September 2017, opens with the bold statement that “Every academic library should commit to contribute 2.5% of its total budget to support common infrastructure needed to create the open scholarly commons.” Lewis goes on to outline a possible plan as to how to implement a 2.5% commitment, touching on the groups and organizations that make up the scholarly commons infrastructure, potential action items, and a possible tool for measuring the 2.5% standard.

Conclusion

The acquisition of bepress by Elsevier presents each company with clear opportunities for growth. Elsevier now owns a robust platform through which institutions can host and promote content, and bepress has gained access to Elsevier’s considerable resources to help meet customer expectations as Digital Commons continues to grow and develop. However, there are a number of reasons as to why librarians and open access advocates are uneasy with the purchase of bepress by Elsevier. Concerns come from a variety of places - issues with Elsevier as a company, worries about ownership of content on the bepress platform, as well as apprehension

about the security of open access content under Elsevier ownership. Joseph and Shearer (2017) perhaps best sum up the concerns of the library community, when they say “This acquisition has highlighted the vulnerability of the research communication enterprise and underscores the need for us to more clearly articulate our vision for the future of scholarly communication, the principles associated with that vision.” It remains to be seen where Elsevier, bepress, and the scholarly communications infrastructure go from here.

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