# Sounding the Alarm: Scholarly Information and Global Information Companies in 2021
# Sonner l'alarme : les entreprises d'information globale et de diffusion du savoir en 2021

Jaclyn McLean et Elizabeth Stregger

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## Résumé de l'article

Les fournisseurs et les maisons d'édition collaborent et s'efforcent de protéger leurs profits - qui sont menacés par le libre accès - en s'infiltrant au cycle de vie de la recherche et de l'analyse des données, et en continuant à se fusionner et à s'acquérir mutuellement, ce qui réduit le choix sur le marché. La mise en œuvre de SeamlessAccess et autres systèmes contraint le personnel des bibliothèques à agir en tant que gardien de systèmes et de plateformes sur lesquels nous n'avons aucun contrôle ni influence. Les fournisseurs et les maisons d'édition contrôlent le contenu en ligne auquel les bibliothèques ont accès. Ils ajoutent et suppriment du contenu comme bon leur semble et ils classent les titres en fonction de leurs marges de vente les plus importantes, ce qui empêche les bibliothèques d'obtenir des licences pour l'accès à l'ensemble du campus. Ces actions - qui ont une influence sur le cycle de vie de la recherche dans son ensemble, perturbent la publication traditionnelle et cherchent à monétiser les données des usagers - sont extrêmement inquiétantes. L'action collective est la seule façon de contrer de manière significative ces développements. Nous suggérons quelques moyens proactifs pour initier ces actions collectives et résister à ces développements de l'industrie imposés par les fournisseurs et les maisons d'édition.

# Sounding the Alarm: Scholarly Information and Global Information Companies in 2021

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Jaclyn McLean
Electronic Resources Librarian
University of Saskatchewan Library
jaclyn.mclean@usask.ca

Elizabeth Stregger
Data and Digital Services Librarian
Mount Allison University Libraries and Archives
estregger@mta.ca

## Abstract / Résumé

Vendors and publishers collaborate and work to protect their bottom line—which is threatened by open access (OA)—by expanding into research lifecycle and data analytics, and by continuing to merge and acquire each other, reducing choice in the library market. The implementation of Seamless Access and other systems force library staff into the position of gatekeeper for systems and platforms that we have no control or input over. Vendors and publishers control the online content that libraries can access: they add and remove content at will, and classify titles according to their greatest possible sales margins, making valuable resources unavailable to libraries to license for campus-wide access. These vendor actions—which impact the research lifecycle as a whole, disrupt traditional publishing, and seek to monetize user data—are extremely concerning. Collective action is the only way to make significant inroads against these developments. We suggest some proactive ways that we can initiate these collective actions and resist these industry-wide developments imposed by vendors and publishers.

Les fournisseurs et les maisons d'édition collaborent et s'efforcent de protéger leurs profits - qui sont menacés par le libre accès - en s'infiltrant au cycle de vie de la recherche et de l'analyse des données, et en continuant à se fusionner et à s'acquérir mutuellement, ce qui réduit le choix sur le marché. La mise en œuvre de SeamlessAccess et autres systèmes contraint le personnel des bibliothèques à agir en tant que gardien de systèmes et de plateformes sur lesquels nous n'avons aucun contrôle ni influence. Les fournisseurs et les maisons d'édition contrôlent le contenu en ligne auquel les bibliothèques ont accès. Ils ajoutent et suppriment du contenu comme bon leur semble et ils classent les titres en fonction de leurs marges de vente les plus importantes, ce qui empêche les bibliothèques d'obtenir des licences pour l'accès à l'ensemble du campus. Ces actions - qui ont une influence sur le cycle de vie de la recherche dans son ensemble, perturbent la publication traditionnelle et cherchent à monétiser les données des usagers - sont extrêmement inquiétantes. L'action collective est la seule façon de contrer de manière significative ces développements. Nous suggérons quelques moyens proactifs pour initier ces actions collectives et résister à ces développements de l'industrie imposés par les fournisseurs et les maisons d'édition.

## Keywords / Mots-clés

library systems, vendor relations, scholarly communications

systèmes de bibliothèques, relations auprès des fournisseurs, communication savante

## Introduction

We are not the first ones to identify any of the issues, challenges, and threats posed by global information companies in 2021. But, as working academic librarians in systems, licensing, and managing online access who have been actively researching unaffiliated (walk-in) user access challenges for the last several years, we felt we had to share the intersecting issues that face us and have caused us to pause as we work on the next stage of our study. The current landscape of scientific (scholarly) publishing—with oligipolistic scientific publishers (e.g., Elsevier, Wiley Blackwell, Taylor & Francis, Springer Nature, American Chemical Society), systems, and licensing—is well known and understood by many, especially those of us working in libraries. Though we approach these issues from an academic librarian lens, we feel the same issues are important in all library sectors and across the higher education industry for anyone who licenses paywalled content. We will touch on many ideas and concerns that all individually need their own in-depth analysis. But put together, they create a situation that we are extremely concerned about.

