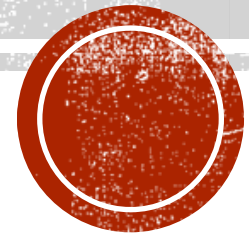


THE FREE RIDER PROBLEM

Are Smaller Academic Libraries Open Access Free Riders?

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THE FREE RIDER PROBLEM – CONCEPT & ORIGINS

Open Access presents a **Collective Action** problem:

-Individuals in large groups are less likely to contribute to the provision of a public good because they can benefit without doing so.

The **Free Rider Problem** (FRP) occurs when **rational actors maximize self-interest**, leading to the underproduction of shared goods unless incentives, compulsions, or group norms can align individual and collective norms.

Open Access publishing results in **non-excludable goods**, meaning one cannot realistically prevent anyone from using it, even those who haven't contributed to its creation.



DIMENSIONS OF THE FREE RIDER PROBLEM

Social Psychology

- Norms, identity & peer expectations
- Libraries may feel pressured by narratives of *responsibility & duty*

Economics

- Cost-benefit tradeoffs, public goods, and logic of self-interest
- Why institutions balk if costs are high or benefits diffuse
- Individual rationality versus group optimality

Moral & Philosophical

- Questions of fairness, justice, & obligation
- *Ought* institutions to contribute?
- What moral basis of exhorting smaller institutions to share load?
- What of structural inequities?



TWO PRIMARY *FRP* PROBLEMS IN OA PUBLISHING

1. Peer-to-Peer Tension: some libraries hesitate to commit to OA initiatives (S20)

2. Systemic Level: larger university libraries fund most OA output while smaller libraries mostly consume

Questions for audience:

- Have you noticed this tension in consortial settings?
- Have you heard the term used in either way in your professional work?

Perceptions versus Constraints:

- Engaged versus Overextended
- Financial versus Invisible Contribution
- Funding versus Benefiting



OA STRUCTURAL CHALLENGES FOR LIBRARIES



The Reality of Smaller Institutions

- Limited budgets and diminishing staff
- Low-volume publishing
- Diffuse disciplinary output
- APCs and Transformative Agreements are difficult
- Green OA relies on buy-in & compliance



The Reality of Larger Institutions

- High financial burden & complex staffing
- High-volume production
- Concentrated disciplinary focus
- Expensive agreements & commitments
- Dependency on broader compliance



1

Smaller libraries support OA ideals but lack capacity to act

2

Cost concentration versus diffusion of benefits:
-costs to large institutions, benefits to all

3

Non-excludability precludes enforcement or alignment mechanisms for non-contributors

4

Cooperation is essential but structurally challenging

TENSIONS & IMPLICATIONS

QUESTIONS FOR AUDIENCE:

How might these tensions shape consortial agreements or inter-institutional policies?

How might these tensions create undesirable outcomes going forward?



MOVING BEYOND THE FREE RIDER LABEL

- The Free Rider Problem is:
 - Emblematic of the many coordination challenges in the OA ecosphere
 - Primarily one of perception or observation point
 - Analytic or diagnostic in this context, not moral
- Collective action problems require and invite solutions that:
 - Name the debate and move beyond the label
 - Provide additional entry points to OA publishing & contributions
 - Recognize that commons are best managed through participatory governance that builds mutual trust
- Equitable frameworks increase participation and reduce friction



STRATEGIES & TAKEAWAYS FOR LIBRARIES

- Facilitate cross-institutional dialogues to clarify terms and contributions
 - Explore what *feels* fair and what doesn't and ideate in that problem space
- Identify, document, and communicate non-monetary contributions to the OA ecosystem
 - Sort values by emergent frameworks that balance competing social psychology, economic, and moral/philosophical concerns. A covenant perhaps?
- Reframe the conversation from *free rider* to *co-contributor*
 - Encourage small and medium-sized libraries to define their role in sustaining OA
 - Assist smaller academic libraries in fully maximizing the value of OA collections
- Devil's Advocate position:
 - Small and medium-sized libraries *should* maximize free riding by de-emphasizing toll-access content
 - Redirect funds to existing and new OA entry points that permit smaller institutions to do more OA publishing

SMALLER LIBRARIES CAN AND SHOULD BE ESSENTIAL CONTRIBUTORS!



- 1 What alternative forms of contribution could your library or organization lead in?
- 2 Would maximizing OA free riding jeopardize consortial relevance that comes from member pricing & bundling?
- 3 How would public libraries and society benefit from a more coordinated OA commons by institution size & contribution?
- 4 What hidden costs or secondary effects might follow from our current narratives and policies around the *Free Rider Problem*?

DO YOU HAVE ANY QUESTIONS?

“In the last analysis, all arm’s-length social coexistence and cooperation that is not exchange under contract carries within itself an element of potential abuse by free riding.” –de Jasay



SOURCES

- de Jasay, A. (2008). *Social contract, free ride: A study of the public goods problem*. Liberty Fund.
- Olson, M. (1965). *The logic of collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups*. Harvard University Press.

