

Introducing the Free Journal Network – community-controlled open access publishing



*Discontent with the scholarly publishing industry continues to grow, as the prevailing subscription model appears increasingly unsustainable and open access big deals, one mooted alternative, unlikely to lead to optimal outcomes either. The Free Journal Network was established earlier this year in order to nurture and promote journals that are free to both authors and readers, and run according to the Fair Open Access Principles. **Mark C. Wilson** describes the progress the network has made so far, why community ownership is a crucial and underappreciated issue, and what research libraries can do to help.*

There is widespread and growing discontent about the state of scholarly publishing, and in particular the cost of subscription journals. For example, this year alone there has been news of breakdowns in national subscription negotiations with [Elsevier](#), [Springer](#) and others, in Germany, France and [Sweden](#). The concept of “OA Big Deals” has gained currency. As explained by Björn Brembs, this is [unlikely to lead to optimal outcomes](#). The alternative model of not-for-profit independent open access journals with no author fees has been around for decades. The community-controlled [not-for-profit model](#) has been supported on this blog recently. I strongly believe that the commercial publishers have far too little incentive to fix the problems of the current system, and researchers must take matters into their own hands.

Journals that are community-run, not owned by commercial publishers, have tended to have very low budgets and be run by volunteer labour (e.g. the [Journal of Machine Learning Research](#)). Many have been started since the advent of the World Wide Web, and been run rather informally. They have thrived or declined based on the work of dedicated volunteers and been made possible by excellent tools such as Open Journal Systems (see the [longitudinal study by Björk et al](#) for survival rates and challenges for such journals). Typically they have a lower profile than the journals of commercial publishers. In some cases that is deserved, but in many others it is merely a consequence of the big publishers’ marketing budgets.

The Free Journal Network (FJN) was founded in early 2018 in order to nurture and promote “diamond” or “platinum” (that is, free to authors and readers) journals. Because of the lack of a good standard definition of such journals and our belief that community ownership is a crucial and underappreciated issue, we require member journals to conform to the [Fair Open Access Principles](#). After an initial recruitment phase FJN currently has 39 member journals. We have a website (<https://freejournals.org>), Twitter account ([@freejournalnet](#)) and private discussion forum at Gitlab (see the [associated public forum](#)). Our oldest journal is *Fennia* (since 1889) and the youngest was founded in 2017. The Steering Committee has 11 members serving a 2-year term, and we invite nominations (including self-nominations) for more.

In addition to functioning as a journal whitelist, FJN is designed to encourage sharing of best practices amongst journals. Competition is healthy up to a point, but the sharing ethos of the research community is more effective in generating real progress. We expect that the membership criteria will gradually tighten as we agree on best practices. For example, we do not yet require registration in [DOAJ](#), but this may change. The ultimate aim of FJN is to demonstrate a clear alternative to commercially owned journals that is “professional” (in quality) but “amateur” in the best sense.

We are conscious that FJN itself is essentially a project carried along by a small number of dedicated volunteers (here I especially want to mention the help of Jonathan Klawitter). Thus formalising governance of FJN (e.g. who chooses the Steering Committee? How are important decisions made? What legal organisation lies behind it?) and developing the basic systems to allow us to receive donations and library memberships are priorities.

One of the very best things libraries can do to improve the scholarly publishing landscape is to support FJN both financially and in-kind. To quote Jean-Sébastien Caux, founder of SciPost and FJN Steering Committee member: “We are finding it difficult to convince individual universities or funders to commit to supporting us even at the basic level of €1,000 per year, since their budget is eaten up by all the insistent (and well-calculated) invoicing from for-profit publishers. Too often, not-for-profit, APC-free publishing is also confused with no-publishing-costs-so-no-financial-support-needed. The reality is that if universities and funding agencies don’t start supporting our cost-slashing infrastructure more actively, reform of the publishing business will stall.”

FJN is happy to talk to research libraries about how to reallocate some of their current serials budget toward high-quality, community-controlled, and truly sustainable open access publications.

The key points for librarians and other decision-makers to take away are:

- In addition to being open access with no author charges, member journals have quality control which in many areas exceeds that of most commercial journals
- The journals are very cheap to run: full costs are well under \$100 per article, closer to \$10 for most journals, since the labour is donated (as with almost all journals) by researchers, open source software is used in many cases, and profits are not extracted
- Even small amounts of money take a lot of pressure off volunteers and improve sustainability and offerings substantially (for example a completely zero-budget journal has no way of assigning DOIs which cost around \$2 each)
- Please support FJN and Fair Open Access more generally – and spread the word!

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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.

About the author

Mark C. Wilson is an academic in the Department of Computer Science, University of Auckland. He is a board member of MathOA and a founder of the Free Journal Network.