

# OPPOSING FORCES

## NAVIGATING THE DUALITY OF SCHOLARLY COMMUNICATION WORK

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### INTRODUCTION

They go by many names and wear many hats, but a core function of a scholarly communication librarian (SCL) is upholding the rights of publishers while simultaneously supporting alternative methods of publication and dissemination. Simply put, as these positions are often currently implemented, SCLs strive toward two competing goals, creating a duality in the work. This duality requires a breadth of knowledge that is impossible to acquire without extensive experience and a patient mentor. In fact, the 2017 “NASIG Core Competencies for Scholarly Communication Librarians” report acknowledges the complexity of the job: “responsibility for the full suite of competencies is beyond the reach of even the most accomplished librarian.”<sup>1</sup>

### THE PROBLEM

Nevertheless, many universities and colleges are hiring SCLs or modifying existing positions to include these responsibilities. Often, these librarians are alone in their duties, with little understanding of the work they do by their colleagues or administrators, and the job description often highlights the duality of the work. For example, the SCL is generally expected to recruit content for the institutional repository and to comply with publisher policies on sharing. Simultaneously, many are expected to actively advocate for open access (OA) models. These conflicting and abstract job duties may create a frustrating work environment.

Unclear expectations and duality inherent in the position often lead to what Dorothea Salo identifies as “fundamental attribution error,” which is “the human tendency to personalize error and failure by blaming them on an individual and his/her distinctive traits rather than the system in which the individual is embedded.” Salo explains, “Encouraging the fundamental attribution error in everyone who interacts with the new initiative both savages the initiative and absolves everyone but the initiative’s staff members of responsibility for any difficulties associated with it.”<sup>2</sup> Essentially, SCLs are presented with not only a position of competing interests (duality), but also possible frustration by colleagues or supervisors when they are unable to solve the nebulous problems they were hired to address.

Why does this tension exist? A 2015 study concerning burnout in academic librarianship showed “that librarians in a variety of positions experience stress, resulting in part from uncertainty about expectations, the pace of the changing roles, and other role-related problems.”<sup>3</sup> Unclear responsibilities, coupled with the intangible or ambiguous expectations of SCLs, are a recipe for failure. Indeed, most of those even peripherally engaged with scholarly communication know that library/publisher relationships are outdated and hurt readers and authors worldwide, but concerns such as fear of lost access, accreditation issues, and potential backlash by campus stakeholders may hold many SCLs back from advocating for or implementing inventive (possibly extreme) change. Without support of colleagues, library administration, and the university as whole, SCLs may find themselves losing traction, causing an initiative to suffer, and leading the librarian to burnout.

Despite the sometimes dire state of working in scholarly communication, there are positive changes on the horizon. These changes, coupled with tangible steps taken by individuals to protect their mental health, can make working in a scholarly communication role sustainable and satisfying.

## STAYING HEALTHY

Self-care is of utmost importance when working in scholarly communication (or any role, anytime, anywhere). Librarianship is rife with rhetoric of being a calling, suggesting librarianship as a saintly profession. This rhetoric may be emotionally damaging, as one could believe one is inadequate if overwhelmed or dissatisfied by the work. “Vocational awe,” as Ettarh explains, is “easily weaponized against the worker, allowing anyone to deploy a vocational purity test in which the worker can be accused of not being devout or passionate enough to serve without complaint.”<sup>4</sup> Considering the duality and related conditions SCLs may confront, it is helpful to work each day with these principles in mind: have purpose, take baby steps, and focus work on university values and goals.

SCLs should start each day with a clear goal in mind, whether the lofty goal of free and open access for all or the less lofty, but equally important goal of earning a living. It is important to approach each day with purpose in order to not let vocational awe, fundamental attribution error, or the competing interests of the work get one down.

While working on those goals, achievable baby steps should be built into the process. For example, one path toward OA could be advocating for an OA policy, but passing such a policy requires a significant amount of groundwork. Each step within that extensive groundwork, though small, is extremely valuable. Beginning conversations locally within the library, collecting and understanding the arguments supporting and opposing OA policies, and identifying OA champions on campus are important steps toward the goal. Though these are small steps, their accumulation is invaluable to the realization of an OA policy.

Finally, SCLs should concentrate energy predominantly on the work the institution is willing to invest in to enact changes in the publishing life cycle. Assessment of the values and goals of an institution should be undertaken to inform the trajectory of work to produce the greatest results. By focusing the majority of one’s energy on activities meaningful to the institution, the librarian is building trust with the campus, ensuring a healthy relationship that opens up the possibility of taking scholarly communication work further in the future. Institutional support is vital to the health and success of the SCL. If buy-in isn’t present, the librarian should consider programmatic adjustments to align with institutional needs.

# POSITIVE CHANGES IN THE SCHOLARLY COMMUNICATION LANDSCAPE

The years 2018 and 2019 were evolutionary for scholarly communication through the reveal of Plan S in Europe, as well as Big Deal cancellations by world-renowned research institutions. Under Plan S, all researchers conducting state-funded research must make their work accessible in “compliant Open Access journals or platforms”<sup>5</sup> by 2021. The cancellation of the Elsevier Big Deal by the University of California system made waves in the North American scholarly communication communities, as did cancellations by several other universities. These cancellations, carried out with support from the faculty and administration of these institutions, are instilling university libraries with greater confidence to confront the crisis in scholarly communication.

## CONCLUSION

SCLs are often charged with publisher sharing policy compliance, while also investigating and instigating methods of moving away from the traditional publishing system. This duality, along with the fact that they may be acting alone with little support in a profession that thrives on vocational awe as a tool for undervaluing workers, can lead to burnout of SCLs. Through centering goals, valuing baby steps toward progress, and aligning efforts with institutional goals and values, scholarly communication librarians can stay healthy and enact the change for which they were hired.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Can you identify ways in which vocational awe has impacted your work? How could you overcome vocational awe to better perform your job?
2. Do you think scholarly communication librarians are any more or less prone to burnout than other specializations in the profession? Why or why not?
3. In addition to the steps suggested by the author, what additional self-care strategies might you consider to avoid burnout and maintain wellness and health?

## NOTES

1. Michael Rodriguez, “NASIG Core Competencies for Scholarly Communication Librarians,” *Technical Services Quarterly* 35, no. 3 (2018): 307, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07317131.2018.1456869>.
2. Dorothea Salo, “How to Scuttle a Scholarly Communication Initiative,” *Journal of Librarianship and Scholarly Communication* 1, no. 4 (2013): eP1075–7, <https://doi.org/10.7710/2162-3309.1075>.
3. Ellen I. Shupe, Stephanie K. Wambaugh, and Reed J. Bramble, “Role-Related Stress Experienced by Academic Librarians,” *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 41, no. 3 (May 2015): 265, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2015.03.016>.
4. Fobazi Ettarh, “Vocational Awe and Librarianship: The Lies We Tell Ourselves,” *In the Library with the Lead Pipe*, January 10, 2018, <https://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2018/vocational-awe/>.
5. Plan S and COAlition S, home page, accessed March 3, 2020, <https://www.coalition-s.org/>.

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