

## We cannot and must not "go back"

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### **We cannot and must not "go back"; What COVID, MAGA, and George Floyd have taught us about "transforming" scholarly communications - Part 1**



As watery sunlight pours into my home outside of Washington DC on [Martin Luther King Jr. Day](#) (January 18, 2021), I find myself thinking "Can we ever go back to how it was 'before'? Should we?" Just 18 days into a new year, two days before President Trump leaves office and barely a week since the first armed invasion and breach of the US Capital since the War 1812 -- this time by domestic terrorists and not a foreign enemy -- I'm tired. We're all tired.

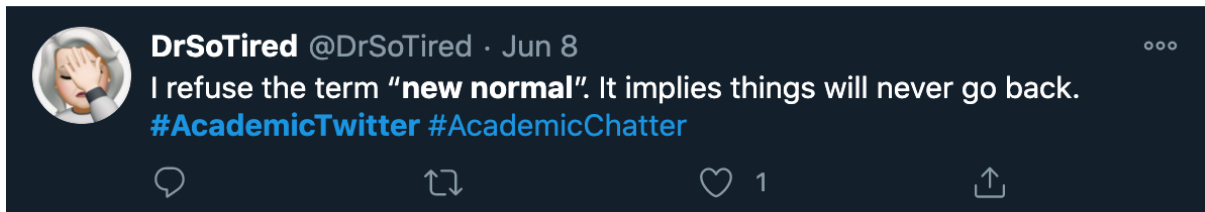
The exhaustion is born of privilege that most reading this never really interrogated until recently. The global paradigm shift we're experiencing -- however you wish to characterize it -- has touched all of us, and we've all been hit with the reality that the "work" is never done.

Those we know and love continue to get sick and die (often ignoring basic preventative measures like masking and social distancing); family members continue to share misinformation online when we just want to look at pictures of their pets or kids; black people continue to be killed "for doing <insert quotidian activity> while black" -- all while our kids are stuck at home and we're more physically isolated than we've ever been.

For many of us, the constant exhaustion is a new experience. Most reading this have regular access to reasonably good healthcare (and are actually [listened to by our doctors](#)). As a highly educated industry that is focused on vetting information before its disseminated -- #peerreview -- we tend to interrogate our own [media consumption](#) for trustworthiness; few of us are BIPOC (google it) and needed an 8 minute and 46 seconds recording of a man dying to ignite the realization we are all benefitting from a society built on [systematic black oppression](#). We've only recently begun sharing the weight carried by our BIPOC neighbours, colleagues, and friends.

And while many of us are earnestly committed to doing real [antiracist work](#) to be effective [allies](#), most of us are privileged to walk away from the work anytime -- when we're tired, when it's boring, because we're busy etc.

If we could just “go back” to how it was, it would be easier. It would be less work. We'd be less tired.



So, what DOES this “new normal” mean for collaborative problem solving come 2021 in scholarly communications? (I was asked to [give a talk with this title](#) at the November 2020 UKSG meeting).

The new normal means *never going back to how things were before*. We know Thomas Kuhn's definition of a paradigm [shift](#). If weathering a pandemic, an ethno-nationalist white grievance movement, and a social justice revolution simultaneously doesn't meet that definition, nothing does. ***Our industry cannot do transformative work without deeply examining, undoing, and rebuilding our current prejudices, processes, norms, and standards.***

So how do we tackle 2021, grounded in a realistic assessment of the work yet to do while still finding hope and inspiration to stay in the fight? By deep, difficult interrogation of our blind spots individually and as a community, and joyful, acceptance of “oops, I did it again” moments.

So, what's untenable industry-wide post-paradigm shift?

## ***Paywalls***

If you believe that marginalized communities are most at risk during times of crisis -- [political](#), [climate](#), [economic](#), [social](#), [health](#), etc -- and you believe that faster access to research improves outcomes, you have to radically assess business and access models that use access barriers to generate revenue.

*This is not a normative judgment on the “morality” of subscription models.* They have been and (in some cases) continue to be a vital way for valuable commercial and non-profit institutions to generate the revenue required to do their work. That said, if you believe the statement above, you have to accelerate your move away from this model.

The [industry as a whole has tacitly admitted this](#) by making most COVID related research openly available for now.



**dave fuller** @cd\_fuller · Sep 2



**COVID is accelerating** this change, since **#preprints** and **#openaccess** have been widely adopted as "emergency measures" to help speed scientific data sharing during the pandemic. This makes pre-COVID science dissemination look positively archaic in terms of accessibility.

Are we seriously going to paywall this content again? When are we “safe” enough to decide this research is not life-saving? Who decides that? Safe for whom? How many variants later? The notion that this research will be “re-paywalled” is risible.

### ***Acting alone or in concert with ourselves (or: the latter days of revenue maximization)***

We will have to recalibrate our definitions of what it means to be a sustainable, healthy organization on all sides -- those paying for services, offering services, or doing both. As we generate new products and services across stakeholder groups, ideation must be done in partnership with other organizations and communities. This is essentially not only for financial viability but, more importantly, to eliminate the “for us, by us” feedback loop that systematically excludes and undervalues contributions those “not of us.”

The reality is that future collaborations (predicated on partnership and integration of global/local sensibilities) are necessarily going to be “cost recovery” endeavours. The days of business models predicated solely on revenue maximization are done.

Which leads me to...

### ***Radical transparency***

We can no longer sell the cake and not tell anyone how it was made. From the mandatory requirements around food labelling that began in the early 20th century to the current advent of “slow fashion,” and “sustainable luxury,” consumers expect to know [“what’s in their stuff”](#). While authors, reviewers, and editors may not be as far along as academic libraries in evaluating scholcomm providers’ alignment with their mission/values, this march toward ongoing radical transparency is inevitable.

There are many benefits to our communities in proudly sharing how we “bake our cakes.” First, and obviously, to convey that our services are not, in fact, free. Second, peeling back the layers means answering the tough question “why am I not comfortable sharing xyz?” Third, transparency **REQUIRES** nuance. Wholesale statements like “all publishing should be free because ... the internet” can no longer be tenable, good faith arguments. Nuanced debate about why services are what they are and why they cost what they do are only possible with transparency and shared fact sets.

Everything above is industry wide. From funders to libraries, we all have to be engaging in these new ways.

What about ourselves in our organizations? In some ways, this work is much harder... And requires its own dedicated space.

See you next month for **Part 2**, where I'll focus on the work we need to be doing internally at our organizations.

These views are the authors' own and do not necessarily reflect the views of UKSG.



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