

ScholarlyHub: A Progress Report at Six Months

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The background and rationale for proposing the platform

- 1 The open access (OA) movement currently operates without a sustainable social network that:
 - a. reflects the broad spectrum of its stakeholders, and
 - b. facilitates scholars' use of the increasingly abundant OA services.
- 2 The principal academic social networks (ASNs), above all ResearchGate and Academic dot edu are mainly freemium repositories subordinated to venture-capital interests such as data harvesting and monetization, not the free exchange of ideas or research output, and operate in a legal grey area that undermines their content's stability and perhaps even legitimacy. The recently launched Humanities Commons, by far a more laudable endeavor, declares a limited scope of disciplines, chose to begin with a select group of traditional learned societies, and—so far as one can tell from their development plan—has no ambition to provide the full range of preprint, peer-review, publishing and other OA services that would provide a real non-profit alternative to the platforms being currently developed by for-profit conglomerates such as Elsevier. Within the broad space thereby left, ScholarlyHub (SH) seeks to test a (modest and sliding-scale) fee-based membership model that makes room for a great variety of scholarly communities of practice, on the one hand, and channels scholarly communications more intently towards a federation of (ideally interoperable) OA services on the other, and to the benefit of both scholars and society at large.

The current landscape and how will ScholarlyHub be different

- 3 The key function envisaged for SH is that of a social platform and aggregator site for scholars, broadly defined. SH members create personal, thematic, project-related, associational or institutional profiles and populate them with scholarly content they have generated as they see fit. These are stored in a searchable open-access archive (to the greatest extent possible based on existing OA repositories), and are directly viewable and downloadable by anyone, including non-members. Members can join existing societies and networks and/or create new ones; and can engage in any and all activities on the platform, from recommending articles and creating events, mentoring, following and contributing to job and conference wikis and discussion boards, to peer-reviewing and publishing articles (once again, based maximally on preexisting services), to curating journals and monograph series and—crucially—setting up new virtual research platforms and initiatives. In its financial rationale and proposed scope, SH thus seeks to offer a non-profit alternative to the one-stop-shopping complex currently being developed by certain conglomerate publishers, for instance Elsevier which has recently purchased SSRN (after already buying Mendeley), to augment its already substantial publishing and indexing portfolio. It is in other words a way to combat the latter's capacity for trading in data, and their attempt to maintain and even increase their market share and power to control prices in the academic publishing market in ways that no other single scholarly communications platform, including the large university presses, is likely to pursue independently.
- 4 To repeat and clarify, SH does not plan to develop each and every service noted above, but rather to collaborate insofar as possible with existing non-profit and open-source services in each of these subsectors (e.g., indexing, preprint, publishing data storage, etc.), and even—to the extent possible—in building its social interface site. Nor does it seek to define how a community of scholarly practice must operate or who its members should be. The approach reflects a strongly felt need in and beyond academia to increase the role played by scholars and scholarship in fighting social injustice and the increasing disparities in who has access to (often publicly funded research) and how such research is accessed by scholarship using individuals and communities around the world, from parents and educators, to journalists, think tanks and NGOs, to legal and medical clinics with limited resources. It is thus in the development of a unified and accessible portal, encompassing a federation of interoperable services for diverse communities, that the vision of SH stands out.

The proposed funding model and rationale

- 5 SH is a grassroots initiative. Accordingly, it will develop its capacities according to members' contributions and needs. To do so it will seek grants from organizations and individuals supporting open science, although its explicit aim is to build on modest annual membership fees (e.g., \$25; \$10 for students), similar to (or indeed, much lower than) those collected by existing learned societies but facilitating a broader user base to scale up. As a strictly non-profit organization (the Dutch ANBI status), learned community-oriented and run endeavor, the hub will not sell its data, open itself to

advertising or charge members for author processing costs (APCs) or monetize in other ways. Costs will be front-loaded through modest membership fees, paid directly by individual members according to their needs, through existing and new learned societies, medium to large scale organizations such as libraries or even colleges and universities, or modest size and ad hoc scholarly communities of practice, including NGOs, think tanks, clinics, etc. Co-development of new features and services, if found desirable by members, can lead to ad hoc or long-term collaborations with other entities, on the basis of a shared OA agenda for creating sustainable scholarly communications infrastructures.

Challenges and opportunities anticipated

- 6 The bad news about beginning at the front end is that it is costly to set up, especially when resources are minimal—as SH's are. The even worse news is that setting up a social network without an existing constituency (e.g. a learned society, a university, a school system, a consortium of NGOs) is risky, since people are less likely to join without critical mass or a viable product. And just to add to the challenge, we will be asking those who will join on to pay membership fees, however modest, when they can get some (but not all) of our services elsewhere for free, at least for the time being. The good news, however, is that important elements of a possible backend are already there, interoperable and not-for-profit. It is here, behind the social network façade, that years of individual and foundation-driven efforts may finally pay off on a large scale. Preprint services, indexers, review and editing protocols, safe mentoring spaces, conference wikis, social media feeds, metadata generators, and of course real open access repositories (decentralized and not) with stable and secure APIs: each and every one of these, provided they are committed to truly open access, open source, and public benefit, can play a major role in effecting a desired shift. It is also an opportune moment to push in this direction, not only due to the growing maturity of the field and its resources, but also given the growing global awareness to the dangers of leaving any personal data to the whims of market forces and profit-seeking entities. The recent Facebook-Cambridge Analytica scandal, for instance, provides a real chance to reclaim a crucial part of the public sphere.

