

# The politics of e-access and e-funding in the library environment

Based on a paper given at the UKSG seminar 'A day in the life of an e-journal librarian', London, 7 July 2004

The domain of e-journals well exemplifies 'competition for power and leadership between competing interests or stakeholder groups'. As a stakeholder with multiple perspectives: library manager, academic, author, peer reviewer and researcher and editorial board member, the author considers the conflicting arguments regarding the desirability of the open access model. Recent reports are challenging the received wisdom that the open access model is unsustainable. While allies and opponents are lining up on opposing sides of the battle lines there is hope of reconciliation in the vision of a mixed economy proffered by Delamothe and Smith. The resulting consumer choice is likely to be between the relentless pursuit of ever-changing open access publishing fashions or the predictable security offered by a long-term relationship with a traditional publisher.



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## Introduction

At a time when major Western governments are criticized for failing to observe due process many no doubt agree with the spurious derivation of the term 'politics' from the Greek 'poli' meaning 'many' and 'tics' meaning 'ugly, bloodsucking parasites'! However, this article uses 'politics' in its original meaning – that is 'competition for power and leadership between competing interests or groups'. Even here it is tempting to embrace *The Devil's Dictionary* definition: 'A strife of interests masquerading as a contest of principles'<sup>1</sup>.

One reason why the topic of e-journals evokes such a strong reaction, and indeed an underlying explanation for the recent interest of a Parliamentary Committee<sup>2</sup>, is that all the cards appear to be held by one player. As a stakeholder with many interests in the topic: a library manager, an academic senior lecturer, a regular author, a committee member of a professional interest group, a research lead and the member of several editorial boards, I feel a compelling need to throw my own two pennyworth into the kitty. In generating further heat I shall leave the more

edifying task of generating light to contributors more qualified than I am.

First, I shall present a modern fable of conflict and separation, hopefully ending with a note of reconciliation, keeping the identities of participants as antithetical to real players as possible and thus minimizing embarrassment!

## A modern fable

Honest John Poorlywhite, entrepreneur, approaches you with a novel idea: "Why don't YOU use YOUR intellectual capacity to invent a new confectionery?" He suggests that YOU write a business case for it. "That is all very well, Honest John, but what will *you* do?", you ask. He continues: "YOU need to get a funder to support YOU in production. YOU and YOUR colleagues will spend two years developing and improving this new product – let us call it a 'serial bar'". Again you ask: "But Honest John, what will *you* do?"

“Then YOU send YOUR serial bar to another colleague who will taste it and ensure it is of sufficient quality. YOUR colleague will send it to two more independent colleagues of YOURS who will also taste it and write a brief report about it. They will suggest how it might be improved and, of course, YOU will improve it. Not only will YOU perfect the serial bar but YOU will provide all the ingredients and labour for a marketable batch using YOUR employer’s time and YOUR funder’s money”. “Yes but Honest John, what will you do?”

Honest John will put YOUR serial bar in his cake shop window. He will let his customers *view* YOUR serial bar. They will even be able to ‘*pay per sniff*’. However if they actually want to *eat* it they will have to buy all the other cakes in the shop. Sometimes they will have to buy a *bundle* of all the cakes from an *arbitrary selection* of all Honest John’s other shops too!

So who can eat your serial bar?

- Your funder can only eat it if he buys all the other cakes in the shop.
- Members of your organization can only eat it if they do so in a closed room.
- Your colleagues are given a small batch to give away one at a time
- and you can only give one away to someone if they come to your private address and ring your doorbell.

And the moral of this fable is: ‘Only journal publishers manage to have their cake and eat it too!’

### The bottom line

Our modern fable captures, at least in some measure, the considerable frustration that we in the academic community feel at supplying our intellectual property and our voluntary time as peer reviewers and editors of serials only to find that, if our employers want to access our work, they must pay again for the privilege. It also explains why many academic authors are gravitating towards an open access model.

