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Adding equity to transformative agreements and journal subscriptions –The Read & Let Read model

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Adding equity to transformative agreements and journal subscriptions –The Read & Let Read model

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*The transition towards open access to research articles has become a question of how, rather than why and the rise of transformative agreements has enabled publishers to strike agreements with large institutions and national research organisations to provide open access and authorship to their members. In this post, **Arthur J. Boston** puts forward an alternative Read & Let Read model, which could extend access beyond these limited groups and create a framework for more collaborative funding for access to open access research.*



Rethinking Old Traditions

It has taken two decades since the [Budapest Open Access Initiative](#) declaration for [open access publications to outnumber subscription publications](#). This transition should be accelerated, but the idea that benefitting a select few scholars at the cost of upholding barriers for the many is not an ideal mode of brokering access to knowledge. [APCs](#) and [TAs](#) are inequitable, because they open articles from only a select set of authors. However, in the same way, libraries subscribing to paywalled journals on behalf of their *own* community is arguably just as blameworthy a practice, since it ensures access only for a select set of readers, locking everyone else out

The way that libraries organise subscriptions from the larger for-profit publishers, I believe, is therefore an underexplored area for bringing about full open access at scale without sacrificing concerns of equity. While these models may have been justifiable in a print-only era, libraries and publishers are long overdue to do better. And that's why I continue to beat the drum for an alternative.

Read & Let Read

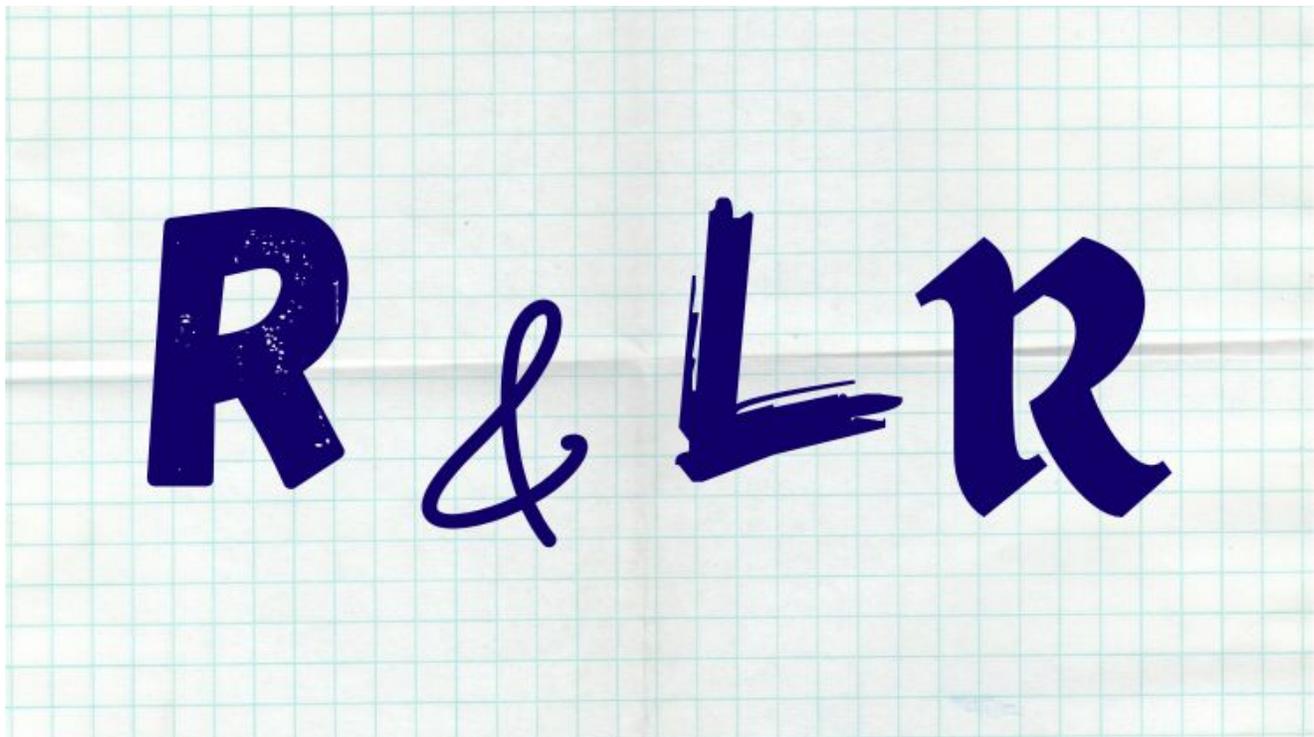
Libraries have traditionally subscribed to journals, but going forward, this should end. Instead of subscribing to *journals*, libraries should broker deals which allow users to access any *article* in a publisher's portfolio and make payments based on the amount of paywalled articles actually used. Under this system, libraries can maintain a level of predictability for publishers by prepaying for a number of article usages each year, based on the amount of articles used during the previous year.

Not only should libraries pay for access to that number of articles in the next year, they should *multiply it by two*. This will mean that likely about half the prepaid article uses will go unclaimed by a libraries' community during the coverage year. To justify the "double" payment, these unclaimed uses shall be made available for any online reader during the following year.

In brief, libraries should commit to prepaying for its community's estimated usage while ensuring an equal level of access opportunities for the wider global community. I call this plan Read & Let Read (R&LR).

R&LR in Action

The University of California (UC) is the example I like to use to illustrate R&LR. UC uses over eleven million Elsevier articles each year, and if UC and Elsevier signed a R&LR that included a wholesale rate of half a dollar for article uses, then UC would pay \$5.5 million dollars for 11 million downloads for its users plus \$5.5 million dollars for 11 million downloads for anyone to use. This adds up to a total of \$11 million dollars which is not a far cry from the \$10.7 million dollar deal that UC and Elsevier announced in 2021.



If UC gave both its institutional readers as well as global readers a combined 22 million opportunities to download any paper of their choice every year, it would greatly expand readership access for much of the world. Now, making articles open access would still be a good thing for the usage rights that the status entails, but the immediate unfair advantages associated with paying expensive open access fees (like potential citation advantages)

would virtually dissolve. And giving the global community this many opportunities to immediately read any paywalled article could simulate what a scholarly system with total open access will eventually feel like.

Enabling Open Access

Originally, R&LR was intended only to expand the reading audience under traditional library subscriptions. But the jigsaw pieces have gradually fallen into place, revealing a potential new model for funding open access. As a matter of creating a solid contract, libraries brokering a R&LR deal could also establish a threshold amount of instances it will pay for any single article to be downloaded. After an individual article's download count surpasses that threshold, that article should then automatically be made open access, regardless of the author or their affiliation.

The average APC in [the Elsevier and UC deal](#) is \$2,449. Therefore, in a R&LR deal with half-dollar article downloads, UC might choose 4,898 as its threshold: if any single article was downloaded 4,898 times (at a cost of a half-dollar each time), UC will have paid the equivalent of an APC. Any payments beyond this threshold would be an overpayment.

Since the criteria for an article to become open access would be its usage rather than its author, affiliation, or ability to pay, this mechanism would put libraries into implicit cooperation with each other to bring about open access—rather than implicit competition, as with APCs and TAs.

If libraries were willing to implement R&LR for the sake of inquiry and knowledge, readers the globe over would gain millions of opportunities to freely read the paywalled articles of their choice. An author's inability to pay for open access would no longer necessarily mean a paywall for readers. Over time, as readers continually accessed the scholarly literature, many of the most apparently important papers would automatically become fully open access. To paraphrase the old Budapest declaration, I believe remixing an old library tradition can make possible a truly transformative and unprecedented public good.

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