

Starting over: applying new models that challenge existing paradigms in the scholarly publishing marketplace

Scholarly publishing has gone through turbulent times. Enormous growth in supply and expenditure has been followed – dramatically and unexpectedly – by severe contraction of budgets. The ‘creative destruction’ of the 2008 global financial crisis has produced new opportunities and forced legislators, administrators, academics and librarians to consider alternatives to traditional subscription models. This article presents a case study of one UK-based ‘gold’ publisher’s attempts to create a viable, sustainable alternative, which aims to bring the same benefits of open access publishing to the social sciences and arts & humanities as have been proven to work in STM – so, providing insights into the strategic choices of product, scope and aims, pricing, marketing, etc. By the time of publication, *Social Sciences Directory* will have published its first issue, and *Humanities Directory* will be close to following suit.

This article looks at the state of scholarly publishing and my attempts to bring about change. I will also state at the outset a degree of subjectivity and vested interest in my assessment of the situation. As the founder of a ‘gold’ OA publishing company, I believe that solutions should be delivered by the private sector, rather than heaping yet more expense on the shoulders of taxpayers. I am, however, very aware of the accusation that commercial publishers are simply latching on to changes and moving with the tide to generate new revenues.

Largely unseen by the public, scholarly publishing is nonetheless a global industry – science, technology and medical information alone has been quoted as being worth almost US\$30 billion a year¹. In the UK, the figure that is generally used for expenditure on university library resources is £200 million a year².

The year 2012 has seen some seismic upheavals in scholarly publishing and was dubbed the ‘academic spring’. In the US, the Research Works Act (RWA) proposal led to a spectacular backlash. A petition spread virally and was signed by over 10,000 academics worldwide who decided to withdraw their voluntary labour from producing work for Elsevier publications. Another petition easily raised the 25,000 names required to ask the White House to put forward legislation that would amend federal policy and require open access to taxpayer-funded research. The Wellcome Trust restated its position that all research funded by it must be openly available and future breaches would not be tolerated.

In May, the UK’s Minister of State for Universities and Science, David Willetts, gave a speech in which he called for changes to the way research is disseminated in the UK. In June 2012, the Working Group on Expanding Access to Published Research Findings, chaired by Dame Janet Finch, made recommendations for the widespread acceleration and adoption of open access publishing – in particular ‘gold’ publishing whereby research output would still be published in the same medium (journals) but the cost-recovery mechanism would be borne by the author of a paper paying a fee to submit it, rather than institutions



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258 paying subscription fees to access it. On 16 July, UK research councils announced that the Finch Report's findings should be implemented in full and it would be mandated that publicly funded research must be published in open access from 1 April 2013.

So, why has all this come about? When I began working in scholarly publishing after more than a decade in Business-to-Business and Business-to-Consumer publishing, it was a shock to discover that these appeared to be some of the norms:

- it was accepted practice that publishers paid little or nothing to their contributing authors and took away their copyright as part of the submission process
- despite the free submissions, journal and subsequently database prices were set at astronomical rates, with annual percentage increases far in excess of inflation. Cutting-edge research clearly had a perceived value, but thousands of pounds for a single journal?
- the demand to publish articles in ranked scholarly journals (which are highly selective and take a very long time to publish, but are regarded as important for both funding and academic tenure) was irreconcilable with the need to have papers published and cited by other academics as soon as possible.

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Many of the practices in scholarly publishing defied ordinary business logic, but my 'take' on it was simple: higher education and research output were seen as matters of national pride, but it appeared that no price was too high to support them. Funding worldwide rose and rose – UK investment in research and development (R&D) rose in real terms by about one third between 1991 and 2009, mostly in the period after 1998. Despite this, the UK has not kept pace with rising investment globally and its share of gross expenditure on R&D (GERD) fell from 5.30% in 1991 to 4.15% in 2008³. Whilst there was so much money sloshing around in the system – nationally and globally – there was limited resistance from librarians to paying subscription charges and signing up to 'big deals', or from academics seeking publication in/subscriptions to journals regardless of cost. Most publishers reacted by engaging in an 'arms race', churning out more and more content in the hope of capturing a bigger share of expenditure – an ALPSP survey reported that, on average, the number of journals available via libraries more than doubled between 2000 and 2009, which was largely attributable to big deals⁴. However, the global financial crisis that began in 2008 has created a mega-shock that has fundamentally changed academic funding forever. Protests about the cost of library acquisitions have gone from being about unfairness and exploitation to being about necessity – the prices being charged are unsustainable.

After the global financial crisis, I witnessed a change in university and library spending, beginning with murmurs about impending cuts; to requests for price freezes and wholesale cancellations of additional print; to colossal budget cuts and delayed payments due to difficulties in state funding. Where once I consoled myself and others that universities in general do not go bust, we were confronted with the prospect of entire states going bust and I became far less sanguine. Many of the librarians and consortia co-ordinators that I dealt with became my friends and it became difficult to look them in the eye and propose subscription price rises when they were fearful about their jobs. Also gnawing away at me was the thought that if somebody could come up with a disruptive technology or an alternative business model that addressed these problems, the effect would be profound. The analogy I kept thinking of was the impact of the iPod and iTunes on the music industry.

