Fair Open Access: returning control of scholarly journals to their communities

The problem of how we should transition to open access is now urgent. The current situation is one of exorbitant subscription journals and expensive open-access ones, and to address it requires organised action from academics. The Fair Open Access Alliance, set up to facilitate the conversion of existing subscription journals to open access, is an example of such organisation. **Alex Holcombe** *and* **Mark C. Wilson** *outline the group's five Fair Open Access Principles and encourage all librarians, researchers, and administrators to work together to secure agreement to cancel subscriptions and to pool funds to pay for open access infrastructure.*

The problem of how the world should transition to open access is now urgent. Growth in subscription fees charged to libraries has continued rising even as open access has grown, and open access has its own costs.

The business model for recorded music was disrupted by the rise of illegal file-sharing. In academia however, until recently file sharing of scholarly papers did not occur enough for researchers to forego subscription access to journals. But that may have changed, via a process of paywall-thwarting that reminds us, a bit, of George Lopez's reaction to Donald Trump's planned border wall. When Lopez, the Mexican-American comedian, was asked what he thought about Trump's wall, he replied: "well, I got news for everybody… we've got tunnels!". For the concerns about Trump's wall, the idea that illegal tunnels are a solution is a joke, but in the case of digital goods, cyber-tunnels can move the vast majority of paywalled articles out from behind the digital barrier.

Using passwords donated by PhD students and other university community members, Sci-Hub bots have "liberated" the scholarly literature, downloading millions of articles and posting them on a Russia-based website anyone can access. Sci-Hub now "provides access to nearly all scholarly literature", according to one independent study.

Sci-Hub is not a long-term solution. First, and aside from the ethical questions involved, Sci-Hub is illegal and the legal establishment has considerable resources for striking back, as Napster, the similarly centralised music file-sharing site, found out. Even if Sci-Hub remains viable, for the publication of new knowledge to continue someone has to pay the costs associated with managing article manuscripts and maintaining the databases and websites that host them. There is a substantial technology infrastructure involved.

Fortunately, the real cost of this infrastructure is much less than universities, businesses, and governments have grown accustomed to paying. Thanks to their near-monopoly on prestigious journal titles in the sciences, commercial publishers have so far been able to charge exorbitant sums for subscriptions while spending very little on providing real service and usability, granting themselves profit margins in excess of practically every other industry.

The alternative to subscription-based journals, open-access publishing, is now familiar to most researchers. It involves no subscription fees; anyone can read and redistribute the article, and under some licences it also means free reuse with acknowledgement (e.g. using other researchers' figures for education, business, and new knowledge creation). Most major publishers now offer it to authors but many do so only at high prices, especially in the sciences, so as to maintain their high profits. To publish in the associated journals, one must pay an article processing charge, a fee typically charged directly to the author but often paid for by the author's university or funder. The large commercial publishers offer open-access journals with fairly reasonable APCs starting at several hundred dollars (close to basic costings with today's technology) to around $2,000, but the APC in "hybrid" journals (whereby individual articles in a subscription journal are made open access) can be quite high. Elsevier, for example, publishes hundreds of journals for which the APC is USD$3000 or more.

Funders in the UK and elsewhere have agreed to pay these APCs, but due to publishers' power over prestigious journal titles, the market is not competitive so downward pressure on prices is very weak, and many authors without direct grant support are shut out. Also, many authors are opposed on principle to paying to publish, being worried about the lack of incentives for journals to exert quality control (see, for example, the results of our survey of mathematicians).

Changing this unsatisfactory arrangement of exorbitant subscription journals and expensive open-access ones requires organised action, and academics are better known for lecturing and debating than for acting. Still, many academics have created scholar-run open-access journals, with many being free to publish in. The Directory of Open Access Journals lists over 9,500 journals, over 6,500 of which have no APC. Many of these journals rely on the open-source Open Journal Systems publishing software. OJS has its limitations, but additional open journal management systems are emerging that make publishing even easier.

