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Fragmentation as Administrative Burden in Read and Publish Agreements

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ABSTRACT

Read and Publish (R&P) agreements have become an increasingly important mechanism for advancing open access publishing, yet libraries continue to report substantial administrative effort associated with their implementation despite ongoing investments in publisher workflows, institutional tools and community standards. This paper synthesizes literature from scholarly communications, public administration, organizational studies and information systems to examine why administrative burden persists. Building on these complementary perspectives, it proposes fragmentation across publisher ecosystems as a conceptual framework for understanding the operational work required to administer institutional portfolios of R&P agreements. The framework suggests that administrative burden arises not simply from the complexity of individual agreements but from the cumulative effort required to reconcile differences among publisher workflows, metadata, reporting practices, eligibility rules and support models. Viewing libraries through this lens highlights their role in performing interoperability work that transforms fragmented publisher implementations into a coherent institutional service. The paper concludes by considering the implications of this framework for libraries, publishers, consortia and standards organizations, arguing that future progress will depend not only on improving individual systems but also on reducing fragmentation across the broader scholarly communications ecosystem.

1 | Introduction

Read and Publish (R&P) agreements have become an increasingly important component of institutional open access strategies. By combining subscription access with prepaid or discounted open access publishing opportunities, these agreements reduce financial barriers for authors while helping institutions meet evolving public access requirements. As participation in R&P agreements has expanded, so too has the role of academic libraries in supporting their implementation.

Today, administering R&P agreements has become a routine part of scholarly communications work. Libraries assist authors with eligibility questions, coordinate with publishers, manage agreement workflows, monitor usage and provide ongoing guidance throughout the publication process. At the same time, publishers have invested in administrative portals, automated approval systems and institutional reporting tools intended to simplify agreement management. Standards organizations and consortia continue to advance recommendations for metadata quality, persistent identifiers and reporting practices designed to improve the broader scholarly communications infrastructure.

Taken together, these developments suggest an ecosystem that is becoming increasingly sophisticated. Yet libraries continue to report significant administrative effort associated with Read and Publish agreements. Author support, eligibility verification, workflow coordination, reporting and publisher communication remain recurring operational responsibilities despite ongoing investments in systems, standards and workflow improvements.

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Key Points

- Administrative burden in Read and Publish agreements is shaped by fragmentation across publisher ecosystems, not only by individual agreements.
- Libraries manage institutional portfolios of agreements, continually reconciling differences among publisher workflows and practices.
- Viewing libraries as performing interoperability work helps explain why administrative burden persists despite workflow improvements.
- Reducing administrative burden will require greater operational consistency across publisher ecosystems, not simply better local tools.

This apparent paradox raises an important question. *If libraries, publishers and community organizations continue to improve Read and Publish administration, why does the administrative burden remain a persistent feature of these agreements?*

Existing research has documented the operational work required to administer Read and Publish agreements and the infrastructure developed to support them. Comparatively little attention, however, has been given to how libraries experience Read and Publish agreements collectively as institutional portfolios rather than individually as publisher implementations. This paper proposes that fragmentation across publisher ecosystems provides a useful conceptual framework for understanding this persistent administrative burden. By examining the cumulative effects of variation across publisher implementations at the institutional portfolio *level*, the paper offers a new perspective on the operational challenges of Read and Publish administration and considers the implications of this framework for libraries, publishers and organizations working to improve scholarly communications infrastructure.

2 | Literature Review

2.1 | Administrative Burden in Read and Publish Implementation

As Read and Publish agreements have become more widely adopted, a growing body of literature has documented the operational work required to administer them. Early discussions of transformative agreements focused primarily on their strategic, financial and policy implications, emphasizing their role in supporting the transition towards open access publishing (Hinchliffe 2019; Machovec 2019; Borrego et al. 2021).

More recent scholarship has increasingly examined implementation itself. Fischer (2022), Goddard and Brundy (2024) and Jones (2025) describe the workflows required to support eligibility verification, author consultation, publisher communication, invoicing, reporting and ongoing coordination between institutions and publishers. These studies collectively demonstrate that successful implementation depends upon sustained local administrative support rather than simply executing contractual agreements.

Empirical work has likewise begun to quantify this operational effort. Jarvis (2026) documented more than 200 h of administrative labour over a 6-month period associated with managing a portfolio of Read and Publish agreements, demonstrating that author support, workflow coordination, publisher communication and internal systems development constitute recurring responsibilities within scholarly communications programmes. Collectively, this literature establishes that administrative burden is an important and enduring characteristic of Read and Publish implementation.

