

# Gowers's Weblog

Mathematics related discussions

## Interesting times in academic publishing

In this post I want briefly to mention four current goings on in the world of academic publishing.

First, I'll just briefly say that things are going well with the new journal Discrete Analysis (<https://gowers.wordpress.com/2015/09/10/discrete-analysis-an-arxiv-overlay-journal/>), and I think we're on course to launch, as planned, early next year with a few very good accepted papers — we certainly have a number of papers in the pipeline that look promising to me. Of course, we'd love to have more.

Secondly, a very interesting initiative has recently been started by Martin Eve, called the Open Library of Humanities (<https://www.openlibhums.org>). The rough idea is that they provide a platform for humanities journals that are free to read online and free for authors (or, as some people like to say, are Diamond OA journals). Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this initiative is that it is funded by a consortium of libraries. Librarians are the people who feel the pain of ridiculous subscription prices, so they have great goodwill towards people who are trying to build new and cheaper publication models. I think there is no reason that the sciences couldn't do something similar — in fact, it should be even easier to find money.

The OLH is actively encouraging existing humanities journals to move to their platform, which brings me to the third event I wanted to mention: the resignation of the editorial board of the Elsevier journal *Lingua*, which is in linguistics. The story in brief is that the editors made demands of Elsevier that were both reasonable and unreasonable: reasonable in the sense that they would be fine if we had a sane publication system, but unreasonable in the sense that it was quite obvious that Elsevier wouldn't agree to them. They wanted to become an open access journal with publication fees of \$400, way below the usual rate for an Elsevier journal. Since Elsevier owns the title, *Lingua* has now become its Greek counterpart *Glossa* — or, if you look at it Elsevier's way, an entirely new journal has been founded called *Glossa* with an editorial board that has an entirely coincidental resemblance to what was until very recently the editorial board of *Lingua*, and it just happens also that the future editorial board of *Lingua* will be disjoint from what was recently the editorial board of *Lingua*. A nice term has been coined for what *Lingua* (that is, the Elsevier version) is about to become: a zombie journal. Maybe it will go the way of another famous zombie journal, *Topology*, the soul of which entered a new body called the *Journal of Topology*, and which staggered on for a couple of years before being put out of its misery. Here is [an article about the \*Lingua\* story](https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2015/11/02/editors-and-editorial-board-quit-top-linguistics-journal-protest-subscription-fees) (<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2015/11/02/editors-and-editorial-board-quit-top-linguistics-journal-protest-subscription-fees>), which includes some priceless quotes from the managing editor. And here is [Elsevier's response](https://www.elsevier.com/connect/addressing-the-resignation-of-the-lingua-editorial-board) (<https://www.elsevier.com/connect/addressing-the-resignation-of-the-lingua-editorial-board>), which is as facepalmish as usual. For example, at one point they say the following, which needs no comment from me.

Lingua is a hybrid open access journal which means that every author who wants to publish open access (i.e., free-of-charge for the reader), can do so. However, we have observed little uptake of the open access option in Lingua or elsewhere in linguistics at price points that would be economically viable.

The Open Library of Humanities will be helping to support Glossa.

Lastly, there is a story brewing at the LMS, which made the decision to close one of its journals, the LMS Journal of Computation and Mathematics (<https://www.lms.ac.uk/publications/jcm>), which has been going since 1998. Somebody with a paper submitted to the journal told me that he received an email saying the following.

Dear [TITLE LAST-NAME],

I am writing with news that may have a bearing on your consideration of publishing your article in the LMS JCM, '[TITLE OF THE PAPER]', by [FIRST-NAME LAST-NAME]

As you may be aware, the LMS Journal of Computation and Mathematics has been running for some years as a 'free' journal and the costs of publishing the journal have been borne by the London Mathematical Society. From the outset, it was intended that the journal should progress to at least break even and, for a few years, it ran as a subscription journal but did not manage to acquire sufficient support from libraries to cover the costs of subscription management. Over the last few years, we have been considering how to best get the journal to a satisfactory and successful state and, last Friday, the LMS Council (whose members are the Officers and Trustees of the London Mathematical Society) considered the LMS Publications Committee's proposal for the JCM, which included moving the journal to a gold open access model.

