

After open access - new scope for magazines?

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Two months ago, against a background of steadily mounting frustration at slow progress towards widespread open access, a broad group of national research funding organisations, with the support of the European Commission and the European Research Council (ERC), announced the launch of cOAlition S, an initiative to make full and immediate open access to research publications a reality. Their programme was presented through a Plan S which outlines ten stiff principles and will ensure that scientific publications coming from these research funding bodies after 2020 “must be published in compliant open access journals or on compliant open access platforms” (see the website Science Europe). This initiative might be stalled or sidelined, but it seems possible that its blunt and sudden toolset will appeal to the populism and broad brush strokes of the Trump administration. If the USA joins in, this new policy will have a stunning and global effect. The STM publishing industry and libraries are certainly taking it very seriously.

The dramatic and short-notice ultimatum implicit in Plan S means that a very large and rapidly growing avalanche of the latest and most relevant research may be freely available from 2020 onwards. Open access will quite suddenly become the norm for almost all academic research publishing – at least in periodicals or journals. When this happens it is very likely that there will be an ongoing explosion in the quantity of scientific and research publishing. It will be increasingly difficult to rely on refereeing or the selection process to ‘weed out’ weaker research, and we will see stepped up activity by the so-called ‘predatory’ publishers who crank out papers for the sake of the relatively small fees that research funders will pay as ‘article processing charges’.

One effect of the increasing bombardment of scientific research and freely available technical data published through the web is that there will be steadily increasing demand for honest reporting on the flood of scientific and academic research. When quality has been only lightly checked or parsed by rapid refereeing, proven, guaranteed quality will count for more. But all the models for open access publishing sanctioned by Plan S will dictate briefer and lighter investment in the review and editing process.

This presents a problem and an opportunity for the top tier of intellectual or highbrow magazines such as *Foreign Affairs*, *Scientific American*, *The New Yorker*, *Times Literary Supplement*, *New Scientist* or the *Harvard Business Review*. These magazines are gradually moving to digital delivery and are successful at growing a digital subscriber base. Although they are sometimes contributed to by researchers and academics they are thoroughly

commercial operations – they will not be open access, and the Research Councils can not require them to be. Moreover their independence will be even more necessary and useful in an era in which arguably research material is being over published with reduced quality control. We will need them because we will need secondary analysis, explanation and commentary on the vast and surely increased flood of research publication that follows from open access. While the case for summary analysis and high level explanation in science and health is obvious – the mission for the *Scientific American* is guaranteed – similar needs will be apparent in all areas of professional expertise: the law, social science, cognitive science and business, and indeed the arts.

Almost fifty years ago Herbert Simon, the Nobel winning economist and father of AI, noted, when writing about organisations in an information-rich world:

“What information consumes is rather obvious: it consumes the attention of its recipients. Hence a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention and a need to allocate that attention efficiently among the overabundance of information sources that might consume it”.

In a world of superabundant information attention is the scarce resource. Reviewers, websites, wikis, and professional bodies will help with the need for post publication distillation and critique, but this is also the metier of professional or expert magazines. Especially the best magazines with established audience and reader trust. *The Economist*, the *Harvard Business Review*, MIT’s *Technology Review*, or the Chatham House journal *The World Today* are clear examples of magazines in the social sciences with a strong intellectual and academic component, yet with policy application. They should thrive and grow along with the need for trustable sign posting and analysis in an age of research superabundance. Their challenge is to maintain a distance and objectivity from research whose publication and promotion has been paid for by funders and to develop strategies for more closely understanding and serving their committed audience. *Harvard Business Review*, for example, has recently taken a new approach to building its digital audience, reducing the frequency of publication to six times a year and increasing the price at the newsstand to \$19.95. They have seen a jump in subscriptions to over 300,000 and in an interesting move they give a lot of attention to promoting engagement in their subscribers (not just in customer acquisition). In a Folio interview with Sarah McConville and Caty Trio it was noted that:

“(the subscriber’s) relationship with the brand was anchored in print, but it is truly an integrated, print and digital experience.”

and

“we’ve found over time that many of our subscribers didn’t know what they had access to in a subscription, and all of these benefits on our website that come along with a print subscription.”

When magazines go digital their print archive is potentially a live database for their subscribers and supporters. At Exact Editions we have noticed that many magazine publishers know that their archive is a key asset, but as yet relatively few magazine publishers have realised just how strong the full and searchable archive can be in providing strong digital engagement with their audience (it sometimes helps to mention the word “renewals”). And, hidden bonus, relatively few magazine publishers have yet realised that

having a great archive is the key to educational and research markets. In a world of open access research and scholarship, magazines with a growing and reliable archive give the publication depth and longevity and they may come to be seen as bulwarks of stability and trusted expertise. This expertise and second order reliability in turn contributes to new research – which will be published via open access. Open access may be one factor powering the digital future of magazines which will still be primarily for subscribers and members.



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