



Is the Open Access movement about to get real?

Wesley J. Wildman, Joseph Bulbulia, Richard Sosis & Uffe Schjoedt

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Is the Open Access movement about to get real?

If you are too young to remember the old days of browsing library shelves for journals hoping that what you are planning as a researcher has not already been done, ask an older research colleague. Ready access to thousands of scholarly journal articles, updated frequently to reflect the contemporary state of knowledge, is a LOT better. Now we can search for keywords, author names, or titles and locate research publications in seconds. We can read abstracts and download the full text of articles and books if it is something we need to know about. And we can do all of that from the comfort of our work desk, from the discomfort of an airplane (if we spring for Wi-Fi), or sitting in a conference wanting to know more about research that was just mentioned.

At least, a *tiny minority* of privileged individuals can do this. Most people—even most people interested in research—don't have access to such benefits.

The democratic vision of a truly free flow of information for all researchers aligns with scholarly aspirations for excellence. Open Access invites all who might contribute to the advancement of human knowledge, with prejudice to none. History is replete with examples of idiosyncratic geniuses such as Michael Faraday, Srinivasa Ramanujan, and Albert Einstein, whose profound discoveries arose outside traditional scholarly institutions. A truly open scholarly world affords opportunities to anyone who might be capable of contributing to diverse scholarly conversations. More fundamentally, it just seems intrinsically good that no one should be excluded from obtaining a record of what has been said by scholars.

Despite those attractive virtues, open scholarship has not been realized, and it has come up against serious obstacles, several of which remain to be navigated. At *RBB* we're paying close attention to these problems inside the article-publishing industry and now and then we like to update our readers on our thinking. Maij et al.'s article in this issue is Open Access and it has over 70,000 reads as of the time of writing; that says something about the power of Open Access.

The main barrier to progress is economic. The intoxicating vision of a record of knowledge at everyone's fingertips is expensive. Who will pay these costs? Currently, most of the economic burden is carried by university libraries, who pay subscriptions to journal publishers. This is funded by the usual university and college revenue sources, which include a hefty amount of public funding through government grants or directly from governments in the case of public universities. Big universities negotiate deals with publishers to get access to thousands of journals in discounted packages. It's still expensive. For example, the operating budget for the University of Auckland Libraries is over US\$17 million, with well over half these costs going to journal subscriptions. In 2014, Harvard University's library budget was US\$160 million, a large chunk of which was for journals.

It might be expensive, but it's still a reasonable solution, isn't it? Well, yes and no. It's good for some researchers. It's not so good for parents paying tuition and taxpayers underwriting research grants and public universities. And there are twists. For instance, when your subscription lapses you typically lose electronic access to the journals entirely. At least in the old days you could buy a journal and keep it—bind it, shelve it, and make it available to future readers. These days, in most arrangements you retain the all-important electronic access only if you keep paying the subscription indefinitely.

Of course a more significant issue is that the only researchers who can access the journals are those who work for institutions or companies that pay the subscriptions. Everyone else must

surmount the paywall, article by article, to read the latest research. And you've seen those prices. If researchers pay publishers to make an article Open Access, using grant funding to do so, the publishers get paid twice. No wonder journal publishing is such a profitable business.

Journal publishing is profitable? You bet. Since most of the big journal publishers are publicly traded companies, we can read their annual reports to find out how profitable the journal publishing business is. Here are the 2018 profit margins, according to one adventurous soul who tracked down the information. Informa's academic publishing division: 29%; Wiley: 31%; Elsevier: 37%. It's all complicated, with taxes and regions and subdivisions and caveats and exceptions. But compare these profit margins to *Forbes'* report on the 15 most profitable industries:¹ Accounting is #1 with a profit margin of 20%, #2 (legal) is at 18%, #3 (oil and gas) is at 16%, and it's all downhill from there. Maybe *Forbes* hasn't heard about academic journal publishing.

Boosters of the Open Access movement believe there's a better way. But someone always pays. The lowest cost version of Open Access is the repository systems supported and funded by many universities, in which the author's version prior to publication is submitted. While that's useful for communication, it's seriously problematic because of the lack of a version of record and the associated problems with citation. To overcome that problem, we need the machinery of the commercial system or an equivalent. The author-pays version of Open Access can work better—there are no double payments to publishers, for one thing. But a lot of authors don't have the grant funding to pay to publish their articles and universities would have to figure out how to move funds from journal subscriptions over to pay-to-publish schemes. A nasty downside of the pay-to-publish arrangement is the intrusion of a host of low-quality Open-Access, pay-to-publish "journals" attempting to take advantage of the confusion surrounding our "publish or perish" university cultures.

There is also the problem of scholarly motivation. Journal prestige affects academic fates. The most respected journals in most fields are owned by profit-making publishing houses. As with all human normative systems, it is unrealistic to think that scholarly norms can simply change overnight. To think that scholars will suddenly avoid valuing the research that is published in the most exclusive peer reviewed journals is spectacularly unrealistic. Though the filters of every peer-review system are leaky, the record of contemporary human knowledge has been built upon those filters. By and large, these filters have worked, and corporate publishing houses own them. Even if it were not reckless to ask scholars to abandon or ignore the prestigious peer-reviewed journals that have served as platforms for the advancement of knowledge, it would seem unrealistic to think that all scholars would simply walk away from them.

Clearly, there is no easy solution to the problem of realizing Open Access for all scholarship. To some commentators, the democratic vision of a truly open record of human knowledge appears to forever remain out of reach. But what would happen if a gigantic university system refused to play the subscription game anymore?

That has just happened.

Yes, the University of California system, which produces about 10% of US research papers, has just declined to renew its subscription with Elsevier, the largest journal publisher. MacKenzie Smith, University Librarian at UC Davis, tells the story at *The Conversation*.² She begins with the immediate 7% plunge in the stock price of Elsevier's parent company, RELX. But what happens next?

To change the university funding model from subscriptions to pay-to-publish, something dramatic and awkward is going to have to happen. Journal publishers are counting on the transition being too complex and disruptive for universities and their researchers to navigate. But if UC votes its conscience in this way, who knows what might happen?

The problem of enabling a world of open scholarly access is itself a complex intellectual problem that combines elements of computer science, economics, politics, and systems design. Prestigious journals are flawed, but they are also excellent, and corporations own them. Solving the Open Access problem also requires understanding how people can break with strongly entrenched traditions. Readers of *RBB* will be familiar with benefits of channeling interdisciplinary expertise to complex interdisciplinary problems.

Whether and how scholars from diverse backgrounds can open the world of knowledge to those who lack access remains unclear. We are watching closely, and eager to contribute to the solutions. These are turbulent and exciting times in academic publishing. As events unfold, we'll keep you apprised.

Notes

1. <https://www.forbes.com/pictures/feki45efjgh/no-15-support-activities/#163b29b344c1>
2. <https://theconversation.com/university-of-californias-break-with-the-biggest-academic-publisher-could-shake-up-scholarly-publishing-for-good-112941>

Wesley J. Wildman, Joseph Bulbulia, Richard Sosis, and Uffe Schjoedt
Editors