

CAN OPEN ACCESS CREATE A SOUND SCHOLARLY PUBLISHING MARKET?

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It is well known that the traditional subscription-based model for scholarly publishing has created an unhealthy and partly invisible market due to the way journal subscriptions are managed by the university libraries. Researchers that read the journals are usually not aware of the costs of the subscriptions managed by the university library. This means that they cannot judge the value of being able to access the content of the journal in relation to the price of the subscription. Since the event of the Internet, the online subscriptions are so transparent that many scholars even believe that the journals are free to read on the Internet, and therefore get surprised when they try to read the journals from outside of campus and find themselves prohibited to reach the content and learn that the yearly subscription of the journal of their choice can cost as much as a small sized car.

Today, when open access is reforming the landscape of scholarly publishing, seems to be the right time not to redo the mistake of the subscription management in hiding the costs from the researcher. Instead, we should attempt to create a more open market where the vendor – the publisher – meets the actual customer of the services – the researcher – so the customer can evaluate the publishing service in relation to its cost. In the previous issue of ScieCom Info, Leif Longva presents an interesting idea: Why not apply a tendering process to purchase publishing services for open access articles?¹ Longva is rightly arguing that if we start to create block funds to cover the article processing charges (APC's) requested for open access (OA) publishing, we risk to create a situation similar to institution-wide subscriptions in that it “holds no incentive for the buyer of OA publishing (the authors of research papers) to shop around for best value for money”. Longva is therefore suggesting a tendering model for the publishing in open access journals, following the same procedure as when for instance equipment and computer systems are acquired by the universities.

The SCOAP³ initiative of CERN is in the process of

doing just this. Its goal is to convert subscription funds to a sort of tendered peer-review service for the 7000 yearly articles within the field of high-energy physics (HEP). Open access publishing has been negotiated for 12 core HEP journals from 7 publishers, covering about 90 per cent of HEP publishing. The SCOAP³ initiative has a yearly budget of 10 M€ and is managed by CERN as a strong central body. But the scope is limited to HEP articles only, and we still have to see if CERN will succeed with its mission. If CERN were to succeed, indeed the SCOAP³ could act as a catalyst for a change of the scholarly publishing system, but extending the model beyond the HEP field would presumably be rather difficult and take tremendous amounts of work and resources.

The basic weakness of Longva's reasoning is that the journal market is not an open and competitive market with comparable products in the same way as the markets for instance scientific equipment and computer systems. Journal titles are often said each to be a “mini-monopoly” of its own, since the impact and importance of the journal in the scientific field it focuses on often does not have any real competition. Journal production is in fact so non-sensitive to competition and price fluctuations that it often is considered to be a prototype for an “inelastic business environment”.

If you for instance do your research on certain species of the flora or fauna of Amazonas, and there is a journal with an editorial board and an audience for exactly that topic, why should you bother publish elsewhere, even if you found an OA journal with a lower APC? The same kind of reasoning may be applied to the impact factors of journals in broader fields of research. If there are several journals to choose among within the field, the journal with the highest prestige will be the preferred choice for the researcher and the cost-sensitivity in the choice where to publish will be fairly low, due to the way scientific achievements are judged and careers are built. So if each journal with its topic, audience and impact factor is a sort of monopoly; how do we change the

¹ Longva, 2013

situation to create a more competitive market? Our suggestion is that we take a step further into Internet-based publishing and abandon the packaging of articles into journals, issues and volumes. There is no reason to bundle articles in issues linked to journal titles when the publishing is not distributed in paperbound form anymore.

The journal and its issues are artefacts of paper-based publishing and distribution of scientific findings. In a true Internet-based publishing environment each article can stand by itself and be marketed via communities and social media and retrieved via the big search engines. We are indeed beginning to see this happening with the emergence of the so-called mega-journals as PLoS ONE, PeerJ, eLIFE, and SAGE Open.

With mega journals the focus of the publisher services is shifting from the reader to the author. A true mega-journal does not do any service of selection to the reader; the mega-journal just serves the publishing researcher with a peer review service and a quality stamp.

The subscription-based journal market was built on an old business model for selling *products to readers*, i.e. journals with selected and bundled articles, whereas the new open access publishing is more of a business model for selling *services to authors* in the form of peer-review and quality assurance.

The conclusion of this line of thought will be that a healthy publication market cannot be created as long as we are dependent on prestigious titles and niched journals giving services to readers. We have to move beyond journal publishing and free the article from the fetters of the journal to get a sound scholarly publishing market. Open access publishing is a first important step on this path, but only a first step. To get further towards a healthy publishing market with proper price elasticity for the review service, the service to the author has to be disconnected from the service to the reader and the related journal title. Only when articles are reviewed and published in their own right can we get a market where the costs of APC's can be valued against the quality of the peer review service given by the publisher.

References

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Biographies

Ulf Kronman is a university physicist that has pursued doctoral studies in musical acoustics at the KTH Royal Institute of Technology. He has been engaged as a bibliometric analyst at the Karolinska Institutet, The KTH Royal Institute of Technology, and the Swedish Research Council. He is presently working as the coordinator of the programme OpenAccess.se at the National Library of Sweden.

Anna Lundén is a librarian with a past from the commercial side of the business. She is presently working as the coordinator of the BIBSAM Consortium at the National Library of Sweden, negotiating agreements with all major scholarly publishers.