By ‘open access’ many of us advocate the definition promoted in the position statement by the Wellcome Trust in support of open access publishing. It means access by which:

“The author(s) and copyright holder(s) grant(s) to all users a *free, irrevocable,*

*worldwide, perpetual (for the lifetime of the applicable copyright) right of access to, and a licence to copy, use, distribute, perform and display the work publicly and to make and distribute derivative works in any digital medium for any reasonable purpose, subject to proper attribution of authorship, as well as the right to make small numbers of printed copies for their personal use.”<sup>3</sup>*

Furthermore it allows that:

*A complete version [and all supplemental materials, including a copy of the permission] ... is deposited immediately upon initial publication in at least one online repository ...<sup>3</sup>*

### What are the resource implications?

In attending a previous event run by the UK Serials Group almost three years ago my arguments, as rehearsed above, were typically headed off by the confident assertion that such a model is ‘unworkable’. As an advocate of evidence-based information practice, and no less of evidence-based publishing, I have bided my time in the knowledge that “absence of evidence is not evidence of absence”. Now the evidence is beginning to be assembled. A report published last year by BNP Paribas, comparing current annual spending on scientific journals at Cornell, Yale and Princeton Universities with estimated spending under open access, concluded:

“... the global scientific research community could save more than 40% in costs by switching entirely to an open access model ... Assuming current published article numbers of 3,900, 3,600 and 2,500 respectively, we estimate the corresponding cost savings at 20%, 35% and 40%.”<sup>4</sup>

### A stakeholder analysis

As a Library Manager of a small research collection of journals spending £20,000 per year, a library user represented on my University Library Committee, an author of more than 40 peer-reviewed articles, a researcher and referee on NHS research programmes, teacher on two MSc courses and an Editorial Team member for *Health*

	Low trust	High trust
High agreement	Commercial open access publishers	Authors/Editors
		Researchers
		Teaching staff
		Not-for-profit open access
		Publishers
		Academic institutions
		Students
Low agreement	Traditional publishers	Subscription agents
		RAE panels

Table 1. Stakeholder analysis

*Information & Libraries Journal*, I have compiled a rough and ready stakeholder analysis (Table 1).

From a librarian's perspective we shall most likely continue to endure the now familiar challenges of the current situation for some time to come, namely:

- continuing journal inflation
- declining budgets
- confusing pricing models
- cancellations
- getting and keeping online access
- educating academics about the perils of the current model
- making hard choices between serial and monograph purchases.

Meanwhile an editor's objectives are captured concisely in the BNP Paribas report:

"To secure a wide base of authors, peer-reviewed open-access journals must *prove that they can offer similar or better visibility than their subscription-driven counterparts* ... they will need to generate identical or higher impact factors ... more a question of time than a structural issue ..."<sup>4</sup>

For an author, there are beguiling implications of the open access model:

"Under open access, authors retain the copyrights, thereby breaking the publishers' monopoly ... The result would be competition for manuscripts – quite the opposite of the current model where manuscripts compete for space in journals ... publishers will have to work harder to attract authors' manuscripts and generate revenues. ... authors would be likely to consider three key factors in their

decision to publish: the speed of publication, the quality of the journal and the upfront charge."<sup>4</sup>

For academic institutions, too, open access has obvious attractions:

"Under open access ... the cost of publishing STM articles could be lowered for universities and research institutions ... [*based on the critical assumption that submission costs per article would be less than the subscription revenues per article implied by the current model*]."<sup>4</sup>

While it is naïve to expect commercial open access publishers to be less motivated by personal interest than traditional publishers, at least for the moment our objectives in wanting to challenge the *status quo* seem to coincide. We have more trust of not-for-profit concerns where financial considerations are less powerful a driver. Established partners such as subscription agents may be waiting to see which way the prevailing economic climate blows but have demonstrated sufficient past resilience for us to believe that their future is assured. Whether their role will change again as it did with the move from print to electronic subscriptions remains to be seen.

A loose cannon for the academic community is the Research Assessment Exercise. The first open access journals are starting to acquire impact factors:

"Open access journals published by BioMed Central have ... impact factors for 2003 that compare well with equivalent subscription titles. The high impact factors, all for journals that are just a few years old, show that by making quality articles much more widely visible, open access to research literature achieves impact fast."<sup>5</sup>

At the same time the oft-quoted assertion that 'you get what you pay for' is challenged by the BNP Paribas report:

"The correlation between impact factors and pricing for a sample of Reed Elsevier's STM journals shows a correlation coefficient of only 0.1 ... higher impact factors do not necessarily warrant higher prices."<sup>5</sup>

However, we do not know how individual assessment panels will view the credibility of open access journals. Indeed the demographics of panel membership suggest that there is some systemic inertia with established researchers continuing their allegiance to the traditional publishing format.