However, the LMS Council did not accept the proposal, and decided instead that the journal should be closed, one reason being that it felt the move to a gold open access model would likely lead to a slow decline that could be more damaging to its reputation. Council felt that the general area of computation and mathematics was one that the Society should, in the long run, continue to be present in, but thought that there were probably better ways to use its resources in this direction. Of course the Society will continue to make the papers already published available in perpetuity.

While we are happy to continue the process of publication of your paper, we are giving all authors yet to be published the opportunity to withdraw their papers. We will continue to publish any papers still in the pipeline providing you are willing to continue.

If you wish to withdraw your paper, please let us know and we will do this on your behalf. If you do not wish to withdraw your paper, no further action is necessary on your part.

Not too surprisingly, this has annoyed a lot of people. The following letter, with many signatures, has been sent to the LMS Council to urge them to reverse the decision.

In accordance with Statute 19 of the LMS Charter and Statutes, we, members of the LMS, make a requisition to convene a Special General Meeting of the Society; the object of the meeting shall be the reversal of the LMS Council's decision to close down The LMS Journal of Computation and Mathematics.

The Council's decision to close the Journal seems to conflict with the public benefit statement of the Trustees' Annual Report. Moreover, closing The LMS Journal of Computation and Mathematics may be at odds with the charitable aims of the LMS as spelled out in its Charter. Indeed, Article 3 of the Charter says:

"The objects for which the Society is incorporated shall be: [...]

(vi) To \*make grants of money\* or donations in aid of mathematical investigations or \*the publication of mathematical works\* [our emphasis] or other matters or things for the purpose of promoting invention and research in mathematical science, or its applications, or in subjects connected therewith; [...]"

We trust that our requisition will be treated in line with Statute 19 of the LMS Charter and Statutes:

"19. The Council shall within twenty-eight days of the receipt of a requisition in writing of not less than twenty Members of the Society stating the objects for which the meeting is desired convene a General Meeting of the Society. If upon a requisition the Council fails to convene a Special General Meeting within twenty-eight days of a receipt of the requisition then a Special General Meeting to be held within three months of the expiration of the said period of twenty-eight days may be convened by the President or the requisitionists."

The LMS Journal of Computation and Mathematics is an electronic journal, so very cheap to run. Perhaps the LMS feels that to run a cheap journal at a small loss sets a dangerous precedent, given that it depends so heavily on the income it gets from its journals. But some sort of line has surely been crossed when a mathematical society closes down a journal that is successful mathematically on the grounds that it is insufficiently successful economically.

This entry was posted on November 10, 2015 at 10:23 pm and is filed under [Elsevier](#), [Mathematics on the internet](#), [News](#). You can follow any responses to this entry through the [RSS 2.0](#) feed. You can [leave a response](#), or [trackback](#) from your own site.

## 11 Responses to "Interesting times in academic publishing"

**Johan Rooryck Says:**

November 11, 2015 at 8:17 am | [Reply](#)

You obviously need an Open Library of Mathematics!

**gowers Says:**

November 11, 2015 at 9:14 am

Watch this space ...

And also, many thanks for commenting, and good luck with Glossa! (And I hugely enjoyed your flipping-burgers remark.)

**David Roberts Says:**

November 11, 2015 at 9:49 am | [Reply](#)  
(Commenting to subscribe to further comments)

**Mike Shulman Says:**

November 11, 2015 at 6:37 pm

(Why doesn't wordpress have a button that lets you subscribe to comments on a post without polluting the comment thread?)

**Richard Baron Says:**

November 11, 2015 at 7:00 pm

There is an option to get an RSS feed (just above the start of the comments section) – although that depends on the person wishing to use it having an appropriate browser or other software.

