What Do We Owe the Scholarly Communication Community?

David W. Lewis

A community is a group with a mission to preserve its interests or to create change to advance them. The mission of the scholarly communication community, at least for me, is to make research and scholarship freely and easily available to anyone who can use it.

To advance this mission will require more than the good work of passionate individuals. It will require institutional investment. This investment is required to create the infrastructure that supports an open, community-owned, community-controlled commons of digital scholarly information. This is a challenging task, and to date, while some progress has been made, we have not been overly successful. Our investment has been insufficient. To generate the necessary investment requires that we overcome the collective action problem.

Mancur Olson (1965) defined the collective action problem in the mid-1960s. He demonstrated that groups, especially large groups, have a difficult time acting in concert, even when such action clearly serves the group’s interests. John Wenzler (2017) applied Olson’s work to academic libraries, arguing that it is not possible for us to achieve our scholarly communication goals. Cameron Neylon (2017), in a more nuanced application of Olson’s work to scholarly communication, shows that in some cases the collective action problem can be overcome. But what Neylon shows is how small groups can act and how collective action can be successful when some members of the group receive a benefit that they value enough to pay for the collective good. An example of the first is Plan S. Neylon’s example of the latter is CrossRef: Those wishing to mint DOIs fund the database that is openly available to everyone. Neylon’s examples of success do not, however, diminish Wenzler’s point. The academic library community as a whole has failed to act collectively to create the world of open scholarship that we claim to be working toward.

So, the question becomes, how does the large and diverse academic library community begin to act collectively? What will it take to for this community to collectively invest so that the robust infrastructure we all need will be available? Elinor Ostrom (1990), in her book, Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action, examines situations and institutions where commons are successful. Her work demonstrates that the collective action problem, though real, can be overcome given the right circumstances, incentives, and motivations. For us, her most useful insight is that the management of a large commons is best accomplished with a hierarchical organizational structure in which small local groups that know and trust each other manage a portion of the commons, a collection of these small groups manages a larger section, and a collection of the collections manages the whole. I am uncertain whether or not the academic library community, especially in the United States, has the incentives and motivation to create this kind of collective structure. I am certain, though, that if we do not, the for-profit sector will continue to exploit us with its monopoly power.
So, we all have to ask, what do we and our institutions owe the scholarly communication community? I would assert that it is much more than we now commit. If we do not find ways to make the collective investments, the world of open scholarship we hope to create will falter, and our efforts will fall short.

References