### What does 'author pays' really mean?

The model of open access receiving most attention is the 'author pays' model. This is, in fact, a misnomer as the costs of publishing would typically be borne by funder, sponsor or the author's institution.<sup>6</sup> Currently the Health Service and academic communities both enjoy a form of open access where fees for submission are picked up centrally. Journal publishers have taken advantage of the resultant lack of clarity over what 'author pays' means, to portray alarmist scenarios of neutered research dissemination. Again evidence is emerging to indicate what an e-funding scenario might look like:

"£1,100 payment by authors would allow a workable, high quality, and sustainable publishing model ... compared with an average cost of £1,500 per paper for papers published under the traditional system."<sup>7</sup>

Armed with such evidence the Wellcome Trust, in its position statement, affirms that the Trust:

- "welcomes the establishment of free-access, high quality scientific journals available via the Internet
- will encourage and support formation of such journals and/or free-access repositories for research papers
- will meet ... publication charges by permitting Trust researchers to use contingency funds for this purpose

- encourages researchers to maximize the opportunities to make their results available for free and, where possible, retain their copyright ..."<sup>3</sup>

and puts down a marker that the Research Assessment Exercise would do well to mirror:

"It is the intrinsic merit of the work, and not the title of the journal in which a researcher's work is published, that should be considered in funding decisions and awarding grants."<sup>3</sup>

### The consequences of open access

What are the most likely consequences of open access? Perhaps inevitably open access journals are cited more. The Distance Learning Masters course in which I am involved already draws heavily on the electronic *BMJ*, with articles available to students wherever they are placed on the academic-service divide:

"Open access increases the chances of authors having their work read and cited by expanding the potential reader base, and ... has the potential to improve communication among scientists, as well as among the research community and the general public ..."<sup>4</sup>

Similarly we will probably see a migration of journal titles away from publishers that are commonly perceived as being 'profiteering'. Within traditional journals the article, not the journal, will become the unit of purchase. Online reading patterns will see fewer articles being read completely as readers pursue hyperlinked 'themes' running through several associated papers. Nevertheless there is a need for a realistic alternative to serendipity to foster creativity and lateral thinking. We shall also likely observe a change of role for subscription agents.

Is there hope for reconciliation? In a key editorial Delamothe and Smith, advocates of improved access, state that in the paper world, each extra copy of an article or a journal comes at a cost – for paper, print, binding, and postage.<sup>8</sup> By comparison, on the web the distribution costs are virtually zero (for *bmj.com* they amount to about 0.3 pence/article). They conclude that:

"If the fixed costs of article processing could be recovered on input to the system then the

output could be made available free to everyone who was interested.”<sup>8</sup>

Delamothe and Smith go on to recognize that “a long-term sustainable model could be a mixture of ‘author pays’ for original research articles and ‘reader pays’ for the rest”<sup>8</sup>. The logic for this is self-evident in that “authors add most ... value with original research articles (by undertaking and writing up the research), whereas the editors and publishers add most ... value with the material they write or commission”. They conclude that there is a place for all existing stakeholders as long as there is a perceptible change in the “politics” or balance of power relationships:

“A business model where journals are paid for the value they add is sustainable – and also provides an incentive for them to add more value. In contrast, a model where publishers charge for value added by others (the researchers) will be found out – as Reed Elsevier is beginning to discover”.<sup>8</sup>

### What of the future?

While prediction is a dangerous game, as librarians endowed with silicon chips, not crystal balls, we can forecast some likely consequences. We are likely to see the growth of leaner, larger publishers and a corresponding demise of the smaller publishers, a particular concern for professional organizations. Publishers will lose their flexibility and their ability to give personal attention, for example in the ‘nanny role’ afforded to help new writers. A hybrid model also challenges bibliographic control as papers become increasingly difficult to identify and thus retrieve. Concerns about a loss of scientific quality will probably be unrealized as the current system of peer review will be re-targeted. However, there could be a loss in the technical quality of published outputs as the editorial infrastructure underpinned by traditional publishers is eroded by rapid publishing. The current uncertainty about archiving responsibilities must also be resolved.

With a future that is neither ‘open access utopia’ nor ‘restrictive publisher monopoly’ a mixed economy offers an expanding prospect of consumer choice. Challenges to the current situation, whereby the publisher holds the reins, are very much to be welcomed. Nevertheless

librarians and authors will probably continue to face a perennial choice between investing time and effort in pursuing ever-changing publishing fashions and settling for the predictable security offered by a long-term relationship with a traditional publisher. The decision is ours!

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