While these studies effectively document the existence and nature of administrative work, they primarily examine implementation from the perspective of individual agreements or institutional workflows. Less attention has been given to understanding the broader structural conditions that shape this administrative burden as institutions administer growing portfolios of agreements.

2.2 | Standardization and Interoperability

A second body of literature has focused on improving the infrastructure supporting transformative agreements. Organizations such as ESAC Initiative (2023) have developed implementation guidance emphasizing standardized metadata, persistent identifiers, reporting practices and consistent workflows across publishers. Jisc (2024) has similarly invested in shared services and implementation guidance intended to reduce administrative effort associated with transformative agreements. The National Information Standards Organization (NISO) has likewise advanced interoperability through community-developed standards and recommended practices such as *Knowledge Bases and Related Tools (KBART) and the Transfer Code of Practice*, which promote a more consistent exchange of metadata, holdings information and journal transfer notifications among publishers, knowledge base providers and libraries (National Information Standards Organization 2026a, 2026b). Collectively, these initiatives reflect an important recognition that greater consistency across organizations can reduce operational complexity. These efforts have addressed important aspects of technical and operational interoperability, but less attention has been given to the cumulative experience of institutions administering multiple publisher agreements simultaneously. Recent scholarship has increasingly approached open access administration from broader systems and portfolio perspectives. Walsh et al. (2025), for example, identify persistent challenges in institutional OA workflows, including inconsistent metadata, limited visibility across publisher systems and the manual effort required to support increasingly complex publishing models. Related community initiatives, including the NISO Open Access Business Processes Working Group, have likewise emphasized the need for more scalable, standardized and interoperable processes across publishers, libraries, funders and other stakeholders (National Information Standards Organization 2023). Together, these developments reflect growing recognition that sustainable OA administration depends not only on improving individual workflows, but also on coordination across the systems and organizations through which those workflows operate.

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2.3 | Organizational Fragmentation and Coordination

Outside the scholarly communications literature, researchers in public administration, organizational studies and information systems have long examined the consequences of administrative and organizational fragmentation. In these contexts, fragmentation can arise when responsibilities, information and processes are distributed across otherwise independent organizations or systems, creating additional requirements for coordination. Rather than arising solely from the complexity of individual systems, administrative effort may therefore reflect the ongoing work required to coordinate among systems that are designed, managed and optimized independently.

Research on administrative burden provides one useful perspective. Herd and Moynihan (2018) argue that administrative burdens are not simply by-products of policy implementation but are generated through the design and operation of administrative systems themselves. Their framework emphasizes that organizations incur substantial effort navigating learning costs, compliance processes and interactions across administrative structures. Although developed in the context of public administration, this perspective suggests that administrative effort may arise from the architecture of administrative systems as much as from the underlying programmes they support.

Related work on boundary-spanning organizations likewise emphasizes that coordination across institutional boundaries requires distinct forms of labour. Aldrich and Herker (1977) describe boundary-spanning roles as organizational functions that facilitate communication and coordination across otherwise independent entities. Building on this foundation, Williams (2002) argues that organizations operating across institutional boundaries must continually translate information, reconcile differing practices, coordinate communication and manage relationships among autonomous organizations. Rather than representing work performed within any single organization, these activities arise because organizational boundaries create differences that must be bridged before collaborative work can proceed effectively.

Malone and Crowston (1994) provide a complementary perspective by defining coordination as *the management of dependencies among activities*. Their framework suggests that organizations incur additional work whenever activities span organizational or functional boundaries, requiring dependencies to be identified, managed and continually reconciled. Viewed through this lens, the administrative work associated with Read and Publish agreements extends beyond executing individual publisher workflows. Libraries instead manage the dependencies created by multiple independently developed publisher ecosystems—including relationships among publishers, institutional policies, authors, journal portfolios, eligibility rules and reporting systems. This coordination work is inherently additive. It emerges not because individual publisher systems function poorly, but because libraries must integrate numerous independently functioning systems into a coherent institutional service.

Information systems research offers a complementary perspective through the concept of interoperability. While interoperability is often framed as a technical challenge involving standards, metadata or system integration, Kubicek and Cimander (2009) argue that organizational interoperability likewise depends upon compatible business processes, governance structures and organizational practices. Complementing this perspective, Chen et al. (2008) emphasize that enterprise interoperability extends beyond technical integration to include the organizational processes required to coordinate work across independent systems. As a result, independently functioning systems may nevertheless generate substantial coordination costs when organizations must continually reconcile differences in workflows, terminology, reporting structures and business rules.

