The system of subscription publishing is unsustainable: we need a 'mega-journal' with low article processing fees and peer review

by Blog Admin   April 10, 2012

Taking inspiration from the changes that Apple's iPod had on the music industry **Dan Scott** *hopes that a combination of low article processing fees and peer review could make 'mega-journals' part of the future of academic publishing.*

The social sciences have a need for a new way of doing things that addresses the many contradictions and issues facing academia and scholarly publishing. After more than a decade of working in business-to-business and business-to-consumer publishing, some of the norms that I discovered in scholarly publishing (such as pricing, copyright and time-to-publication) were a shock.

Much of it defies ordinary business logic but my take on it is simple. Higher education and research output are matters of national pride and, as such, no price was seen as too high to support it. Whilst there was so much money sloshing around in the system, there was not too much resistance to paying subscription charges, signing up to 'Big Deals', or academics seeking publication in/subscriptions to journals regardless of cost. Most publishers have reacted by engaging in an 'arms race', churning out more and more content in the hope of capturing more and more share of wallet.

However, the global financial crisis that began in 2008 has created a mega-shock that has fundamentally changed academic funding forever. Protests about the cost of library acquisitions have gone from being about unfairness and exploitation, to being about necessity – the prices being charged are unsustainable. The system of subscription publishing is unsustainable.

At the same time is the impact that digital publishing and the internet have had. When I completed my first degree in 1994, the university library did not have a computer. When I finished my Masters degree in 2009, I only set foot in the campus library once and all of the content that I needed was downloaded remotely. That is a big change in a relatively short space of time, and it is creating a fundamental shift in learning. As well as looking at traditional journals, textbooks and ebooks, I researched and cited information from interviews, news reports, op-eds, video and audio clips, conference proceedings, presentations, annual reports and more. If the information I wanted came from a reliable source, I was happy to include it.

The generation of students and young academics working today, brought up in the digital era and used to being able to do easy federated searches for information, at no cost, will want what I call "e-stuff" and be able to debate/discuss/review it across a number of social media platforms (Social Sciences Directory has a blog, LinkedIn, Twitter and Facebook pages). The conclusion I draw from this is that individual journal titles and books will simply become an anachronism as searches are conducted on topics and keywords and discussions take place in virtual forums.

So these are the needs – an alternative to existing publishing practices; and a simplified, homogenous space where as much related material as possible can be brought together.

What about the opportunities? I witnessed a change in university and library spending, that began as murmurs about impending cuts, to requests for price freezes and wholesale cancellations of additional print holdings, to colossal budget cuts and huge delays in payment due to difficulties in state funding. Where once I consoled myself and others that universities in general do not go bankrupt, we were now confronted with the prospect of entire states going bankrupt and I became far less sanguine. Many of the librarians and consortia coordinators that I dealt with became my friends and I had a real problem with

looking them in the eye and demanding subscription price rises when they were fearful about their jobs. Gnawing away at me was the thought that if somebody could come up with a disruptive technology or an alternative business model that addressed these problems, the effect would be profound. The analogy I kept thinking of was the impact of the iPod and iTunes on the music industry.

In the autumn of 2011, I read about what BioMed Central, Hindawi and especially PLoS ONE were doing with open access publishing in the Science, Technology and Medicine (STM) sphere, in particular:

• their business models based on Article Processing Charges (APCs) and institutional fees
• their objective peer review based on technical soundness as a key criteria for publication
• their consequent speed of publication and universal access to the content

This was mainly a reflection of the incoherent voice of the open access movement, which is now being addressed through bodies such as SPARC and OASPA, advocates such as Steven Harnad and Peter Suber, and the evidence of the impact of open access content when the metrics are analysed. If it has worked in STM, I reasoned, why should it not work in other disciplines? Hence, what I see as the opportunity for Social Sciences Directory.

So what is it? To put it simply, a compendium, a 'mega-journal', an encyclopaedic database of academic research and other content focused on the various disciplines within the social sciences. It will be paid for by charging low article processing charges or institutional memberships for the content that must be peer reviewed, and made freely available to all under a Creative Commons copyright licence which allows the authors to retain ownership of their work. Editorial control will be as light-touch as possible.

Social Sciences Directory is a well-intentioned initiative providing a progressive solution to some urgent problems. We need submissions and we need volunteers to review them in their areas of expertise. We need trade press, faculty, learned societies, library consortia and librarians to support, advocate and refer their peers to use the service.

Note: This article gives the views of the author(s), and not the position of the Impact of Social Sciences blog, nor of the London School of Economics.

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