Development so far

- 7 Our November 2017 launch received significant media interest, with articles in Times Higher Education, Research Fortnight, and Inside Higher Education, followed closely by interviews in ScienceGuide, Wired, and EdSurge, among other outlets. Within our advisory board¹, which represents a diverse group of scholars in various fields, we reached out to our own social and professional networks directly via email, as well as through the SH website and social media accounts. (The latter no longer includes a Facebook page; in light of the recent Facebook-Cambridge Analytica scandal, we have decided that our need to communicate with potential members and supporters should not come at the cost of doing so in a safe and sustainable way.) Each of these channels turned out to be quite popular with OA scholar-activists and a range of other scholars around the world. Among the latter group, it was clear that some were learning for the first time about the increasingly toxic ecosystem within which they publish, access, or share scholarly work. Currently more than 1,200 people are signed up to our newsletter,

more than two thousand people interact with us regularly on social media, and tens of thousands of unique visitors have already arrived at the SH website, which includes a blog, donation page, FAQs and a twitter feed.

- 8 Beyond calling attention to our plans, we also managed to establish ourselves as one initiative among several—including Humanities Commons and the various existing disciplinary repositories, such as arXiv, Open Journal Systems (OJS), and Open Science Framework (OSF)—who want to challenge the status quo. Invitations for conferences (such as ElPub 2018), seminars, workshops and interviews, as well as for contributing blog posts and articles soon followed. Given the great record and sophistication of existing initiatives, it was heartening to receive such positive attention early on, and we hope to continue building on this positive, forward-moving momentum to earn the trust of scholarly communities around the world. If we spotlighted existing platforms, we see that, too, as a success. The profound cultural change we want to help effect is not a zero-sum game; there is much ground to reclaim and the more hands weeding out the garden, the better.
- 9 The cooperative spirit is hardly unique to us at ScholarlyHub. Within this period, different organizations have reached out to us—including learned societies, grassroots organizations, libraries, academic publishers, IEEE, ORCID, OSF, and numerous individuals—formally and informally connected to major stakeholders in OA. They have convinced us that a coordinated attempt is possible, especially in the back end, and stressed the importance of our intervention in the front end. Out of these preliminary talks and our in-house discussions, it seems that moving forward, with minimum redundancies, is quite possible once the social network portal is set up. We have already laid out the portal's basic design² and user interface and shared it with our subscribers and supporters. We are now beginning to develop a clear road map for building the eventual website and discuss it and its implications with possible partners.
- 10 Last but not least, donations³. Three weeks after announcing our plans, we began gathering the necessary funds to realize those plans, with an initial target goal of 500,000 EUR. We chose not to use crowdfunding sites and opted to work mainly through our website for the sake of efficiency and cost-savings. We knew in advance that the target was ambitious and estimated that it would be possible, even desirable to reach it by spreading the burden as widely as possible, collecting small donations from enthusiastic individuals rather than large ones from private or institutional donors. During the first three months of the campaign, we raised around 15,000 EUR from about 120 individuals.
- 11 Direct fundraising is key to our success, particularly as a demonstration that a grassroots effort can help turn the tide. It is too early to tell what's on our horizons, but the enthusiasm with which our plans were received, and the support it lent directly and indirectly to initiatives whose agendas and values we strongly share, bodes well for the future of independent scholarly communications. The alliance of non-profit services we wish to integrate and synergize will succeed by bringing a critical mass of scholars and scholarship-using communities into one or several main environments. We believe we can make a difference. Together, we can build a better, more open culture of scholarly creation, communication, and sharing.

NOTES

1. <https://www.scholarlyhub.org/whos-involved>
 2. <https://www.scholarlyhub.org/feed/2017/12/10/the-platform>
 3. <https://www.scholarlyhub.org/donate/>
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ABSTRACTS

ScholarlyHub (SH) was launched in November 2017 as a portal to fund and create a social network for scholarship-using individuals and communities that is supported and directed from the bottom up and not beholden to venture capitalists on the one hand and governments on the other. As an inclusive, member-run portal, it hopes to connect rather than replace numerous non-profit and open-source OA initiatives, which tend to lack a visible and attractive front end, and which may not currently be interoperable. If its goals can be realized, SH may offer one solution to the full workflow platforms that for-profit conglomerates are on the cusp of achieving. This practitioner's paper presents the key characteristics of SH and offers an early progress report.

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Keywords: academic social networks, open access, scholarly communications, scholarly communities of practice, inclusivity, interoperability

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