

OER Review: *Power, Profit, and Privilege: Problematizing Scholarly Publishing*

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Review

As students, researchers, and academics, we often do not think of the dark side to scholarly communication and scholarly publishing. Amanda Makula delves into these topics in her open textbook entitled *Power, Profit, and Privilege: Problematizing Scholarly Publishing*. This textbook was created for the Scholarly Communication Notebook (SCN), an online community/repository that hosts community-designed examples of teaching and doing scholarly communication. The SCN aims to solicit and produce open texts that introduce readers to the scholarly communications system (Scholarly Communication Notebook, n.d.). Makula places emphasis on scholarly journals and the problems surrounding the current publishing paradigm. This Open Educational Resource (OER) is organized into three parts: “The Fundamentals,” “(Some) Problems,” and “Assignments.” Each part contains subsections that take a deep dive into the different aspects of the publishing cycle, including how knowledge is created, evaluated, disseminated, and preserved.

Library and Information Studies (LIS) students, faculty, and instructors would benefit from reading this text at their own pace and completing the assignments therein. This resource is intended for upper-level undergraduate or graduate students interested in pursuing publication, as well as early career librarians or those interested in scholarly communication topics and practices. It is licensed under a Creative Commons CC BY-NC license, which means anyone can access, edit, and share the resource if the use is noncommercial.

Makula begins with a chapter entitled “The Fundamentals” which contains six subchapters. All six subchapters contain exercises, additional readings, and resources for those that would like to further their knowledge beyond the textbook. Makula gives readers a great starting point and asks them thoughtful

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questions. Each subchapter is short. This means readers will not be totally consumed while navigating this textbook; it can be read in a matter of two–three hours, though the exercises will take longer to complete.

The first subchapter is titled “What is Scholarly Publishing?” and discusses the major players in the publishing cycle with helpful definitions and colorful diagrams. This allows readers to see the information in a pictorial format rather than simply words on a page, which is especially helpful for visual learners. The second subchapter, “Academic Culture,” discusses the promotion and tenure process in higher education and connects this discussion to the previous subchapter. The language used throughout is easy to understand and reader friendly. Next is “Scholarly Journals and Peer Review,” a subchapter which describes the important characteristics of a scholarly journal and provides readers with a basic definition of peer review and how it is situated within the scholarly publishing process. Key concepts are in bold, and videos are embedded to break up larger blocks of text.

Following this subchapter is “Finding Scholarly Journals,” which as the title suggests, assists readers in discovering scholarly, relevant journals in their field. This subchapter looks at journals through the lens of both an author and a reader, encouraging students and instructors to critically engage with journals as a way to both to stay up to date in their disciplines and to assess viable publishing outlets. For the novice author, this chapter provides multiple links for further help in finding a journal that “fits” their work. Directly connected to this subchapter is the following subchapter, “Evaluating Scholarly Journals.” This subchapter asks readers who have possibly chosen a journal for publication how best to evaluate that publication. The subchapter includes infographics to assist in the synthesis and comprehension of the outlined information. The last subchapter, “Copyright,” provides a basic explanation of copyright and authors’ rights and links these topics to scholarly publishing. Makula provides real-life examples which help readers understand the concept of copyright, often difficult for those with little to no knowledge of the law.

Overall, the subchapters under the “The Fundamentals” section flow naturally, building upon one another and guiding students and instructors through the basics of scholarly communication principles. Readers with expertise in copyright or any of the previous topic areas may choose to skip the “Copyright” subsection as it is geared towards beginners. It is helpful to those looking to dip their toes into scholarly publishing as subject matter and has many resources compiled into one place with links for a deeper dive, questions for reflection, and opportunities for creative collaboration with fellow students. This OER largely serves as the raft which guides students through the waters of scholarly communication. “The Fundamentals” are a placid stop until reaching the dark and turbulent topics in the second section, “(Some) Problems.”

