

# How can scholarly societies survive as we move ever closer to Open Access?

by Blog Admin

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*The question of the fate of scholarly societies is one of the most contentious in the Open Access debate. **Cameron Neylon** argues that the only societies to survive will be those that decouple the value they offer through peer review from the costs of publication services.*



With major governments signalling a shift to Open Access it seems like a good time to be asking which organisations in the scholarly communications space will survive the transition. It is likely that the major current publishers will survive, although relative market share and focus is likely to change. But the biggest challenges are faced by small to medium scholarly societies that depend on journal income for their current viability. What changes are necessary for them to navigate this transition and can they survive?

The fate of scholarly societies is one of the most contentious and even emotional in the open access landscape. Many researchers have strong emotional ties to their disciplinary societies and these societies often play a crucial role in supporting meetings, providing travel stipends to young researchers, awarding prizes, and representing the community. At the same time they face a peculiar bind. The money that supports these efforts often comes from journal subscriptions. Researchers are very attached to the benefits but seem disinclined to countenance membership fees that would support them. This problem is seen across many parts of the research enterprise – where researchers, or at least their institutions, are paying for services through subscriptions but unwilling to pay for them directly.

What options do societies have? Those with a large publication program could do worse in the short term than look very closely at the [announcement](#) from the UK [Royal Society of Chemistry](#) last week. The RSC is offering an institutional mechanism where by those institutions that have a particular level of subscription will receive an equivalent amount of publication services, set at the price of £1600 per paper. This is very clever for the RSC, it allows it to help institutions prepare effectively for changes in UK policy, it costs them nothing, and lets them experiment with a route to transition to full open access at relatively low risk. Because the contribution of UK institutions with this particular subscription plan is relatively small it is unlikely to reduce subscriptions significantly in the short term, but if and when it does it positions the RSC to offer package deals on publication services with very similar terms. Tactically by moving early it also allows the RSC to hold a higher price point than later movers will – and will help to increase its market share in the UK over that of the ACS.

Another route is for societies to explore the “indy band model”. Similar to bands that are trying to break through by giving away their recorded material but charging for live gigs, societies could focus on raising money through meetings rather than publications. Some societies already do this – having historically focussed on running large scale international or national meetings. The “in person” experience is something that cannot yet be done cheaply over the internet and “must attend” meetings offer significant income and sponsorship opportunities. There are challenges to be navigated here – ensuring commercial contributions don’t damage the brand or reduce the quality of meetings being a big one – but expect conference fees to rise as subscription incomes drop. Societies that currently run lavish meetings off the back of journal income will face a particular struggle over the next two to five years.

But even meetings are unlikely to offer a long term solution. It’s some way off yet but rising costs of travel and increasing quality of videoconferencing will start to eat into this market as well. If all the big speakers are dialling it in, is it still worth attending the meeting? So what are the real value offerings that societies can provide? What are the things that are unique to that community collection of expertise that no-one else can provide?

Peer review (pre-, post-, or peri-publication) is one of them. Publication services are not. Publication, in the narrow sense of “making public”, will be commoditised, if it hasn’t already. With new players like [PeerJ](#) and [F1000 Research](#) alongside the now fairly familiar landscape of the wide-ranging [megajournal](#) the space for publication services to make fat profits is narrowing rapidly. This will, sooner or later, be a low margin business with a range of options to choose from when someone, whether a society or a single researcher, is looking for a platform to publish their work. While the rest of us may argue whether this will happen next year or in a decade, for societies it is the long term that matters, and in the long term commoditisation will happen.

The unique offering that a society brings is the [aggregation and organisation of expert attention](#). In a given space a scholarly society has a unique capacity to coordinate and organise assessment by domain experts. I can certainly imagine a society offering peer review as a core member service, independent of whether the thing being reviewed is already “published”. This might be a particular case where there are real benefits to operating a small scale – both because of the peer pressure for each member of the community to pull their weight and because the scale of the community lends itself to being understood and managed as a small set of partly connected [small world networks](#). The question is really whether the sums add up. Will members pay \$100 or \$500 per year for peer review services? Would that provide enough income? What about younger members without grants? And perhaps crucially, how cheap would a separated publication platform have to be to make the sums look good?

Societies are all about community. Arguably most completely missed the boat on the potential of the social web when they could have built community hubs of real value – and those that didn’t miss it entirely largely created badly built and ill thought through community forums well after the first flush of failed generic “Facebook for Science” clones had faded. But another chance is coming. As the ratchet moves on funder and government open access policies, society journals stuck in a subscription model will become increasingly unattractive options for publication. The slow rate of progress and disciplinary differences will allow some to hold on past the point of no return and these societies will wither and die. Some societies will investigate transitional pricing models. I commend the example of the RSC to small societies as something to look at closely. Some may choose to move to publishing collections in larger journals where they retain editorial control. My bet is that those that survive will be the ones that find a way to make the combined expertise of the community pay – and I think the place to look for that will be those societies that find ways to decouple the value they offer through peer review from the costs of publication services.

*This post was inspired by a twitter conversation with [Alan Cann](#) and builds on many conversations I’ve had with people including Heather Joseph, Richard Kidd, David Smith, and others. Full Disclosure: I’m interested, in my role as Advocacy Director for PLOS, in the question of how scholarly societies can manage a transition to an open access world. However, this post is entirely my own reflections on these issues.*

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

*This blog post was originally published on Cameron Neylon’s personal blog, [Science in the Open](#).*

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