

Open Access: Perspectives from SSHRC and NRC

by [Lesley Perkins](#) and [Heather Morrison](#)

Abstract: At the “Open Access, New Roles for Funders and Publishers?” session, held at the [Canadian Library Association](#) Conference, Saturday, June 18, 2005, representatives of two of Canada’s key academic research agencies, both based in Ottawa, presented their views on Open Access (OA). The speakers were **Cameron MacDonald**, Director, Publishing, [National Research Council of Canada](#) (NRC Press), and **David Moorman**, Project Administrator and Senior Policy Advisor, [Social Science and Humanities Research Council](#) (SSHRC). The session convenor was **John Teskey**, Director of Libraries, University of New Brunswick, and incoming President, [Canadian Association of Research Libraries](#) (CARL). While both NRC Press and SSHRC are committed to OA in principle, they are struggling to find ways to implement it in practice that are acceptable to all parties involved. NRC Press provides free access to its journals to all Canadians, through the Depository Services Program, and allows authors to self-archive the final PDF of articles, after a 6-month delay. SSHRC is undergoing a major transformation, asking questions about how to decide which journals deserve subsidies. Currently, OA journals do not qualify for SSHRC subsidy funding, which requires a subscriber base. Perhaps this stipulation can be changed for the next round of competition for subsidy funding in 2007, but what criteria will be used to replace this rule? Will publishers even be necessary, now that institutional repositories are becoming a reality?

The first speaker at the “Open Access, New Roles for Funders and Publishers?” session, held at the [Canadian Library Association](#) Conference, Saturday, June 18, 2005, was **Cameron MacDonald**, representing the publisher’s view, to explain why authors and libraries need publishers. NRC Press is a not-for-profit (NFP) publisher, and the largest publisher of Science and Technology journals in Canada. NRC currently publishes 15 of its own journals, and another 17 under contract. Like many government agencies, NRC is mandated to be a cost recovery operation. Cameron, who was a librarian for many years before working for NRC Press, was quick to point out that NFPs support OA in concept, meaning they are supportive of more equitable access. But he added that he sees the OA movement as a response to a crisis, and that there is a lot of misinformation. He described the OA movement as a very new business model, and noted that it costs a publisher \$2,000 to \$3,000 to get an article out. Cameron’s talk followed the format of a series of questions and answers. Here are some highlights from Cameron’s presentation:

Why Publish? Mainly to support the scholarly communication process, and to provide communities with a publication process.

What’s Happening in the Academic Publishing Environment? While the focus is usually on the huge STM publishers, about 50% of academic publishing is done by a variety of NFPs, including scholarly associations, university presses, and government agencies. These publishers range in size from the University of Toronto to small groups of like-minded individuals. There’s no more money in the system. Publishers need to continue to support both paper and electronic, which readers and authors still expect. There have been large technological changes in publishing, and there are several new business models, including OA.

Why do Authors Need Publishers? Among other reasons, to reach out to a targeted community of researchers, to manage peer review and the related impact of the review process, to develop and promote journals and ground-breaking research articles, and to make authors’ research look good and read well.

On this last point, Cameron described the work that happens behind the scenes to make submitted articles ready for publication in an academic research journal; NRC editors (who hold Master’s degrees in the sciences, and have editing experience), clarify inaccurate or contradictory material, check and fix incomplete references and citations, fix mislabeled charts, and “buff up the abstract so it’s understandable.” Cameron said scientists are not noted for the clarity and accuracy of their writing.

Why do Libraries Need Publishers? For reliable access, predictable quality, for indexing, abstracting and search engines, linking, multiple formats, and multilingual access.

What is the Problem with OA as a Business Model? NRC Press is mandated to recover its costs, and the majority of subscriptions are from outside of Canada, so if NRC journals were to become open access, additional revenue would be needed. Most researchers are not prepared to pay the true costs of publishing, some are unable to pay any costs, and most granting agencies are “not there yet”. Membership fees are still coming from university budgets. To date, OA has only been shown to be possible with significant funding. It is too early to tell which business model is workable. Possible solutions, which many publishers are already experimenting with, include: open abstracts, delayed access (6 months is common), open access to select articles, and split journal access (free access if author pays, locked down if subscriber pays).