This second section is divided into two subchapters, both of which revolve around scholarly communication and the world at large. Makula touches on changes in society, activism, and issues of accessibility, diversity, equity, and inclusion that affect academia and scholarly publishing. She continues to use real-world examples to help readers put these concepts into context and drive home the points made. All examples are current as of the year 2022. For instance, she references the Covid-19 pandemic and the subsequent rise of pre-print repositories as well as the expedited research publishing processes which helped share information necessary to combat the coronavirus. The introduction to this

section ends with an embedded version of the documentary, *Paywall: The Business of Scholarship*, a film which sets the tone for the next subchapters (Schmitt, 2018).

Beginning with the subchapter “Power,” Makula questions who holds the power in the scholarly publishing arena and the effects of this power dynamic. This subchapter also wades into open access and lists its benefits, though a discussion of the downfalls (for example, why scholars choose not to publish open access) would have been helpful to balance the author’s preference for openly accessible materials. For-profit and commercial publishers are identified as the dominant force in scholarly publishing, and this subchapter questions why the academic community continues to pay for content they have created. This is one of the major problems to which this chapter is referring, and Makula asks tough and timely questions as libraries deal with the serials crisis, canceling of journal subscriptions, and transformative agreements. Makula also highlights an ugly truth: while publishers commoditize and control scholarly content, prohibiting creators from reaping the benefits, academics are still stuck in the loop of conforming to traditional publishing expectations for promotion and tenure purposes. These are issues most would rather sweep under the rug, but Makula does not shy away from pushing back the curtain that hides this disturbing reality. Makula returns to the consideration of open access publishing models which strive to shift the power away from commercial publishers and ends the subchapter with a list of open access repositories and an exercise.

Following that is “Profit,” a subchapter concerning how motivations of money and prestige influence scholarly publishing, creating a resistance to change and transformation. Also included is a brief history of how journals became money-making machines, which paints a full picture of the publishing landscape from past to present. Makula goes on to discuss the serials crisis and includes a graphical illustration of the exponential rise in journal subscription costs. This chapter portrays libraries as victims, held prisoner to exorbitant journals prices, subscription bundles, and “Big Deals” that gouge money from libraries’—already tight—budgets. A table with profit margins of other industries compared to scholarly publishers breaks up the text and puts this issue into perspective. The numbers might shock and incense the reader, hopefully into a state of activism. Other issues with journal purchasing models are introduced, including increasing Article Processing Charges (APC), and the problem with the use of the assessment metric, the Journal Impact Factor (JIF), is discussed. These purchasing and profit models developed by the commercial publishing industry have huge impacts on the creation and distribution of knowledge. While this may seem depressing, Makula concludes the subchapter with an example of a university that is actively adjusting their promotion and tenure review by incorporating Open Science. This example shows readers that real change can happen.

The last subchapter in the “Some Problems” section is titled “Privilege.” It aims to identify for the reader those with privilege in the publishing cycle and those without. Makula delivers an explanation as to why this privilege is imbalanced and provides suggestions as to its rectification. This subchapter highlights inequities of race and ethnicity in publishing, which lead to a lack of diversity in scholarly journal content and scholarship produced by the academy. Inequality ultimately results in a biased and unbalanced publishing landscape. Gender inequities against women also abound in academia, leading to further bias which again interferes with the production of new knowledge. Wider global inequities are discussed, highlighting the inequality of knowledge production, consumption, and dissemination between the global North and the global South, as scholarly publishing is skewed towards the global North and “developed” countries.

These are, admittedly, very hard topics, but all are distilled into easy to swallow chunks of information; this subchapter presents the material as matter of fact and closes with a call to action that is brilliant. The final section, “Assignments,” includes two projects: a publishing plan for those delving into the world of scholarly publishing, and a promotion plan which will help authors further promote their work. Through her text, Makula has given readers the tools of knowledge and self-efficacy.

This OER is a fantastic resource for students and instructors, novices and experts, those in the field of scholarly communication and those from entirely different backgrounds. *Power, Profit, and Privilege: Problematizing Scholarly Publishing* provides readers with a sense of agency in the scholarly publishing cycle if they choose to take it. The information in this text will assist emerging authors in understanding the underbelly of scholarly publishing and will hopefully encourage them to take a stance and become advocates for open access and equitable publishing practices. These topics are relevant to everyone because they are relevant to humanity: issues of power and privilege affect us all, and Makula’s text pushes us to buck the traditional trends in academia and strive for a better future.

References

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