## The Oligopoly's Next Act

For several years we have been librarians, library workers, and systems and electronic resource managers who negotiate and work with all types of vendors. When these vendors and publishers cooperate and collaborate rather than compete, we perk up and pay attention. In a for-profit, oligopolistic academic publishing industry, when the five

largest publishers collaborate on new initiatives, or when companies that address different aspects of the research lifecycle continue to conglomerate and reduce competition to a level that is laughable, we need to talk about it. Examples include the proposed Clarivate and ProQuest merger (Ojala, 2021; Schonfeld, 2021), the Kanopy and OverDrive merger announced in June 2021 (Cooper & Schonfeld, 2021), and the history of acquisitions by RELX (Lamdan, 2019; Moore, 2020). As open access (OA) publishing continues to evolve and increase, and as the suggestion by Piwowar et al. (2019) that by 2025, 44% of all journal articles ever published and 70% of all article views will be OA begins to feel achievable, one begins to look at the more traditional academic publishers and wonder how they are going to shift to protect their profits and their business in a new paradigm. Looking at the way these companies have acquired new technology and shifted their focus to data gives a strong indication that user data is the future.

In the past, libraries could select content and systems from a much wider variety of companies and add solutions and content that were developed in-house or collaboratively. Companies have consolidated to provide both content and systems. Clarivate, a publicly traded company, plans to acquire ProQuest, which previously acquired Ex Libris (Ojala, 2021; Popowich, 2021; Schonfeld, 2021). Library systems are designed by the companies that lease us databases and, in the case of Clarivate, do not even mention libraries on their homepage (www.clarivate.com). Elsevier, a publisher with massive profit margins, has acquired widely adopted technology such as reference management systems (Mendeley) and institutional repository systems (bepress). Elsevier is a division of RELX, which has recently rebranded itself as "global provider of information-based analytics and decision tools for professional and business customers" (RELX, 2021). In many cases, librarians have spent considerable time and energy adopting technology and promoting it to our communities, only to have it acquired by a company that does not align with our values.

As traditional scientific publishers are diversifying their income streams and rebranding themselves as data and technology companies (DiVittorio & Gianelli, 2021; Lamdan, 2019; Posada & Chen, 2017; SPARC, 2021), they are leveraging data to support their new business models. These data include citations, user data from libraries, usage data from their platforms, and multiple other sources. Open access initiatives continue to build momentum, with new ideas like Subscribe to Open (S2O, www.subscribetoopencommunity.org) emerging to compete with the traditional publishers' solution of Article Processing Charges (APCs) that seek to preserve publisher income levels. With grant funders, universities, and governments advocating for and requiring open access as a feature of research funding, this will only continue to grow (Government of Canada, 2016; SPARC, 2021).

## *Seamless at What Cost?*

The developments in recent years of RA21 (Resource Access for the 21st Century), which led to Seamless Access, and GetFTR (Get Full Text Research), which is built off the Seamless Access infrastructure, are examples of for-profit publishers cooperating and collaborating rather than competing. Seamless Access and GetFTR seek to reduce

the incidence of logins required by users who are conducting research across paywalled platforms. This solves a long identified usability problem for faculty members who know exactly what they want to access, but moves our whole community away from library systems, carefully selected collections, and open content. Vendors and publishers are driving these initiatives, and libraries are largely left out of the equation, or treated only as consumers, not partners, in these systems. The transition from library managed IP-based access, including proxy systems, to federated authentication, Single Sign On (SSO), and Security Assertion Markup Language (SAML),[1] which are managed by vendors, has been underway for a few years already.

When several publishers launched Seamless Access in early 2020, they leveraged universities' pre-existing memberships in international data consortia.[2] By leveraging the university's participation in these data consortia, vendors are able to implement Seamless Access, and by extension, GetFTR, without discussing it with anyone at the client institution. When librarians criticize or ask questions, we are largely brushed aside. For instance, the inability of SAML-based authentication to manage unaffiliated user access is known and understood by NISO and the managing group for Seamless Access. Their solution? To just wait and deal with it later, and to focus on primary user groups of students, faculty, and staff for now. Scholars including Lisa Hinchliffe (2018, 2019), Sarah Lamdan (2019, 2019), Samuel A. Moore (2020), Robert C. Schonfeld (2021, 2018), and Dorothea Salo (2021), have written comprehensively and thoughtfully about these and other related issues.

