

Project Retrospective: Understanding and Mitigating the Risks of Open Access for Scholarly Societies

Prepared by: **Marcel LaFlamme** 

September 23, 2024

This report describes the context for and outcomes of the project “Understanding and Mitigating the Risks of Open Access for Scholarly Societies” from the 2018 Scholarly Communication Institute in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. The project team was comprised of Anna Agbe-Davies, Alberto Corsín Jiménez, Ellen Dubinsky, Marcel LaFlamme, and Caura Wood.

What gave rise to the project, and how was it initially framed?

Scholarly societies seek to make the knowledge that their members produce accessible to a range of publics. Many societies also rely on revenue from the publications they sponsor, along with membership dues and conference fees, to support organizational activities. In recent years, researchers have called on societies to move their publishing programs toward Open Access, even as funders have come to expect grant recipients to make their research outputs publicly accessible. But societies have been reluctant to embrace Open Access, viewing it as a risky departure from a working business model in the midst of uncertainty on other fronts.

Open Access advocacy in the field of anthropology dates back to the early years of the twenty-first century. By the mid-2010s, one focal point for these advocacy efforts was a collective of researchers known as Libraria. In 2018, Libraria approached two societies based in North America, the American Anthropological Association (AAA) and the Canadian Anthropology Society/Société canadienne d'anthropologie (CASCA), about proposing a project for Triangle SCI. The resulting project aimed to address the following questions:

- What financial, operational, and cultural risks would moving toward Open Access pose for scholarly societies like the AAA and CASCA? How can Open Access advocates more fully apprehend these risks?
- Are there risks for societies like the AAA and CASCA in *not* moving toward Open Access? In other words, are the existing publishing models for these two societies likely to remain viable into the future?
- What other actors have a stake in mitigating the risks of Open Access for scholarly societies? How might they be enlisted in doing so? What forms of support would be useful, and how could they be structured such that societies could rely on them?



- Does the Libraria model,¹ as it is currently formulated, mitigate the risks of Open Access for the AAA and CASCA? If not, then how could the model be refined or further specified? What other social and technical infrastructures might be required?
- How do the answers to these questions map onto the actually existing governance structures of these societies? What role would sections, committees, boards, and society staff need to play in moving toward Open Access?

As of 2018, the AAA published a portfolio of twenty-two journals on a subscription basis in partnership with the commercial publisher Wiley. One additional journal was self-hosted and published Open Access by the society. CASCA published its flagship journal, *Anthropologica*, on a subscription basis in partnership with the University of Toronto Press. Changes in a national funding scheme on which CASCA relied for support of *Anthropologica* were an external driver prompting this society to consider a move to Open Access.

What actually happened at SCI?

In the weeks leading up to Triangle SCI, the publishing director of the AAA (originally a member of the project team) indicated that she would not be able to participate in person. Instead, she agreed to join the team via Zoom for portions of the working sessions. This was a significant setback for the project, which was designed around allowing Open Access advocates and society leadership to build trust in an unhurried, face-to-face setting. While no reason for the change in plans was given, some members of the project team felt that it reflected a lack of buy-in by AAA leadership and a sense that the project was not a high priority.

The AAA did supply information about the revenues and expenses associated with its publishing program, under the condition of team members signing a nondisclosure agreement. However, the project team overestimated its ability to make sense of the voluminous documentation that was provided. In retrospect, it could have been useful to bring in an expert who was not part of the project team to help analyze this material. Future initiatives seeking to learn from the SCI experience may wish to place greater emphasis on the availability of knowledge integrators with relevant domain expertise, who could either be prebooked or on call during the event.

Prior to Triangle SCI, CASCA had conducted a member survey about support for Open Access, the results of which were shared with the project team. 90% of survey respondents indicated that they would remain dues-paying members of CASCA if the society's journal went Open Access, and 66% indicated that they would be open to paying an additional levy to support this move. With this evidence in hand, CASCA's representative to the project team indicated that a

¹ LaFlamme, Marcel, Dominic Boyer, Kirsten Bell, et al. 2018. "Let's Do This Together: A Cooperative Vision for Open Access." *Anthrodendum*, June 27, <https://anthrodendum.org/2018/06/27/lets-do-this-together-a-cooperative-vision-for-open-access>

decision to proceed would likely be announced by the end of the year. As a result, CASCA's focus was on making arrangements for their journal that would be actionable in the near term.

