Open access

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Summary

Open Access is great, but killing academic journals is not. Also on the internet, there is no such thing as a free lunch. Peer review, editing and keeping articles available online all cost money. And someone has to pay for that. Either through subscriptions or through article processing charges and through the hidden costs of thousands of library people and university technicians making sure that articles go and stay on line and are accessible with the latest browsers.

Keywords

open access – peer review – editing – costs – subscriptions – article processing charges

I dedicate this talk to a freelance medievalist. She has never had a paid position at an academic institution. She is about to publish her latest, and possibly her last book, on *Jean de Wavrin and his collection of chronicles of England*. She is also my mother. Dr. Livia Visser-Fuchs. She is the real scholar in the family because she studies old manuscripts. She used to have to order microfilms from all over the world. Now most of her sources are available online, which makes that part of her research much easier. Those sources are available in open access, because they are out of copyright, but even more so because the relevant library has gone to the trouble of digitising them and is ready to forego the income gained from selling the digitised versions.

We live in wonderful times, where all academics can share all their brilliant ideas, insights and articles, directly and instantly with all their colleagues worldwide. Without the need for time consuming printing and distribution

processes, and without readers having to take out hugely expensive subscriptions or go to libraries to read there or make photocopies. Therefore, academics should publish everything on the internet for free, in open access, and everybody will have access to everything, and the benefits for the academic community will be immeasurable.

Is this true? And if so, why has it not yet happened across the board?

It is true that, nowadays, anyone can put anything he or she has written on the internet for all the world to read. And far too many people do. There is an information overload. There is fake news and fake research. Many people live in bubbles where they base their opinions on huge amounts of unreliable information.

Obviously, we need quality control, verification and selection. We need peer-review and we need editing.

Traditionally, peer-review and editing is organised and financed by publishers of journals. They have a commercial interest in maintaining a high standard of quality. And the business model is subscription based. The price for the journal subscriptions are high. Therefore, it is mainly libraries that take out subscriptions. The researchers themselves go to the libraries and make photocopies. Those libraries belong to universities which employ the scholars who write the articles and who are on the editorial boards and do the actual peer review.

There has always been a tension here: universities paying for the subscriptions of journals containing the work of their own employees. They seem to pay double: they pay the salaries and they pay for the journals filled by their own people.

Since the 1990's scholars started sharing their pre-prints over the internet on platforms and in online archives.

Since 2000 academic institutions all over the world started initiatives and declarations, which

- a) require their researchers to deposit a copy of all their published articles in an open access repository. This is what is called 'green open access'.
- and
- b) encourage their researchers to publish their articles in open access journals where a suitable journal exists (and provide the support to enable that to happen). This is what is called 'golden open access'.

Obviously, this development is a threat to the traditional subscription based business model of most academic publishers. If everything is available in open access, then nobody will take out an expensive subscription. This is of course exactly the result that the university libraries wanted to achieve, but it seems to threaten the very existence of academic journal publishing.

Some publishers have been trying to ignore or boycott this development by requiring a transfer of copyright and not allowing articles to be made available in open access or only after a very long period of time. Universities started to order their employees not to publish in such journals.

But there is an additional problem here. The academic community has developed an intricate system of rating themselves and each other on the basis of the number of publications in those very journals. Citation-indexes, impact-factors and the H-index. Academics have to publish in those journals in order to get their job in the first place, to get a promotion or to get tenured and to retain their positions. Universities cannot simply order their employees not to publish in those journals as long as they retain and rely on these rating systems.

Other publishers have been more flexible and have started their own open access journals. But they have to make money to maintain a serious selection and peer review process, and therefore they introduced Article Processing Charges, or APC's. These charges vary from a few hundred to a few thousand euro's per article. In most cases these APC's will be paid for by the institutions.

And if the research budgets are in the tens or hundreds of thousands such charges are no problem. But in the humanities and in law there are no such budgets. So the costs shift from the subscriptions to the APC's and it is not clear whether the total costs for institutions will be lower.

And as long as journals are partly open access but still require a subscription the price of which has not gone down, we have the worst of both worlds: APC's and expensive subscriptions. And if institutions start cancelling subscriptions while the articles are not yet in open access, the researchers at these institutions do not have access to those articles at all.

With 'green' open access the trade-off is even more unpredictable. If articles become available in open access in so called repositories after 12 or 24 months after they have been published, is that a reason for universities and their libraries to cancel their subscription to the journal in question? That will mean that their researchers cannot access them for a year or two and that the journals will still go bust or will have to go 'golden open access' and start charging article processing charges.

The reality is that, also on the internet, there is no such thing as a free lunch.

Peer review, editing and keeping articles available online all cost money. And someone has to pay for that. Either through subscriptions or through article processing charges and through the hidden costs of thousands of library people and university technicians making sure that articles go and stay on line and are accessible with the latest browsers.

Personally, I am all in favour of open access. Because free-lance academics without university affiliation, like my mother, and academics in third world countries and anyone else with a scholarly interest but without a university affiliation can access scholarly information unimpeded. And I want all my own work in open access, sooner or later, because my students and my colleagues are more likely to find it, read it, use it and refer to it, if it is available in open access. But we have to be realistic and stay critical, both of the traditional publishers who say it is naïve and impossible and of the idealists who think it is easy, cheap and perfect.