

Open Access Q&A with Simon Batterbury

blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2020/10/24/publishing-articles-concerned-with-social-justice-issues-in-unjust-journal-outlets-seems-wrong-open-access-qa-with-simon-batterbury/

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*Stage one of the Open Access (OA) movement promoted the democratization of scholarly knowledge, making work available so that anybody could read it. However, publication in highly ranked journals is becoming very costly, feeding the same vendor capitalists that OA was designed to sidestep. In this Q&A, **Simon Batterbury** argues that when prestige is valued over publication ethics, a paradoxical situation emerges where conversations about social justice take place in unjust journals. Academic freedom and integrity are at risk unless Open Access becomes not simply about the democratization of knowledge, but the ethics of its publication too.*



Q.What are your main concerns about how Open Access (OA) is currently being pursued by funders and universities?

My thoughts on this reflect a group of scholar-publishers and editors who recently co-authored an [Open Access Manifesto for Freedom, Integrity, and Creativity in the Humanities and Interpretive Social Sciences](#), convened by [Andrea Pia](#) from the LSE. The Manifesto wishes to “repoliticise Open Access to challenge existing rapacious practices in academic publishing”. We are concerned that journal publication is increasingly dominated by large commercial publishers, threatening principles of “academic freedom, integrity, and creativity” because of their costs and growing dominance across social sciences and the humanities. OA journals published by scholars themselves address these three principles well, and should have greater recognition and support. We signal concerns about “invisible and unremunerated labour” in scholar-led publishing, and make recommendations for university managers, academics and editors.

Stage one of the Open Access (OA) movement promoted the democratization of scholarly knowledge, making work available so that anybody could read it (usually via the web, and from the early 1990s). The opening up of research relevant to the COVID-19 crisis [illustrates](#) how important this is, and OA publishing is the new model across the board. It is replacing paywalled content and journal subscription deals, which cost university libraries [dearly](#). OA publishing of funded academic work is now being mandated in Europe and globally through [Plan S](#), and so the five big publishers, and much of the sector, are rapidly shifting from subscription to ‘pay to publish’ models (or their hybrid variants) to retain and increase their [market share](#). Large publishers are strengthening their [oligopolistic market power](#) by buying up smaller publishers and society journals. The Article Processing Charges (APCs) they charge are in my view

huge, with US\$3,000 (£2,300) being common across the STEM and social sciences disciplines, and sometimes much higher – during the covid-induced retractions in university incomes and with decently paid academic jobs becoming scarcer by the day. For me, this is unjust, and can threaten ‘academic freedom to publish’ if scholars lack money for APCs through their national or institutional publishing arrangements.



Stage two of the OA movement is therefore to address equality in publishing – to consider the *ethics* and the *conditions* under which scholarly material is published. We lack data, but do know that the cost of publishing an article lies (or could lie) well below commercial rates (hundreds of dollars in our own journal, not thousands). With some corporate profits reaching in excess of 30% per year, authors and university libraries are victims of vendor capitalists. As the Manifesto says, we need to reward and budget for more publishing in socially just outlets, which offer fairer and less costly alternatives.

Funding agencies and universities should inject some capital here – to support article editing and layout, file storage and data compliance, and technical proficiency. They need to support academics and library staff to work in this cooperative and convivial alternative Open Access publishing sector themselves as editors, publishers and reviewers. We know that Latin America already works this way with its major journals published by universities online using open source software, with some support from public funds to reduce or remove APCs.

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Q.Do you think the ethical arguments around Open Access, particularly around equity and inclusion, resonate with enough academics in the Global North?

Not enough, for sure. Social justice arguments, concerns and principles are raised in much of the content published in the social sciences and humanities (in particular). Yet published outputs are most commonly found in the dominant commercial journals, either paywalled ones or OA with high APCs.

Scholars are just not connecting the dots here – while needing to boost their publishing profiles they can overlook the financial successes and inequities of the for-profit publishers (e.g. the CEO of the largest, RELX earned £1.28 million with substantial incentives and benefits in 2020, [Annual Report](#) p110). Many senior academics influencing career progression and hiring ignore these issues, prioritising publication of articles in prestige outlets, almost all of them now residing with 5 major publishers, over publication ethics for themselves and junior scholars. The latter respond by seeking that prestige, as I once did, because in turn, high-profile publications are essential for rewarding jobs at the best universities, which have better resources.

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To me, social justice publishing helps break this cycle, and tackles **stage one and two** above. This means avoiding the most profit-driven companies where possible and seeking out and supporting ‘fair trade’ alternatives, as many of us do for other commodities. To sum up, publishing articles concerned with social justice issues in unjust journal outlets seems wrong, doesn't it?

Q. Given the current volume of academic publishing, is it realistic to think that we can do without commercial publishers that operate on much larger scales?

Several STEM and medical disciplines publish a high number of articles and make this claim. However, there are significant free [Open Access alternatives](#) linked to departments and universities, as Sir Tim Gowers, a professor at Cambridge, has [long championed](#) for mathematics. In the social sciences and humanities we publish less volume, and there is vast potential for more academics and library staff to become involved in journal publishing not only to assist their colleagues, but also to [‘take back’](#) publishing. My own [listing](#) identifies and tracks hundreds of respected English language social science journals, many of which could use more submissions and input from scholars, if they were rewarded to do so and had the time.

Q. Your university recently signed up to [DORA](#), what changes would you like to see come from this commitment?

[DORA](#) is an agreement that addresses many of my worries above. It commits institutional signatories to abandoning the impact factor of a journal in assessing the worth of an article, or its author(s) performance. Authors can write for appropriate and reputable outlets, not just highly ranked ones, and expect to have their work assessed

fairly. Of course, they will occasionally seek out commercial journals, especially for multi-authored work. The implication of DORA is that hiring and promotion must consider the *quality* of published research, not place of publication. The UK [REF](#) assessment already acknowledges this, but has no way to recognise *ethical* publication that I can see. For some senior academics and funders unfamiliar with these arguments, we must do more signal these social justice commitments.

You should be able to publish justly, or devote time to editing and reviewing for scholar-led and alternative publishing, without fear of losing a job, or never getting hired. Otherwise, *academic freedom is breached*.

Q. The [Manifesto](#) mentions that academics feel under increasing pressure to “play the game” – what advice would you give to early-career researchers (ECRs) who feel this pressure but want to support scholar-led OA publishing?

If more universities adopt the [DORA](#) declaration, and senior academics accept it, then the range of ‘prestige outlets’ enlarges and the hierarchy of journals will flatten, hopefully changing the structure of hiring and promotions to focus on excellence, conviviality, and teamwork. If we change the game, APCs and corporate profits may even fall. We do need to be realistic: social justice considerations are secondary at certain career stages but should never be forgotten and sometimes need to be asserted, with a direct mention on a cv or in an interview. You should be able to publish justly, or devote time to editing and reviewing for scholar-led and alternative publishing, without fear of losing a job, or never getting hired. Otherwise, *academic freedom is breached*.

Many of us, young and old, are trying to try to “change the game itself”, and stop, in Jennie Halperin’s [words](#) “treating public research like a private resource to be bought and sold back to institutions”. My [journal listing](#) for some disciplines, and the [Directory of Open Access Journals](#), include many free or academic-led OA journals which have established reputations, if ECRs feel they need to strengthen their cv and profile.

In conversation with Dimity Flanagan, Manager, Scholarly Communications at the University of Melbourne, Australia. Extended from [an original post](#) on [The University of Melbourne blog](#).

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Impact Blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [comments policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

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