

Academic spring – a seasonal variation or global warming?



Steve Byford
Independent STM publisher



Sue Thorn
Managing Director, Sue
Thorn Consulting Ltd

Steve Byford FSB has over 25 years' experience in academic journals publishing, including 17 years at the Society for Endocrinology and its trading subsidiary, BioScientifica, most recently as its Publications Director. He has spoken publicly on open access issues, and is a member of the Society of Biology's recently-convened Research Dissemination Committee.

Sue Thorn FSB currently runs Sue Thorn Consulting Ltd. She has 30 years' experience in academic journals publishing and the management of learned societies. She was CEO of the Society for Endocrinology for almost 20 years and Managing Director of BioScientifica. She was Chair of the Association of Learned and Professional Society Publishers for three years and currently chairs the Society of Biology's Research Dissemination Committee.

"Wellcome Trust joins 'academic spring' to open up science", blazed the front-page headline of *The Guardian* on 10 April. The Trust was to "throw its weight behind a growing campaign to break the stranglehold of academic journals and allow all research papers to be shared online".

The campaign for "open access" (OA) to research outputs, free to any reader with access to the web, has been debated vigorously for at least a decade, but these things don't usually make the headlines. So why now?

From the outset, a possible alternative business model for OA scholarly publishing had been identified. Instead of charging readers for access (usually via their libraries), publishers could charge authors (or their funders or institutions) and then make the resulting online article free to all. This is now known as "Gold" OA.

Many (but not all (1)) publishers of scientific journals were decidedly cool or even hostile to calls for any form of OA from stakeholders concerned about what they saw as the high costs of research dissemination and validation. As a result, research funding bodies, institutions and their libraries, and even governments, started to take things into their own hands, seeking to bypass publishers' access controls by setting up open repositories into which researchers were encouraged or even mandated to deposit their articles for free online dissemination – so called "Green" OA. It involves no fee and no business model.

These stakeholders have seized the initiative, also proposing revisions to copyright law to provide more public access to copyright materials, both to the full articles themselves and via text mining.

Matters have reached a renewed head in just the last few months. Last summer, *The Guardian's* George Monbiot opined that

"Academic publishers make Murdoch look like a socialist". Then, in the early months of this year, open antagonism towards publishers escalated.

In January, Cambridge mathematician and Fields Medal winner Tim Gowers blogged that he would no longer cooperate in any way with Elsevier, either as an author, referee or editorial board member. Elsevier, amongst its massive portfolio of scholarly journals, publishes many prestigious mathematics titles. Gowers objected to its prices, its policy of selling online journals in bundles and its lobbying activities, especially in the USA, in opposition to proposals that he saw as improving access to journal content.

The online discussion that followed led to the creation of a public campaign against Elsevier. On the "cost of knowledge" website, academics could publicly commit to boycotting Elsevier's journals. At the time of writing (May), the number of signatories had reached over 11 000.

It is this that has caught the attention of the news media, and the coining of the term "academic spring". A few days after the *Guardian* article quoted above, an editorial in *The Economist* (14 April) pronounced "When research is funded by the taxpayer or by charities [our italics], the results should be available to all without charge".

Strikingly, when a representative of the Publishers Association wrote an earlier *Guardian* piece saying "Branding academic publishers 'enemies of science' is offensive and wrong" on 27 January, all the online comments found the article objectionable.

When academic publishing reaches the front page, we know things are really heating up. And, although much of this invective is specifically targeted at Elsevier's reported 35% profit margins, often critics are at least partly using this as shorthand for 'for-profit, non-OA' publishers. These same publishers, of course, publish the journals of most learned societies, including BPS, so societies may well be directly affected by this negative PR.

We focus here on three interesting aspects of this debate:

- 1) The 'public access' argument: 'publicly-funded research should be publicly available'
- 2) The 'too much profit, too many restrictions' argument: widespread reaction against what is seen as excessive profits being made by some publishers, who at the same time are perceived as seeking to impose unreasonable restrictions on the ways published outputs can be used.

- 3) The 'rampant capitalism' argument: a broader reaction across much of society against perceived corporate greed, where excessive salaries and profits are achieved, especially in a low-risk business environment.

The public access argument

Journal articles are funded by the taxpayer, written by academics for no fee, reviewed also by academics for no fee, so why should there be barriers to anyone accessing the material who wants to? Publishers say they add value in several ways. Even though critics say this is overstated, publishers do invest in systems and staff to manage and facilitate timely and rigorous peer review, to edit, code and format the text, to add context and discoverability to the content in the wider digital environment. All of these certainly cost something to achieve, and are valued by authors and readers. But there is also more to it than just the process of dealing with individual articles. Learned societies work with their publishers to actively build the profiles of their journal brands by keeping them relevant to developments in their disciplines. This can represent a long-term investment of time and resources. The result is that the prestige of publishing in journal A is different from that of journal B, giving readers a clue as to where to find the research most valuable to them.

