

Can transparency in publishing costs clear the way for open scholarly communications?

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The biggest challenge facing me in my current job is dealing with increasing costs of electronic resources, and communicating the associated issues with our various stakeholders. In an ideal world there would be greater transparency in costs associated with processing and disseminating academic research.

Each year when it is time to renew resources there are unpredictable increases from many publishers. Forecasting these increases is impossible. The publishers promise that these increases come with a whole host of improvements: platform upgrades, increased content, better support, and open access options. Others claim that they cannot operate without applying these increases. The reality is that major publishers are failing to supply comprehensive metadata, suffer frequent platform issues, use suspect attempts to block and monitor users, and allow errors in ostensibly COUNTER compliant usage reports. This level of service does not warrant the so-called 'market standard' increases.

Not only are these increases hard to predict and impossible to budget for, they are becoming increasingly difficult to justify. Some of the larger publishers report significant profits, and are owned by companies that are driven by increasing profit margins. How can the increases imposed by profitable publishers be passed on to institutions where academics are producing the content at no charge to the publisher?

The increased costs introduced by publishers surpassed library budgets years ago and libraries are already carefully analysing which titles are most used and which need to be saved.

This was highlighted by Ann Rossiter of SCONUL in her presentation at this year's UKSG conference. Through this analysis by SCONUL, and others, it is clear that libraries are faced with increasing responsibilities, but this is not reflected in the static, or even shrinking budgets.

In an ideal world, the costs involved in editing, compiling and publishing journals would have greater transparency. The improvements and innovations would be introduced with greater consultation with the whole scholarly communication community, would be flagged years in advance, and the price staggered over time. It was somewhat surprising to hear at the UKSG conference that these are included in criteria for working with developing nations. In a global community of knowledge exchange, these are principles that should apply anywhere where research, education, and the general development of a better society is being pursued. This perspective on "doing business with developing countries" really highlighted that publishers are

trying to do business, where we are trying to do education.

Librarians are making difficult decisions and working out the finer points of the subscription agreements with publishers. These decisions might be made in consultation with academic colleagues, and inevitable cancellations or curtailments need to be communicated to the faculty and students. All the while the same academics are submitting their research to these publications and participating in the publishing cycle. This is as part of their academic duties, not for any financial gain, only for their institution to pay to access the content. Would greater transparency in this process make it easier to communicate our subscription decisions to faculty, and lead to a greater understanding of the consequences of their choice of publishing outlet?

Better communication with the academic community would ensure all parts of the research cycle are aware of the inputs, resources and costs. New editorial models being demonstrated by Glosa and other open access publications are an example of transparency, clearly outlining necessary costs and how they are passed on. At both the UKSG and NASIG conferences this year, I heard about a number of successful university publishing initiatives that are providing examples of how research can be shared freely and openly, with editorial rigour and professional presentation, but without the hefty price tag. Managed within the university, the costs involved are visible or even administered by the library and so are entirely predictable and worked into the overall budget and strategy. They are also useful in demonstrating the true costs of editing, coordinating, compiling, publishing, maintaining a platform and advertising.

I do not doubt that established publishers can add value to academic work. The peer review, editing, design and promotion of academic work involves a skillset and experience that cannot be completely disregarded. We all have our jobs to do, and adding to the existing workload of librarians, or hiring new staff to take on the librarian-as-publisher role presents an additional cost, as well as a reputational and strategic investment. Just as librarians deserve acknowledgement of their specific skills and responsibilities so do publishing professionals. In many cases it is still logical to outsource the work of publishing, just as we buy shelf-ready books and purchase software. However greater clarity in the processes and inputs are needed so that academic institutions know what they are paying for. The increasingly common business model of acquisition, growth, and increased quantity, is not sustainable when large journal packages are at risk of losing quality.

By making the publishing process more transparent, all of those involved can be sure of the quality and integrity of the published journal, creating a prestige based on openness. The academics producing the content can see the value that is added to their work and understand the pricing applied. The librarians purchasing the journals can budget for the coming years and anticipate upcoming changes. Library budgets should be investing in positive developments in scholarly communications, those which prioritise opening up access to the research carried out within their institutions, not furnishing increased end of year dividends to private backers.

The scholarly communications landscape is changing rapidly. Repositories such as arXiv.org and The Open Library of the Humanities are providing more streamlined access to research. The Electrochemical Society intends to have its publishing activities fully funded and open access by 2024. An admirable aim and one which I hope is sustainable. It does inspire the question; "Is there a shelf life on the for-profit publisher and their myriad of hidden costs that add value to research conducted within our own institutions?"

The existing players must move towards a more transparent model, one which also recognises the importance of making information more open and accessible. If they cannot, there are alternative initiatives which will overtake this antiquated practice and eliminate the whole business, not just the profits.



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