**Mike Shulman Says:**

November 11, 2015 at 7:02 pm

I'd rather not pollute my RSS reader with an extra feed for every single post that I want to subscribe to comments on.

**Richard Baron Says:**

November 11, 2015 at 11:23 am | [Reply](#)

Open access in all of its forms is clearly a very good thing (except for commercial publishers, whose concerns we should disregard, and for learned societies which depend on journal income, whose concerns we should take seriously). But I wonder whether there is thinking to be done (it may have been done) about the significance of the differences between:

1. One big repository, like the arXiv
2. A repository plus overlay journals (like Discrete Analysis)
3. Journals that retain their own identities and publish their own papers (like the Open Library of Humanities journals)

1 alone would be easiest. It might also promote standardization of citation indexing, of metadata, and of all the other tools that help people to find what they need. But 2 and 3 would both assemble papers in ways that researchers found useful, and allow the identity of each journal and a certain esprit de corps of those who worked on it to develop. These effects are in turn likely to be stronger with 3 than with 2. On the other hand, 2 would allow more cross-category journals to flourish. As you commented in September, "discrete analysis" has an oxymoronic feel, but when you look into it, it is a cross-category area of work that it is very worthwhile to identify.

I don't mean there should be any centrally dictated choice between the options. Central direction tends to devour effort for no benefit. But it would be nice to have an idea of how the corpus of knowledge might be affected.

Given that there are several different ways to manage the publication of material, including different ways to format material (a standard LaTeX .sty file for a journal might, for example, be a great labour-saving device), different ways to manage the refereeing and publishing processes, and different ways to make it easy to find work, it would surely be a good idea for journals and repositories to be open-access with all their methods and software, so that other journals could borrow whatever would work for them.

Finally, on a point of detail, could all these new electronic journals please adopt PDF formats that would make it easy to read papers on screen? My main bugbear is wide lines: full-width A4 is too wide. There is a reason why books traditionally limited themselves to 60 or 70 characters per line. And double-column pages are not the answer, both because the column you are not reading is distracting and because on screen, they require scrolling down and then back up again. In

electronic publication, the total number of pages really does not matter. Single reasonably narrow columns should therefore be used.

**Gil Kalai Says:**

November 12, 2015 at 12:01 pm

Dear Richard, if there is one thing you learn after a few decades as a mathematician is that appearances of the word “clearly,” often refers to wrong or at least very problematic statements

**Richard Baron Says:**

November 12, 2015 at 12:18 pm

Dear Gil, if we may gently spar with words, “often” is often used to convey a hint of “on the majority of occasions”, without taking the risk of asserting that something is so on the majority of occasions. But I accept that it may be clear that  $p$ , without its being the case that  $p$ , and also that I should not have presumed to claim that the goodness of open access was clear to others. So I retreat to “It is clear to me that open access is a very good thing”, and allow that I might one day change that view, but I cannot currently think of anything that might encourage me to change my view.

**Gil Kalai Says:**

November 12, 2015 at 6:23 pm

haa you are right about “often”. On the issue itself, I like open access and certainly don’t mind experimenting with it. I also take seriously both learned societies and professional publishers. In any case, it will be interesting to see how and how quickly things will develop...

**Robert A. Wilson Says:**

November 13, 2015 at 10:57 am | [Reply](#)

I am one those authors who received the email from the LMS JCM quoted above. My paper was published in vol 16 last week. What puzzles me most about the decision of the LMS Council is its timing. The UK Government and research councils are making a big thing about open access to research data, and this is the time the LMS chooses to close down the only journal it has which offers open access to research data! One would have expected the LMS rather to capitalise on its competitive advantage, gained from being first in the field, rather than throw it away. Commercial publishers such as de Gruyter are now starting up new journals offering (admittedly gold) open access to research data. Others will surely follow.

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