Collectively, these studies suggest a broader organizational principle: coordination work frequently emerges through the ongoing interaction of otherwise functional but independently developed systems. The challenge is therefore not necessarily that individual systems function poorly, but that organizations responsible for operating across multiple systems must continually reconcile their differences. From this perspective, the administrative burden experienced by organizations becomes a consequence of managing fragmentation rather than evidence of inefficiency within any single system.

Although these concepts have informed research in public administration, healthcare, information systems and organizational management, they have received comparatively little attention within discussions of Read and Publish agreements. Existing scholarship has largely examined administrative work associated with individual agreements or publisher workflows. Less consideration has been given to whether the cumulative differences across publisher implementations constitute a form of organizational fragmentation that itself generates administrative burden for libraries responsible for managing institutional portfolios of agreements.

2.4 | Literature Gap

Taken together, these bodies of literature establish three important insights. First, Read and Publish agreements require substantial administrative effort. Second, considerable progress has been made towards improving the technical infrastructure that supports agreement implementation. Third, organizational research suggests that fragmentation across otherwise independent systems can itself generate administrative burden through ongoing coordination and reconciliation.

What remains under-explored is whether these ideas help explain the persistent operational burden associated with administering portfolios of Read and Publish agreements. Existing scholarship has paid relatively little attention to the cumulative effects of variation across publisher implementations as experienced by libraries managing multiple agreements simultaneously.

The following section proposes fragmentation as a conceptual framework for understanding this phenomenon. Building on emerging systems- and portfolio-level approaches to OA administration, the framework focuses specifically on the cumulative effects of variation across independently developed publisher

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implementations. In doing so, it conceptualizes fragmentation across organizational, technical and informational boundaries as a source of administrative burden for libraries responsible for translating multiple publisher environments into a coherent institutional service.

2.5 | Conceptualizing Fragmentation in Read and Publish Administration

The preceding literature suggests two complementary observations. First, administering Read and Publish agreements requires substantial operational work. Second, considerable effort has been invested in improving the systems, standards and workflows that support these agreements. Yet the persistence of administrative burden suggests that implementation challenges cannot be fully explained by the complexity of individual agreements alone.

This paper proposes that fragmentation offers a useful conceptual framework for understanding this apparent paradox.

For the purposes of this paper, fragmentation refers to the operational variation that arises when independently developed publisher systems must function together to support a single institutional service. Within Read and Publish administration, this fragmentation appears as cumulative differences across publisher workflows, metadata practices, reporting structures, journal eligibility rules, administrative interfaces, communication models and operational expectations. Fragmentation and interoperability are therefore understood as complementary rather than synonymous concepts. Fragmentation describes the institutional condition created by variation across independently developed publisher ecosystems. Interoperability describes the organizational work required to reconcile that variation into a coherent institutional service. From the perspective of an individual publisher, these differences may appear relatively minor. From the perspective of a library responsible for administering multiple agreements simultaneously, however, each difference introduces additional coordination work. Administrative burden therefore emerges not simply from the number of agreements administered but from the continual reconciliation of differences among them.

This distinction shifts the unit of analysis from the individual agreement to the institutional portfolio. Rather than asking whether a particular publisher workflow is efficient, the relevant question becomes how multiple publisher workflows interact within a single institutional service environment. Figure 1 presents the conceptual model proposed in this paper, illustrating how fragmentation across publisher ecosystems creates cross-system dependencies that require interoperability work by libraries, ultimately producing cumulative administrative burden while supporting a consistent researcher experience.

Libraries occupy a unique position within the scholarly communications ecosystem because they interact operationally with every publisher represented within an institution's agreement portfolio while simultaneously providing a unified institutional service to researchers. Within this framework, libraries perform what might be described as interoperability work: the ongoing organizational effort required to translate multiple independent publisher implementations into a coherent service for researchers. Importantly, this work extends beyond traditional author support. It includes interpreting differing eligibility rules, reconciling publisher reports, monitoring journal coverage, responding to title transfers, maintaining local guidance, troubleshooting workflow exceptions and coordinating communication across multiple external partners.

Viewed individually, each of these activities appears to be a discrete operational task. Viewed collectively, however, they represent a common organizational function: reducing fragmentation experienced by researchers by absorbing it within library workflows.

