

It's time to stand up to greedy academic publishers

The UK's higher education institutions spend more than £180m on journal subscriptions every year. We need to come together and create a better system

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How should research travel from the notebooks, hard drives and laboratories of researchers to the desks of their peers? Who should get access? And who should pay?

Over the past few years, these deceptively simple questions have been beset with controversy. Librarians at some of the world's wealthiest institutions have announced that they can no longer afford to purchase the materials their researchers need. Leading academics have organised boycotts, petitions and mass resignations to protest the combination of prohibitively high prices and profit margins that rival those of the big oil, pharmaceutical and technology firms. A recent paper found that just five multinational publishing conglomerates accounted for 50% of all papers published in 2013.

It may seem like an administrative afterthought, but the issue of how research is communicated in society raises questions that cut to the heart of what academics do, and what academia is about. The scale of the entanglement between academic research and big publishers may well lead us to ask: who is serving whom? Does our scholarly communication system put the needs of researchers first? Or does it prioritise the uninterrupted profitability of a handful of publishers?

In response to this dilemma, researchers, institutions and policymakers have been exploring different ways of making research available, and different ways of paying for publishing. In the UK, new policies from Hefce and Research Councils UK have sought to widen access to the public as well as to encourage a shift from paying at the point of access to paying at the point of publishing - through so-called article processing charges (or APCs). In principle, this would mean that rather than many institutions repeatedly buying access to the same material, publishing is paid for "up front" by the research community and thereafter free for all forever.

But will these changes amount to a step towards a better deal, a fairer system? To advance understanding of the effects of these changes, we have just published a paper in the Open Library of Humanities to begin to piece together financial flows around academic publishing. However, the picture that we have been able to obtain so far based on publicly available data is still woefully inadequate to the task of being able to assess who pays for what, whether this is fair, and what resources might potentially be available for financing alternative arrangements (such as university-based presses or

non-profit consortia).

What do we know so far? Thanks to hundreds of freedom of information requests, we have a window into how higher educational institutions spend more than £180m every year on journal subscriptions. The lion's share of this (just over 42%) goes to four of the largest publishers. Data about article processing charges is much more difficult to get hold of. Thanks to the valiant efforts of a few librarians and institutions we now have partial information for a selection of institutions, but this is still only a very small part of the picture. From what we can tell so far, the same big publishers who receive most money from subscriptions also take home the most money from article processing charges.

Yet despite these fleeting glimpses we are still a long way from a useful picture of how money flows through the academic publishing system, which could be used to see the effects of recent policies, and fuel our collective imagination about other ways in which scholarly communication could be organised. We still can't account for half of the £180m a year spent on journal subscriptions. With respect to article processing charges, despite some important steps, we are still largely in the dark. As institutions derive their income from many different sources it is also hard to trace where this money comes from.

To address this, we need a public database of spending on academic publishing. Having this information would not only help us to understand the current system, but also to change it. Collective negotiation bodies have been shown to lead to better deals for universities with publishers (though this is not always smooth going, as evidenced by the recent nationally coordinated boycott of Elsevier by Dutch universities).

As well as providing evidence to inform such negotiation processes, a more joined-up picture of how money is spent would give institutions a better sense of the resources available to invest in publishing initiatives and infrastructures which prioritise the interests of researchers and their publics, rather than the returns of shareholders.

Hence we call on researchers, universities and public institutions to publish what they pay and rethink what they are investing in, in order to expedite progress towards a scholarly communication system that is fit for purpose in the 21st century.

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