

It's time for academics to take back control of research journals

The evolution into a highly-profitable industry was never planned. Academics must make the case for lower-cost journals



Academic publishing originated as a vehicle for communication for the gentlemen scholars. Photograph: David Levene for the Guardian

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“Publish or perish” has long been the mantra of academics seeking to make a success of their research career. Reputations are built on the ability to communicate something new to the world. Increasingly, however, they are determined by numbers, not by words, as universities are caught in a tangle of management targets composed of academic journal impact factors, university rankings and scores in the government’s research excellence framework.

The chase for metricised success has been further exacerbated by the takeover of scholarly publishing by profit-seeking commercial companies, which pose as partners but no longer seem properly in tune with academia. Evidence of the growing divergence between academic and commercial interests is visible in the secrecy around negotiations on subscription and open access charges. It's also clear from the popularity among academics of the controversial site Sci-Hub, which has made over 60m research articles freely available on the internet. Over-worked researchers could be forgiven for thinking that the time-honoured mantra has morphed to “publish, and perish anyway”.

From gentlemen scholars to the marketplace

But it was not always this way. A new report I co-wrote with Dr Aileen Fyfe and colleagues, *Untangling Academic Publishing: A history of the relationship between commercial interests, academic prestige and the circulation of research*, traces the origins of academic publishing to the gentlemen scholars who ran the first learned societies. These institutions often struggled financially and were primarily vehicles for communication.

The study then charts the rapid growth that followed the second world war, a phase in which the synergism between the demands of an increasingly professionalised academy and the capabilities of private publishing companies enabled the latter to establish a dominant presence in the marketplace.

The report shows how far we have strayed from the core principles of science first identified by Robert Merton in 1942: universalism, disinterestedness, organised scepticism and - most notably and perhaps most surprisingly - communism. The ideals of communism may have faded politically and economically through the 20th century - Merton later preferred the term “communalism” - but the belief in the “essentially cooperative and cumulative quality of scientific achievement” lives on.

Those ideals preserve the widespread notion that scholarly information should be shared freely. This is not to say that it should be shared for free - it has never meant that, except at a time when scholarly communication consisted solely of letters exchanged between gentlemen of science - but cost remains an issue. Profit margins well in excess of 30% earned by the likes of Elsevier and Springer Nature stick in the craw, particularly since they depend to a large extent on labour that these large publishing companies don't pay for.

It is curious, at a time when the Conservative and Labour parties are arguing about who can intervene most effectively in the energy market to protect the consumer, that no UK government has ventured to demand value for money from academic publishing, despite its heavy dependence on public financing, since much published research originates in universities and research institutes funded by government and charities.

The digital revolution in academia

And although digital technology and the internet have created a new terrain in which the ideals of open access have begun to germinate, they have yet to produce a cost-effective and reliable harvest of accessible knowledge. The acquisition by private publishing companies of peer review processes that had previously been the preserve of scholarly societies has combined with the increased dependence of individual academics on where, rather than what, they publish to control the digital revolution in scholarly publishing. This has prevented the full realisation of its promise to make publishing faster and cheaper.

But we can take heart from the innovations of new publishers and startups that are, if not yet revolutionising publishing, nevertheless driving a significant phase of evolution. The rise of mega-journals and preprint servers, coupled with moves to enhance data-sharing, are helping researchers to rediscover that sharing information should be the primary role of research publications. They are also helping to address concerns about the reliability and reproducibility of the scientific record that are the misshapen produce of a communications ecosystem in which publishing and prestige have been yoked together too crudely. But we still have some way to travel.

History reminds us of our values. It can be muffled by the noise of the day-to-day busyness that obscures our ideals and our greater purpose. By reminding researchers of their fealty to disciplinary communities and of their duties to the public purse, we can clarify the vision of the academic community. The report ends with a recommendation not just for researchers, but for other major stakeholders - principally government, funders, universities and learned societies - to look back at the winding road that has brought us to this unexpected present. It's time to take back control so that we might yet arrive at the destination we had in mind at the start.

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