

Universities should sink their resources into publishing partnerships with scholarly societies

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2012/12/06/land-university-press-societies/

12/6/2012

Christopher Land writes that a hybrid partnership between the university press and scholarly society would put publishing back under academic control and would produce a more open, and impactful, form of publishing.



In UK universities this year, conversations are dominated by [the REF](#). Whether a colleague is 'REFable', who has the gold-standard '4x4', or whether x journal is a 2 or a 3 are all matters impacting on academic identities, careers and teaching loads. What is less often discussed is the business model used by the journals that publish the majority of REF submissions.

Most academic journals today are published by a handful of commercial houses whose primary purpose is to profit from controlling access to academic knowledge. The most common business model is to restrict and then charge for access to research outputs. Charges for individual papers are high enough to effectively exclude the vast majority of the world's population. For those affiliated to a research university, the question of access may not be obvious as electronic access is relatively simple from a campus network. Behind the scenes, however, the cost of this access is significant. University librarians have had to work with escalating subscription costs for years. Between 1970 and 1997, journal costs rose at an average of 13 per cent per annum. The 2012 [Finch Report](#) found that "between 2006 and 2010, the global total of journal articles alone increased by a fifth" whilst UK and US library budgets have been falling since at least the 1980s. Despite this, academic library subscriptions account for an estimated 53% of direct publishing costs, and "[a further 11% in the form of the unpaid costs of peer review.](#)" Non-academic subscriptions account for around 29% of the remaining costs.

For the academic publishers this is big business. The global market for professional, social science and humanities publishing was worth around \$10 billion in 2010. In the UK alone, universities spent £112million on journal subscriptions in 2011. Companies can command profit margins in the region of 30-40 per cent, unheard of in any other sector.

These exceptional profits come at a price. Not only is access to what should be a public good restricted but the public foots the bill. A [House of Commons report](#) from 2004 notes that 'public money is used at three stages in the publishing process: to fund the research project; to pay the salaries of academics who carry out peer review for no extra payment; and to fund libraries to purchase scientific publications'. All that would appear to be left is for the journals to market their contents but even this work is being devolved to authors. Following the publication of the article on which this blog entry is based, I received an email from Sage outlining '[10 Ways to Increase Usage and Citation of your Article](#)', adding another form of free labour to the academic workload. At a time when budgets are being cut in the name of austerity, and students shouldering more of the costs of HE through tuition fees, this business model needs to be revisited in order to deliver real value for money and to ensure the widest possible dissemination of academic knowledge.

To this end I would like to suggest four possible strategies for modernising the academic publishing industry: increasing open access through institutional repositories or a publisher-pays commercial model; a 'fair trade' model that would reimburse universities for at least some of the work they currently provide to publishers for free; a revival of the university presses; a move toward self-organized, academic publishing collectives.

Open Access Publishing and Repositories:

An open access model based on academic repositories is already well established in the natural sciences where the open access eprint archive, arXiv.org has been active for over 20 years. Publishing articles in an institutional

repository is increasingly stipulated as a condition of funding by research councils, so this model of research dissemination is likely to grow in importance. It has its limits however. First, if an article is also published with a commercial journal there are usually copyright restrictions. This might only prevent the final, formatted paper being reproduced, in which case the entire text of an article can be published separately on a repository. In other cases, however, the author is restricted to publishing an early draft, prior to peer-review. Even in the first case, academics seem to prefer to cite the 'final' publication as it appears in a journal, perhaps due to convention and habit, or possibly because then they can be certain they are referring to the final, quality controlled version. In either case, the practice of writing and research ends up privileging the journal publishers as the ultimate guarantors of research quality and rigour.

The publishers are quite aware of this and, under pressure to improve access, are themselves adopting some versions of open access publication. Springer recently acquired BioMed Central, an open access publishing platform that provides free access to over 200 journals. As with other 'open access' for-profit publishing models, the costs of publishing are devolved to the author, instead of the reader, so this model still ends up being paid for by Universities, albeit from a research budget rather than a library budget. Such a model does have the potential to reduce the cost per article, however, so may represent some progress and appears to be the model favoured in the 2012 [Finch Report](#).

Fair Trade:

Almost all of the work involved in preparing articles for publication is done by academics employed in universities. From conducting research and writing articles to editing and reviewing for journals, most of this work is unpaid, enabling the exceptionally high rates of profit enjoyed in the academic publishing industry. Compensating the universities for this labour would go some way toward redistributing some of this surplus value, particularly given how easily publishers can [avoid taxes](#). As well as channeling a proportion of the value-added back into the universities, this strategy would also raise the visibility of the work that academics already perform for publishers and force it to be accounted for. In this the strategy replicates that used by feminists demanding 'wages for housework'. Practically it appears to have some governmental support and was recommended for adoption in 2004 by the UK [House of Commons Science and Technology Committee](#). Almost ten years on, nothing has come of that demand.

University Presses:

Given that university employees already do most of the work of publishing, a third approach would be to simply take publishing in-house. Even if the university presses kept the current business model, this would generate a significant revenue stream for universities. Taking direct control over research dissemination and publishing would also open up opportunities for restructuring the business. For example, it might prove more sensible for universities to sink their resources into publishing a number of high-prestige open access journals than to subscribe to the hundreds of journals that others publish. Diverting the library budget from subscription fees to publishing could enable this, opening up access and improving the dissemination and impact of research, though it would require a global mode of coordination that seems unlikely. This strategy would also leave the copyright for the back-catalogue of electronic journals with the current publishers, enabling them to continue charging a rent on access.

Self-organized open publishing

A more radical but simpler alternative is for journals to move independently toward an open and self-organized publishing system. Given the amount of free labour that is already performed for publishers, only a small additional cost is required to publish an electronic journal directly, for example to cover proof-reading, layout and website management. There are even open source content management systems being developed that can help to run open access, or even [open process](#), academic journals.

There are some precedents for this kind of initiative. Both [ephemera: theory & politics in organization](#) and

Surveillance and Society are well respected, open-access journals published by independent academic editorial collectives. Whilst both were set up to be open access from the outset, it is also possible to take journals into independent control. For those already owned by scholarly societies, it should be a relatively simple matter to move to an independent, open access, not for profit publishing model. Even where journals are controlled by a commercial publisher, it is possible to change direction. The editors of the Elsevier journal *Topology* collectively left to set up the *Journal of Topology* in 2008, publishing it with Oxford University Press on behalf of the London Mathematical Society. Elsevier discontinued *Topology* in 2012. This conjunction of a University press with an independent scholarly society suggests a hybrid that could work to bring control over publishing back under independent academic control but without necessitating a top-down, coordinated strategy on the part of universities and university presses to take control of journal publishing. If it ultimately enabled a more open form of publishing this would significantly improve impact and contribute to the general sum of human knowledge. The only losers would be the shareholders of the big publishing houses and tax havens like Zug.

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.

About the author:

Christopher Land is Senior Lecturer in Work and Organisation Studies at Essex Business School, University of Essex.

- Copyright © The Author (or The Authors) - Unless otherwise stated, this work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution Unported 3.0 License.