## *Outsourcing Selection*

For decades, as online opportunities have expanded and grown exponentially, libraries have wholesale ceded control to vendors for systems, workflows, and publishing. Instead of purchasing and owning content—as we did in print—we now lease huge collections of data and published materials from vendors, who can and do remove parts of the collections, or decide to classify important texts as "textbooks" and therefore ineligible for libraries to license for campus-wide use. Single-user licenses, DRM-laden online files, and restrictive platform requirements like making an account with the vendor to download a single PDF (Elsevier, 2017) have become the norm. This makes library staff the gatekeepers for systems and platforms that we have no control or input over and makes all these issues look like library problems, when in fact they are caused by vendors and publishers. The next great frontier for profits in scholarly publishing are, as mentioned above, tied to data. Repackaging and using data generated through the publishing platforms are essential for this to work and requires the ability to track and individuate users across platforms (Moore, 2020). GetFTR fulfills this role.

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[1] SAML is an XML-based protocol that uses security tokens containing assertions to pass information about an end user (Attributes) between a SAML authority (Identity Provider) and a SAML consumer (Service Provider). SAML enables web-based, cross-domain single sign on (SSO).
[2] If you want to find out which data consortia your university or organization belongs to, you can search the Refeds website: https://met.refeds.org/.

Over this same time period, some librarians have been resisting these systems by using open source systems, supporting institutional and data repositories, and promoting open access and open educational resources (OER). These collaborative efforts are unfortunately often commercialized by library content and technology companies providing wrap-around services and integrating them into the for-profit information market. An example is EBSCO Faculty Select, which is marketed as "a single interface for library staff and institutional faculty. Faculty Select makes it easy for faculty to explore OER and purchasable DRM-free e-books to support their courses" (EBSCO, n.d.). The open educational resources searchable in this site are limited to a few sources that have licensed their metadata to EBSCO. Faculty members searching this site do not discover all the OER options that can be located through portal searches or well-developed LibGuides. Without seeing those options, they are more likely to request one of the DRM-free ebooks, which are, of course, available for purchase through EBSCO.

## *Active Librarianship*

What does this mean for librarians? Improvements to cataloguing and classification will not be seen by our users if they access an item from a major publisher and their interface keeps them within those platforms. Collection development decisions that prioritize diverse voices or local content will be overwhelmed by streaming content accessed through an app on our devices. In addition to liaison work directly supporting teaching, learning, and research, we now have frequent discussions with faculty members about problematic acquisitions models, library budgets, and vendor systems. The very ideas of a library collection and the community of users are under challenge in ways that reduce our flexibility in planning for a more inclusive future.

The intersection of these many issues that impact the research lifecycle—that disrupt traditional publishing, that seek to monetize user data gained through licenses managed by libraries worldwide—is concerning. Collective action is the only way to make significant inroads against these developments. Librarians working towards common goals of supporting open scholarship are already making progress in many of these areas. We believe that advocating with scholarly associations and academic presses about their publishing practices and alignment with for-profit publishers and encouraging open access initiatives are actions that could have significant impacts. Looking to existing initiatives like the Public Knowledge Project (PKP, https://pkp.sfu.ca/), Érudit (https://www.erudit.org/en/) and the new MIT Press direct-to-open sales model (MIT Press, n.d.) are all good places to start. Raising awareness among faculty about the issues of volunteer labour inherent in the current for-profit scholarly publishing model and thus initiating change through faculty is another opportunity. Another is making university administrators, grant-funding agencies, and governments aware of these issues, ensuring that they know the impact for-profit, paywalled scholarly publishing has on bottom lines, innovation, and public access to research. As librarians, we also encourage you to talk about these issues with other librarians, researchers, and administrators, and to ask questions about how vendors are using data, and review licenses carefully for data related clauses, not just usage data, as we move forward.

We hope our article has raised your awareness of these issues and encourages you to investigate further through groups like SPARC and OA2020, look for opportunities to influence change, and see how your individual efforts, along with our collective efforts, may have an impact on a future that—as of today—seems fairly certain to cement the oligopoly's power in the academic processes of research for decades to come.

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