Nonetheless, it is surely by now clear that Gold OA is a viable business model to support this. There are still practical challenges in making it work, in particular authors' ability to access funds, especially after a grant has ended. It is also clear that there are particular difficulties for research that is not comprehensively supported by grant funding. This includes much clinical research, for example. In these cases, Gold OA, if required, would need to be funded by the university, hospital or some other body.

The argument about whether OA is the way forward is perhaps largely over – the question is now turning to *how*. Funders and governments are increasingly insisting on free public access within a short time of publication. There is strong political momentum towards this in a number of countries including the UK, and also at EU level.

The 'too much profit, too many restrictions' argument

The feeling that Elsevier's margins are unacceptable has been a significant contributor to the "cost of knowledge" boycott, especially in extremely tight economic circumstances in which libraries say they are making very difficult spending cuts. Some publishers do indeed appear to make large profits. However, it is not fair or correct to tar all with the same brush: not all publishers' profits are unreasonable, and often much or all of it goes back into the academic community via learned societies. The work by reviewers and editors can then be thought of as helping to earn resources for the benefit of their discipline.

Though we may insist that not all publishers and societies deserve criticism, some vociferous and influential parties are not listening. They are attacking the publishing industry generally. And what is a fair profit margin?

Broad reaction across society against rampant capitalism

The wake of the 2007-8 global economic crash has led to ordinary people seeing themselves paying for years and possibly decades to compensate for the failings of bankers who seem to be suffering much less, if at all. This is having a knock-on effect on perceptions of private enterprise as a whole, and especially of large corporations.

In a normal market, income is determined by the customer's appetite

for your product or service at the price you are asking, and this usually limits the level of profit margin. However, for this model to work well there has to be pressure on prices, so that they are positioned low enough to encourage the market to buy. However, with journals, those who 'consume' the product (the author and reader) and those who pay (the library) are not connected in their decision-making. This has led over many years to a dysfunctional market: the decisions on what journals to subscribe and submit to are divorced from decisions about value for money. With the caveats stated earlier about funding, Gold OA has the potential to restore functionality to this market. It will probably drive prices and profit margins down, but the publisher who provides prestige, quality, service and functionality at a good price will attract more papers, so their actual profits could even rise. There is finally an incentive for publishers to deliver what all parts of the market want.

There are unstoppable forces at work. Gold OA can deliver if the practical issues are resolved collaboratively by all parties as recommended by Universities UK and the Research Information Network in 2009 (2). With Gold OA, the link between price and value is transparent, which is surely as it should be. If publishers get it right and deliver what the market wants at a fair price, there are probably still good opportunities for academic and financial success.

In conclusion, the way forward is surely for publishers to meet and engage with the needs of the library community, funders and governments. The debate with these groups is maturing and publishers can now get beyond the earlier antagonistic rhetoric to deal with the practical issues. The UK Government appears to understand the subtleties and complexities, as evidenced by David Willetts MP's speech to the Publishers Association on 2 May (3). As well as recognizing "the value which publishers add", he also acknowledged that it "would be deeply irresponsible to get rid of one business model and not put anything in its place." We can't prevent new business models, but we can shape them. To quote the former Vicar of Badminton, "If you can't prevent the wall from collapsing, at least push it the way you want it to go."

And if publishers and other stakeholders could work together to deliver a genuinely sustainable model that meets everyone's needs, that would surely be worthy of a few headlines.

References

- 1) Byford S. Open Access: should journals be free for all? *The Endocrinologist* 2004 73 8-9 (<http://www.endocrinology.org/endocrinologist/073/073.pdf#page=8>)
- 2) UUK/RIN Paying for open access publication charges. A report by Universities UK and the Research Information Network. 2009 <http://www.rin.ac.uk/our-work/research-funding-policy-and-guidance/paying-open-access-publication-charges>
- 3) Willetts D Public access to publicly-funded research 2012 <http://www.bis.gov.uk/news/speeches/david-willetts-public-access-to-research>

Since the above article was written in May, Dame Janet Finch's working group has published its report "Expanding access to research publications", recommending a coordinated move towards sustainable open access and echoing many of the themes set out above. The full report is at <http://www.researchinfonet.org/publish/finch/>.