



Five Reasons Why Publishing Science for Profit Will Endure

White Paper



Simba
Information

Introduction

Newspapers, magazines, directories, books, music, network television, films — the list of mass media channels beaten into submission by the advent information superhighway is long and sad.

These industries are mere shadows of what they once were, but one of the great ironies of the digital revolution is that the relatively staid business of academic journal publishing continues to roll along with stable growth and healthy profits.

In 1995, Forbes magazine predicted that Elsevier, the largest publisher of scientific journals, would be “the internet’s first victim”. Twenty years later the Financial Times has dubbed Elsevier “the business the internet could not kill.”

It’s not for lack of trying. Doom and gloom predictions were predicated on the idea that instant digital distribution would enable research scientists to share their work for free. The idea eventually coalesced into a movement known as open access, which is the subject of Simba Information’s latest report, *Open Access Journal Publishing 2018-2022*.

Open access first took the form of repositories that archived the non-published drafts of research papers in a given field or at a university. That was followed by the emergence of open access journals that would collect a fee and make the article available online free to all.

This grass roots open access was a threat, but participation in these outlets was low and scattered. In response, the largest research funding bodies upped the ante and began mandating that the research they bankrolled would be made available to all via open access. Surely this was the beginning of end? No. Open access submissions grew, but so did article processing charges and commercial publishers began buying open access publishers and launching hybrid models that would allow them to accept and publish OA at almost any journal.

The open access movement, facing the reality that commercial journal publishers were still controlling the market, went further to organize a boycott of Elsevier, where editors were encouraged to resign in protest, and authors and reviewers were to steer clear of the STM market leader.

Recently, universities and library consortia have also pushed back at the negotiating table by cancelling large subscription packages unless further concessions are given on price and open access.

SPARC, an advocacy group that promotes open access, has tracked subscription cancelations. Some high profile examples include Florida State University’s plan to drop its Elsevier package next year and university systems in France dropping their Springer Nature package. Elsevier and the German university system are still at an impasse, though access has been maintained.

Yet, even with this stiff opposition to its basic business model from the community that creates and ultimately uses its content, Elsevier, Springer Nature, John Wiley & Sons and Informa continue to endure. Here are five reasons why.

Big Deals Are Actually a Good Deal

Mass cancellations of large subscription packages could destroy publishers, but nothing like that has taken place thus far. Most libraries are out to find sustainable agreements with publishers, because the idea of losing a large journal collection creates hardship for librarians who have to scramble to find new ways of helping patrons find alternative access.

Florida State, for example, will now offer access to content that is not subscribed to for faculty and graduate students at a cost of around \$30 to the library, but will encourage them to access materials through the slower interlibrary loan system as much as possible. Undergraduate students will only have the option to go the slower (cheaper) route.

Some libraries seek to cancel their big deal and choose to subscribe only to the titles the institution needs the most, only to find little to no cost savings. Brock University in Ontario, for example, canceled its big deal with Wiley in 2015, only to return a year later for the same price. The institution looked into purchasing back just the most essential titles from Wiley, and found “there was no way to do it for less than we were paying for the big deal.”

The survival of many journals from smaller publishers like scholarly societies depends on their inclusion in big deals. Any mass cancellation scenario would see many of these journals shutter, further consolidating the journals market around the most prestigious titles.

Prestige Matters

Which brings us to the No. 2 reason scholarly journal publishers endure: prestige matters. Every university has a list of titles it considers to be the most prestigious in its field. These journals reject far more science than they accept. Having your work published there automatically means that it has risen to a level that few others attain. As a result, academics establish their credentials by publishing in these journals, and universities grant tenure and promotion for the same. Various institutions even pay their professors a bonus for publishing in such select journals.

As long as universities make decisions about tenor and advancement based on where a faculty member publishes, commercial publishers will continue to be able to charge a premium for demonstrated impact or prestige. Publishers worked to acquire control of the most prestigious titles years ago and are laser focused on building and maintain impact factors (a measure of how often articles in a given journal are cited by other authors) across their portfolios.

Boycotts Are Largely Symbolic

Efforts to mobilize against a publisher, such as British mathematician Timothy Gowers' 2012 mass boycott of Elsevier over its pricing policies, have been largely symbolic.

Yes, more than 15,000 academic signed a petition stating that they would snub the Elsevier journals that failed to “radically change how they operate”. The protest brought plenty of bad publicity, but failed to gain enough support to hurt the company in a way that would have triggered the desired change. The flow of article submissions continued to swell, editors and reviewers were quickly replaced without any perceived loss of quality at the journals, sales and profits rolled on.

Academics know that choosing to boycott publication in high impact journals will hurt their careers advancement before it hurts Elsevier.

Preprint Archiving Is Not Universal

Issues of prestige and competitiveness among researchers have kept the simplest form of open access from proliferating. The idea that all scientists would just use the internet to share their work for free never materialized.

Preprint servers have been around since the early 1990s, but the results have been mixed. Researchers in some fields think nothing of sharing their draft papers in an open archive, but there are many others who will not. The reasons why range from norms within the field (the traditions passed on by colleagues and teachers), the overall level of competitiveness in the field, and the potential for commercialization of the new results.

Harvard University's Laboratory for Innovation Science recently surveyed more than 7,000 working research scientists from nine different major fields. The researchers found that social scientists, mathematicians, biological scientists and those working in agriculture have the highest disclosure rates, with around 75% sharing the results of work before final publication. The figure for physical scientists is slightly less, at 67%. Other fields like computer science (40%) and engineering (55%) reported lower levels.

At these levels of participation, preprint servers can work to supplement the scientific record, but they are incomplete. Even in fields where preprint sharing rates are high, there is still widespread emphasis on the version of record.

Publishing Quality Science Is Difficult and Expensive


The most recent threat is emerging from universities launching their own open access platforms. In May, the London School of Economics & Political Science became the latest university to launch its own open-access publishing platform. Researchers are invited to

start their own open-access journals on the LSE platform, submit a book proposal or explore other styles of academic publication. It follows a similar move made in January by University College London when it launched a competitive open-access megajournal.

The University of California Press has operated a successful broad journal, Collabra - now Collabra: Psychology - since 2015. Several research funders have also established their own open-access platforms, including the Wellcome Trust's Wellcome Open Research, launched in October 2016.

This model is working in specific fields or with targeted audiences, but it's not likely that we will see every institution accept the challenge of setting up its own open access publishing system. Publishing quality science is difficult and expensive. It takes many talented people to launch a journal, find the right articles, vet them, and build a reputation and an impact factor over time.

Publishing a journal article is only the baseline for what successful publishers need to do. The next line of demarcation is being able to support the journals with research tools. This requires investment, experimentation and the acceptance of high levels of risk that universities, research funding bodies and academic societies may not be able to stomach.



In today's global market, it's more important than ever to understand the changing dynamics of scholarly and professional publishing. Rely on Simba Information's [Open Access Journal Publishing 2018-2022](#) to build your growth plan for this year and beyond.



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