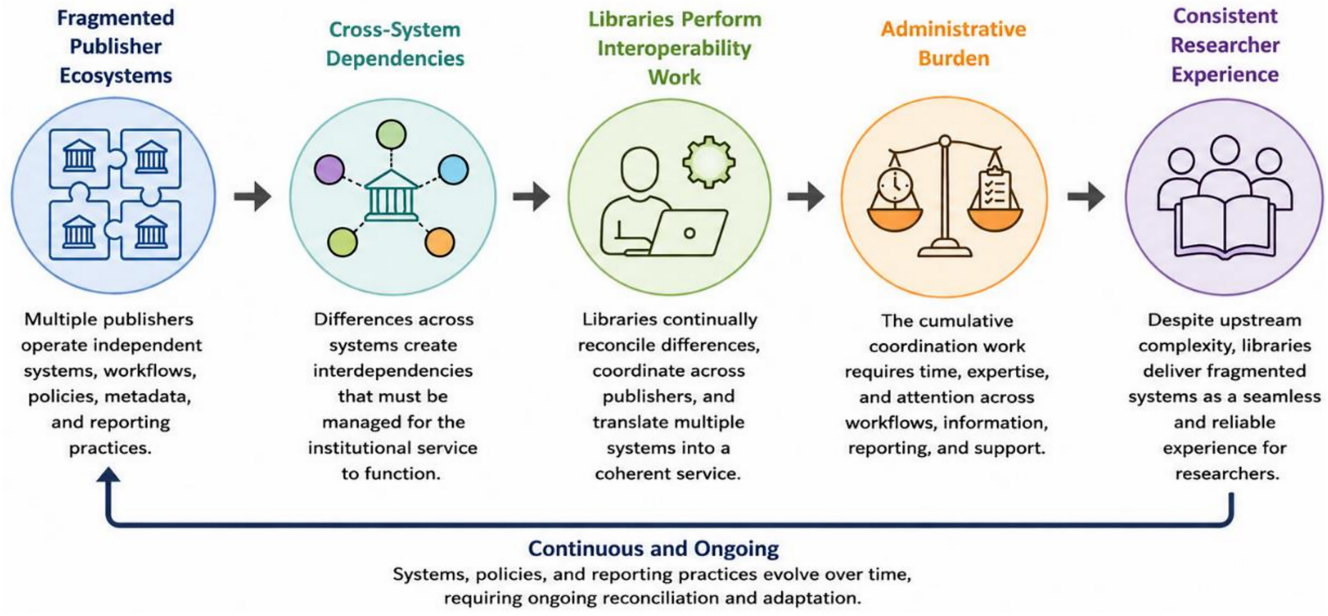


FIGURE 1 | Fragmentation as administrative burden in Read and Publish agreements.

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Within Read and Publish administration, fragmentation manifests across several operational dimensions.

2.6 | Workflow Fragmentation

Different approval models, mediation requirements and author verification processes require libraries to navigate multiple operational pathways while presenting a consistent institutional service.

2.7 | Information Fragmentation

Differences in journal coverage, metadata, eligibility criteria and title transfers require continual reconciliation to maintain accurate local guidance.

2.8 | Reporting Fragmentation

Variation in portals, reporting schedules, definitions and metrics prevents libraries from viewing institutional activity through a single operational lens.

2.9 | Support Fragmentation

Distinct publisher documentation, contacts, escalation pathways and communication models require libraries to coordinate across multiple independent support environments.

Importantly, these forms of fragmentation are not presented here as deficiencies within individual publisher systems. Rather, they are an inherent consequence of multiple independently developed systems operating within a shared institutional environment. Every publisher may optimize its own workflows, yet the library remains responsible for reconciling differences across all of them.

This perspective suggests that administrative burden should not be understood solely as the accumulation of agreement-specific tasks. Instead, it reflects the organizational work required to transform fragmented publisher ecosystems into a seamless institutional service. The framework therefore helps explain why administrative effort may continue to grow even as individual publishers improve their own administrative systems and libraries continue refining local workflows.

By conceptualizing administrative burden through the lens of fragmentation, the discussion shifts from optimizing isolated workflows towards understanding the relationships among publisher implementations. This perspective has implications not only for institutional workflow design but also for future efforts by publishers, consortia and standards organizations to improve interoperability across the scholarly communications ecosystem.

The framework proposed here is intended as a conceptual lens rather than an empirically validated model. Future comparative research across institutions and publisher portfolios will be necessary to evaluate the extent to which fragmentation contributes to administrative burden under different implementation contexts.