Independent open-access journals are often of high scholarly quality, albeit run on a shoestring budget and sometimes lacking features of expensive journals. Unfortunately, these journals can find it difficult to develop the positive reputation and "brand" that subscription journals with a longer history sometimes enjoy. Taking an existing subscription journal with an established brand and setting it free is therefore an attractive proposition. But when a for-profit corporation holds all the legal rights, including the name of the original journal, as is often the case, wresting control can be difficult.

This "flipping" of a publisher-owned subscription journal to open access can be done, and indeed there are several precedents, including linguistics journal *Glossa*. Its founders were formerly editors of the prestigious and expensive Elsevier subscription journal, *Lingua*. Led by chief editor Johan Rooryck, the editors resigned from *Lingua* and started the new, open-access *Glossa*. The scholarly community of authors and reviewers followed, and *Glossa* is flourishing, while the old journal languishes.

However, most journal editors and editorial board members are understandably reluctant to take the leap of converting to open access. Problems include ignorance of the options, a desire for editorial board consensus, uncertainty regarding the viability of finances, and distaste for the prevailing model of charging a fee to publish. These concerns should not be limited to open access journals: Sci-Hub and the movement of funders toward open access have also brought the financial viability of subscription journals into question.

To feel comfortable with abandoning their publisher for a new initiative, there is a lot that editors need. A strong understanding of both the motivating principles and the practicalities is required. To address these issues, and to facilitate improvements in the way that open-access journals are set up and run, our group has formulated a set of principles that we call Fair Open Access. At the FairOA website, we lay out the five Fair Open Access principles. Briefly, a FairOA journal has the following qualities:

1. The journal is controlled by the scholarly community and has a transparent governance structure.
2. Authors retain copyright of their articles.
3. All articles are fully open access.
4. No fees are required from authors.
5. Any payments made to a publisher are transparent and in proportion to the service provided.

We also provide practical information to assist scholars in getting their journals out from under publisher ownership and converting to a FairOA model.

The needs of the various disciplines differ, so we have created discipline-specific organisations under our umbrella FairOA site: LingOA, for linguistics; PsyOA, for psychology; and MathOA, for mathematics. (We intend to add more disciplines as resources permit). We have begun systematically asking editorial boards about the perceived barriers to "flipping" their journals to open access. MathOA recently facilitated the breaking away of the editors of the *Journal of Algebraic Combinatorics* from Springer to found an open-access replacement, *Algebraic Combinatorics*. MathOA has also surveyed community opinion and found a strong mandate for editors to break away from commercial publishers if the publishers will not agree to basic demands to improve service and cede control.

Fair Open Access principle number four is that fees should not be paid by authors. How can this be avoided? Many scholarly communities do most of the publishing work themselves using a platform such as OJS, thereby avoiding fees, sometimes in conjunction with society or institutional support. But in many fields, researchers are not accustomed to shouldering as much of the publishing burden and feel, with some justification, that it is not their job.

The Open Library of Humanities has shown one way to proceed. Instead of a publisher owning the articles, or the title of the journal, publishing services are instead hired by the scholars and universities themselves, organised as OLH. This arrangement prevents lock-in, incentivising improvements in the service provided. When the needs of scholars change, or if the service-provider hikes their prices too high, OLH can switch to a new provider.

Who pays the bills for OLH? University libraries contribute a membership fee, which covers costs and also gives the universities a say in the future evolution of the system. OLH started with several dozen university libraries. It now manages 14 open-access journals and has grown its membership to over 200 libraries, including more than 50 universities in the UK. To be financially viable at a larger scale, new open-access journals (some of them "flipped" from legacy journals) should take over the roles of old subscription journals, so that subscriptions can be cancelled.

Previous efforts to extricate journals from publisher ownership have typically happened in isolation and in ignorance of what has worked in the past. Only by sharing information will researchers know what it takes to keep corporations from locking up the fruits of their labour. But sharing tips won't be sufficient. It takes large-scale cooperation to get agreement to cancel subscriptions, and to pool funds to pay for open access infrastructure. We encourage all librarians, researchers and administrators to work together on this critical issue. Our FairOA group is itself a product of such cooperation, including scientists, humanities scholars, librarians, and publishing experts.

We at FairOA are ready to help; please contact us at psyoa@psyoa.org or info@mathoa.org

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Note: This article gives the views of the authors, 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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