

A Statement on Open Access from Fernwood Publishing

In their submission to the Tri-Council Open Access Policy Consultation, in December 2013, CAUT says there is a “crisis in scholarly publishing.” In brief, the costs of scholarly (and academic) publishing, as indicated by journal subscription prices, has increased dramatically (200+ percent since 1986), while the resources (budgets) of universities (libraries) has stagnated or decreased, and the profits of private publishers have remained steady at 35 percent. In their view Open Access is a solution to this crisis. We think that CAUT has made explicit the underlying rationale for all proponents of Open Access. We, at Fernwood, fully agree that there is a crisis in scholarly and academic publishing; however, we do not agree that Open Access is a solution to that crisis.

Let’s unpack the basis of the crisis. As usual aggregate statistics hide as much as they reveal. The prices of publications from independent academic publishers (we would include university presses) have not increased by 200+ percent since 1986. Nor are the profits of independent (and, again, we assume university) presses high and steady at 35 percent. Using Fernwood Publishing as an example: our prices have increased in the range of 40 percent – 50 percent since we began publishing in 1992, and our profits, when we actually have profits, are much more likely to be in the five percent – ten percent range. It would be stretching things to say that either of these changes is exorbitant or higher than the increases of university resources over the same period.

Hence, this “prices crisis” has been created by the dominant suppliers of scholarly and academic literature (journals, monographs and textbooks) – the multi-national private publishers.

Fernwood Publishing agrees with the principle of free access to publically funded scholarly research, as likely do many or most independent academic and university presses. In this, our allegiances are with scholars (not with multi-national corporations). But, those of us who work in independent academic publishing need to be paid for the work we do to assist in disseminating the results of scholarly research and disseminating scholarly and academic writing. And we do assist in the process of making such work accessible, from developing manuscripts, editing the writing, designing and producing the books (and, maybe, some) journals, making potential readers aware of that writing to delivering that writing to readers. We need to be paid for that work, just as scholars are paid for the work they do in researching and writing, as well as the many others at their institutions whose work supports their research and scholarly/academic writing who are paid for their labour in that process. However, most/all independent (and university) publishers, unlike the multi-nationals, do not have investors and shareholders to pay.

So, what are the solutions to this problem created by the practices of multi-national publishers? One obvious, and seemingly simple, solution is for scholars to not publish with the problem presses. Individual scholars and scholarly societies (who

organize and manage scholarly journals) could/should seek out independent publishers for disseminating their work. Scholars could make the same commitment to independent publishers that we have made to them – when is the last time a multi-national publisher had a decent-sized exhibit at Congress? A condition of funded writing could be that it must be disseminated through publishing channels that meet a specific set of criteria (regarding Canadian ownership, prices, profit), if we do not want all publishers of academic writing to be public (university owned and run) presses.

In our view, mandated or incentivized Open Access is not a solution to the real problem. As the ACUP Open Access Report so aptly demonstrates, the costs of Open Access are substantial and, at least by implication, will not bring down the prices/costs of scholarly and academic writing, particularly for monographs. Open Access does not magically disappear all the work that goes into making scholarly and academic research and writing openly accessible to everyone. That work must still be compensated. But most importantly, Open Access does not address the “crisis in scholarly publishing.” While we agree that the subsidy level for Open Access needs to be \$30,000 or more and the length of an embargo of 12 months or 36 months or 48 months, discussions about these aspects of Open Access do not address the root causes of the problem.