What is NRC Research Press Doing About OA? Current strategic directions include: promote free access to Canadians, the development of new funding models to enhance OA, continue to investigate and experiment with options, expand access to OA programs, and support national OA initiatives. Cameron emphasized that NRC “does not want to imperil or endanger its good expertise and technologies.”

The second speaker, **David Moorman** (SSHRC), spoke from the perspective of the research funding agency. SSHRC's mandate is to promote and assist Canadian academic research in the social sciences and humanities, to advise the Minister on issues referred to the Council, and to provide maximum impact for research funded in Canada. David, who has been a vocal advocate of OA for the past few years, explained that SSHRC is governed by academics, run by a president, and reports through Ministers to Parliament directly, and that the point of this set-up is to have “as little political influence as possible.” Here are some highlights from David's presentation:

OA Adopted in Principle: David said that SSHRC is undergoing a major transformation (for details see http://www.sshrc.ca/web/whatsnew/initiatives/transformation/index_e.asp). Two improvements are needed: Interactive engagement, and maximizing the impact of research. At its October board meeting, SSHRC adopted OA in principle, and was the first research council in the world to do so. David stressed they don't yet understand all implications of this policy. Consultation on OA with other agencies (such as the Canadian Federation of Humanities and Social Sciences, and CARL) is ongoing, with the next round starting in July.

SSHRC Journals: Of the 161 SSHRC journals, 50% are owned by scholarly associations, and 80% provide some degree of electronic access now or plan to in 2 years. Also, 44 of the 161 journals use non-Canadian service providers (e.g. EBSCO, Blackwell). This presents an ethical problem, since SSHRC funding criteria includes using Canadian editorial and publishing services.

SSHRC measures the relevance and impact of a journal by its subscriptions, and the size of a SSHRC grant is determined by a journal's revenue. Measurement options common in the sciences (citation data, impact factor) do not have equivalents in the social sciences and humanities. There are no obvious replacements.

OA policy is difficult to implement when journals are closed access. The big question is how to maintain the financial stability of the journals.

Possible Solutions: David says the answer lies with the research communication system. Some options involve eliminating publishers entirely. Academics could work directly with their peers, or with interuniversity consortium publishers (an example is Quebec's Érudit, <http://www.erudit.org/en/info.html>). Could there be a role for libraries, perhaps building a peer review overlay on articles deposited in institutional repositories? It is, admits David, a huge political issue to ask the question “do the publishers really need to be there?”

Other options would be for SSRHC to require, as a condition for a research grant, that the author deposit a copy of his/her work in an OA repository (so far, there are only 9 operating institutional repositories at Canadian universities), or to create a central repository, similar to the [U.S. National Institute of Health's PubMedCentral](#) (creating such a repository would require funding).

While requiring deposit of research articles in OA repositories would be a powerful motivator for academics, this approach could have a serious impact on the journal community, since it undermines all that they do.

Conclusions. Cameron believes there's a need to develop business models consulting with all communities involved, that NFPs need to reduce their costs and seek new revenue streams, and that shared cost models will move to the centre. David stressed the need for creative thinking to figure out how to make OA work, and—he turns to the academics and librarians, believing that “librarians hold the key to all of this.” Both speakers agree that while there are major cost efficiencies with electronic-only publishing, there is a need to publish in both print and electronic in the current scholarly communication environment, and that many authors and readers want access to both formats. Whatever happens, both Cameron and David agree there will need to be a transition period.

Authors' Note: [The Canadian Association of College and University Libraries](#) (CACUL) and CLA each passed a Resolution on Open Access this year. At CACUL, the resolution was passed unanimously. The text of the CLA Resolution on Open Access is available at <http://www.cla.ca/resources/resolutions2005.htm>.