

# Is the Sky Actually Falling? Using the Theory of Fields to Illuminate Contemporary Discourses in Academic Librarianship

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# Attempting Elegance

*Jenica Rogers. Burn the land and boil the seas, you can't take the sky from me.*

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## Walking away from the American Chemical Society

September 12, 2012   Posted by Jenica under [Collection Management](#), [faculty](#), [Libraries](#), [The Vendor Files](#)   [75 Comments](#)

There's no gentle introduction to this, so I'll get right to my point:

Librarians, this is a call to action.

*tl;dr:* SUNY Potsdam will not be subscribing to an American Chemical Society online journal package for 2013. We will instead be using a combination of the Royal Society of Chemistry content, ACS single title subscriptions, the ACS backfile, and ScienceDirect from Elsevier\*\* to meet our chemical information needs. We're doing this because the ACS pricing model is unsustainable for our institution and we were unable to find common ground with the sales team from the ACS. Instead, we explored other options and exercised them. You could do the same if you find yourself in a position similar to ours as ACS standardizes their pricing, and maybe together we can make enough choices to make our voices heard in meaningful ways.

So here's how we got here.

### The problem:

In May 2012, after much internal discussion and debate, three SUNY library directors from the comprehensive colleges (myself included) and the university centers, along with two SUNY Office of Library and Information Services staff met with three representatives from the ACS at SUNY Plattsburgh.



<http://www.attemptingelegance.com/?p=1765>



Thank you  
for saying  
this.

It's  
about  
time!

... more power to  
Jenica Rogers for  
what she has done.

Why haven't we seen more widespread, successful attempts to "fix the system"?

What might it take for us to fix it?

# **Theory of Strategic Action Fields**

Neil Fligstein and Doug McAdam. *Theory of Fields*.  
Oxford U Press, 2012.

# Theory of Fields

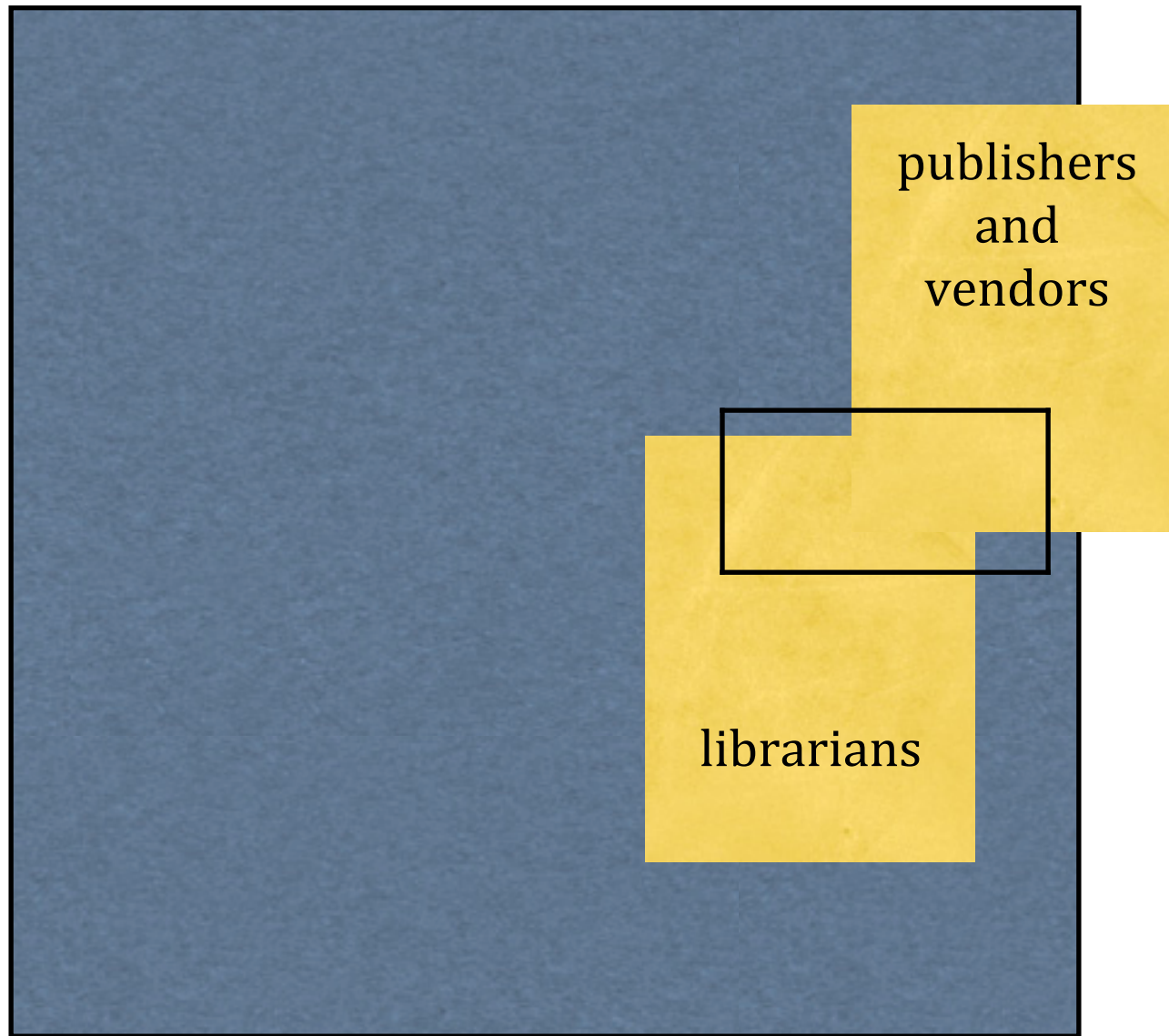
The field: boundaries, rules, structure

Incumbents and challengers

Social skill

Stability within fields

Crisis and episodes of contention



The subfield of **collection development** in the field of academic librarianship (map not to scale).

Academic librarians want to serve faculty and students by making collections available for them to use.



What is at stake is the ability of librarians to have real decision-making authority over their library's collections.

# “Rules”

1. the publisher/vendor sets prices for materials and terms for access
2. pricing is confidential
3. library budgets are limited
4. librarians acquire materials – it’s we who do the selecting and buying
5. librarians acquire materials on behalf of faculty and students
6. librarians are “nice”, polite, civil, kind, generous, don’t rock the boat

Incumbents = Publishers and Vendors

Challengers = Librarians

# Social Skill

“the ability to induce cooperation in others”

Read people and environments

Frame a course of action

Mobilize others

A stable field is constantly shifting, but the overall structure of the field stays the same.

# Episodes of Contention

A crisis external to the field

The field is completely changed: new incumbents, new rules, new structure

The new field will be shaped by the strongest, most socially skilled actors

Strive to improve our position

Tell meaningful stories

Take stock of available resources

Try alternative courses of action

Develop social skill

“Libraries are always changing”

Shifts and adjustments

vs.

Large-scale transformations



# Theory of Fields