2.10 | Implications for Libraries

Viewing administrative burden through the lens of fragmentation suggests that the operational challenges associated with Read and Publish agreements cannot be fully addressed through local workflow optimization alone. One practical value of the framework is therefore diagnostic: identifying where administrative burden originates can help distinguish problems that can be addressed through local workflow redesign from those that require changes in publisher practices, greater cross-organizational coordination or broader infrastructure and standards development. Libraries will undoubtedly continue refining internal processes, developing author support resources and implementing tools that improve local efficiency. These efforts remain both necessary and valuable.

However, this framework suggests that local improvements address the symptoms of fragmentation rather than its underlying cause. Every institution administering a portfolio of Read and Publish agreements develops local workflows to reconcile differences among publisher implementations, yet those workflows must continually adapt as publisher systems, journal portfolios, reporting practices and agreement terms evolve. Consequently, administrative burden persists not because libraries have failed to optimize their services, but because they operate within a fragmented external environment.

This perspective also has implications for how libraries evaluate Read and Publish agreements. Financial considerations, publication volume and open access outcomes remain important measures of success, but operational sustainability should likewise be recognized as a meaningful component of agreement evaluation. Administrative effort represents an institutional investment that often remains invisible within traditional assessments of agreement value.

2.11 | Implications for Publishers

This framework likewise offers a different perspective for publishers. Administrative burden should not be interpreted as evidence that individual publisher workflows are ineffective. On the contrary, many publishers have invested substantially in administrative portals, automated workflows, reporting tools and author support systems that function effectively within their own environments.

The challenge emerges because libraries administer agreements as institutional portfolios rather than as isolated publisher relationships. From the institutional perspective, every variation in workflow, reporting, metadata, journal coverage or communication model requires local reconciliation. Even well-designed publisher systems therefore contribute to cumulative administrative burden when viewed collectively within an institution's portfolio of Read and Publish agreements. This perspective suggests that future improvements in Read and Publish administration

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may depend less on optimizing individual publisher workflows and more on increasing consistency across publisher ecosystems. Greater transparency surrounding operational changes, more consistent reporting practices, standardized metadata and predictable communication models would reduce the need for institutional reconciliation while preserving flexibility within individual publisher systems.

Importantly, this framework reframes interoperability as an organizational challenge rather than solely a technical one. Technical standards remain essential, but reducing administrative burden will also require greater consistency in operational practices.

2.12 | Implications for Consortia and Standards Organizations

Organizations such as ESAC, Jisc, NISO and regional consortia have played a critical role in advancing metadata standards, persistent identifiers, reporting practices and implementation guidance for transformative agreements. These efforts have significantly improved the infrastructure supporting Read and Publish administration and provide an essential foundation for continued progress.

The framework proposed here suggests an additional opportunity for future collaboration. If fragmentation across publisher ecosystems contributes to institutional administrative burden, then interoperability initiatives might increasingly consider operational consistency alongside technical interoperability. While metadata standards facilitate the exchange of information, comparable attention to reporting conventions, workflow terminology, operational notifications and implementation practices could further reduce the institutional effort required to administer multiple agreements.

This perspective does not suggest that all publisher workflows should become identical. Diversity among publishing models is both expected and appropriate. Rather, it highlights the value of identifying those operational elements that benefit from greater consistency because they are encountered repeatedly by institutions administering portfolios of agreements.

Viewed in this way, fragmentation becomes not simply an institutional challenge but a shared ecosystem challenge. Libraries, publishers, consortia and standards organizations each optimize different components of Read and Publish administration. Continued progress may therefore depend less on further optimizing individual systems than on strengthening the relationships among them.

3 | Conclusion

Read and Publish agreements have matured considerably over the past decade. Libraries, publishers and standards organizations have each invested substantial effort in improving implementation. Yet administrative burden remains a defining feature of these agreements. This paper suggests that the persistence of this burden reflects not a failure of local optimization, but the cumulative effects of fragmentation across publisher ecosystems. Recognizing fragmentation as an ecosystem-level challenge shifts the conversation from improving individual workflows towards strengthening the connections among them. More broadly, this framework suggests that the evolving role of academic libraries is increasingly defined not only by the services they provide but also by the organizational coherence they create across an increasingly fragmented scholarly communications ecosystem.

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Christy Jarvis: conceptualization; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing. The author takes full responsibility for the content and approves the final version for submission.

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