The Open Access model developed by Libraria, while inspired by successful initiatives like SCOAP3 and the Open Library of Humanities, was still unproven coming into Triangle SCI. That is, the cooperative envisioned as the coordinating body did not yet exist as a legal entity and certainly did not have the turnkey capacity to collect library payments or host journals. Libraria had hoped to enlist the AAA and CASCA in a process of co-creating these structures. But, accustomed to working with professionalized publishing partners, the societies—although they found elements of the model appealing—were reluctant to stake their publishing programs on a service offering that remained conceptual in nature. And, as an SCI participant from another project team pointed out, the Libraria representatives would need to decide if this is what they wanted to spend the next 3-5 years of their lives building.

Another tension navigated by the project team was between surfacing perspectives typical of the stakeholder group that each member represented and trying to enlist specific organizations in a commitment to work together. For instance, the librarian on the team could describe a general trend toward shifting collections budgets toward Open Access initiatives, but could not guarantee that her library would sign up as a supporter of the Libraria cooperative without more details being provided. Yet other local interactions did seem to point toward more widespread dynamics; the AAA board member on the team, whose term would end the following year, commented that “at the end of the day, I’m an archaeologist. When the publishing professional in the room tells me that this is how things are, I’m going to defer to them.”

What has happened since SCI?

At the AAA, the issue of Open Access mostly receded from view until 2021, when the society’s publishing agreement with Wiley was drawing to a close. Sensing that the terms of a contract renewal might not be as favorable as in the past, AAA leadership held a series of member town halls about other directions for the publishing program, which coincided with a statement about Open Access by a group of journal editors and section leaders.² But none of the groundwork had been laid for meaningful change, and so the AAA had little choice but to reup with Wiley through 2027. Wiley’s efforts to sign transformative agreements with U.S. institutions did create pathways to Open Access for some AAA authors. Yet new production requirements from Wiley, as well as a longer history of mistrust toward the publications office, triggered a revolt by journal editors, prompting new AAA leadership to take a more proactive role in placing the program on a sustainable, transparent, and open footing.

² Besky, Sarah, Ilana Gershon, Alex Nading, et al. 2021. “Opening Access to AAA’s Publishing Future.” Society for Cultural Anthropology website, June 30, <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/opening-access-to-aaas-publishing-future>

CASCA did move forward with its Open Access transition, partnering with the library at the institution of the editor-in-chief to host *Anthropologica* and with the Canadian initiative Érudit on enhanced discoverability. The transition has on balance been a successful one, with citation and readership numbers up and financial support coming from a new round of national funding as well as the member levy, which was reauthorized by CASCA members as recently as 2023. Replacing the production and indexing services provided by the journal's previous publisher has taken time, but yielded significant cost savings.

The Libraria model continued to evolve, based on feedback from an invitational workshop held at MIT in the spring of 2019, and was included in the final report of the Society Publishers Accelerating Open Access and Plan S project.³ However, as new initiatives like OACIP joined incumbents like Knowledge Unlatched in helping journals to source library support, Libraria leadership recognized that their own limited capacity might be better invested in other ways. Libraria rebranded itself as a consulting and advocacy network that aims to convene informed conversations and catalyze demonstration projects, such as the Cooperate for Open initiative focused on small, scholar-led Open Access journals.^{4,5} Libraria also played a key advisory role in the launch of Berghahn's Open Anthro offering.⁶

Thinking back on our experience at Triangle SCI, one team member reflected: "We were on the right track that change was possible. But we were premature in approaching the problem before the stakeholders were ready to collectively forge a new path." For others, the experience crystallized the value of using existing structures of society governance to effect change. One of us (Alberto) went on to bring a motion to the general assembly of the European Association of Social Anthropologists, whose passage compelled the society to take its journal Open Access. Another (Marcel) agreed to serve on the AAA's Future of Anthropological Communication Committee, which was charged with recommending options for the society's journal portfolio to a newly engaged Executive Board. More and more, advocacy for Open Access within scholarly societies has become indissociable from a broader agenda of community control.

³ Wise, Alicia, and Lorraine Estelle. 2019. "Society Publishers Accelerating Open Access and Plan S: Final Project Report." Information Power, <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.9805007.v1>

⁴ Herman, Kate. 2021. "Exploring Mutuality: A Report on Independent Open Access Publications in the Social Sciences." Libraria, <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4795689>

⁵ Brackenbury, Anne. 2022. "Yes, Scholar-Publishers Can Make Common Cause After All." *Allegra Lab*, December 22, <https://allegralaboratory.net/yes-scholar-publishers-can-make-common-cause-after-all>

⁶ Berghahn, Vivian. 2021. "The Berghahn Open Anthro Journey: Embarking on a Discipline-Driven Equitable Open Access Initiative." Berghahn website, October 28, <https://www.berghahnbooks.com/blog/berghahn-open-anthro-journey>