In the autumn of 2011, I read about what BioMed Central, Hindawi and especially PLOS ONE were doing with open access publishing in the science, technology and medicine (STM) sphere, in particular their business models based on article processing charges (APCs) and institutional fees, their objective peer review based on technical soundness as a key criterion for publication, and their consequent speed of publication and offer of universal access to the content. It was a bombshell, a revelation, and exactly the kind of disintermediation that I had been suspecting would arrive. Alternative models could be adopted that challenge

259 existing paradigms in the scholarly publishing marketplace. I soon discovered that a great deal of existing advisory material, precedents, open source software, advocacy bodies and so on already existed and could be utilized to bring about change. If it has worked in STM, I reasoned, why should it not work in other disciplines, such as social sciences and arts & humanities?

In January 2012, I set out to put my beliefs into action. A business plan was written to spell out a coherent strategy for development, growth, timings and costs. The new publication would be called *Social Sciences Directory* (www.socialsciencesdirectory.com) and it would be a monthly-updated, online-only 'mega-journal'. Conceptually, the following features and benefits have been applied to address the issues that have been spelled out above:

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- a print version has been dispensed with to remove the costs of print production and postage, as well as to provide unlimited pagination. A criticism of the very high rejection rates from the peer-review process is that it is a legacy from the past when journals had limited print capacity and had to select only a small number for publication, with the result that very good work could be rejected unnecessarily and go to waste. In a world of unlimited online space, this barrier should no longer pertain and allow a greater amount of material to be published
- as well as peer-reviewed journal articles and book chapters, *Social Sciences Directory* would publish or link to case studies, data sets, interviews, news reports, op-eds, video and audio clips, conference proceedings, presentations, annual reports and more. User behaviour is changing fast. Students and young academics working today have been brought up in the digital era and are used to doing easy, federated searches of database content, based on keywords – 84% typically begin information searches from a search engine; only 1% through a library website or an online database⁵. Two things stem from this:
 - it follows that individual journal titles and books will simply become an anachronism as searches are conducted on topics and keywords
 - researchers will use the results of their searches, which will certainly contain – but may not be exclusively – scholarly research. Much of this additional reading around the subject would add value to scholars.
- multi-disciplinary research will be facilitated by this federating of information which is, ultimately, in researchers' self interest. Now that most research is carried out online, key metrics are the usage and cost-per-download of journals. Niche academic journals often have a price tag that is inverse to their readership – the more exclusive/prestigious they are, the more highly they are priced. However, if a niche journal has such a small audience that its cost becomes unsustainable, it risks being cut.
- social media and blogging is being provided to allow discussions to take place in virtual forums, as well as for marketing purposes
- content is made freely available to all under a Creative Commons CC-BY copyright licence
- editorial control will be as light-touch as possible. An editor-in-chief and editorial board – made up of volunteers – was appointed through a selection process. This has given *Social Sciences Directory* both a rich internationality in its composition and also a broad spread of disciplinary knowledge. Referees conducting a peer review are specifically asked to ascertain that the methodology used in a submitted work has been undertaken in a way that is technically sound. Has sufficient academic rigour been applied to produce results and conclusions that are robust? If the answer is 'Yes', it will be deemed suitable for publication. This method of review is designed to remove the subjectivity from the process and rely much more on an objective opinion.

260 For all of these reasons, use of the term 'journal' to either brand or describe *Social Sciences Directory* has largely been avoided. 'Directory' has been criticized in some quarters as sounding like a reference work, although ultimately it is a moot point – the software used is Open Journal Systems and it will adhere to all of the industry standards for referencing, cataloguing, indexing and archiving, making it *de facto* a scholarly journal, and the long-term aim is to achieve high citation and ranking in the normal fashion.

One of the unintended benefits from recruiting the editorial board was the interest of an academic with a background in the arts & humanities, Dr Alison Bancroft. It was always part of my thinking to expand and create a humanities directory at a future date, once *Social Sciences Directory* was successfully launched. However, this process was accelerated and *Humanities Directory* will be launched as a sister website in the autumn of 2012.

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Pricing was an area that required particular attention. I do believe that article processing charges equalling thousands of pounds, and institutional memberships equalling tens of thousands of pounds, are still huge barriers for many academics and departments. Going back to the age-old argument that reviewers donate their time for free, but that editorial and production does incur costs (for web development and maintenance, marketing and promotion, archiving, registration with CrossRef, copy-editing, page design and so on), I wondered what would be the minimum price that could be charged. What would cover these costs but not be off-putting to potential authors or widely regarded as unreasonable, whilst allowing *Social Sciences Directory* to be financially viable on a long-term basis and without donations? The figure I decided upon was £100/US\$150/€120 per article. Alternatively, a university could take out an institutional membership, a quasi-subscription allowing unlimited submissions for a given period (usually 12 months) for £2,000/US\$3,000/€2,400.

Having worked so closely with librarians and consortia for several years, it was a key part of the strategy to embrace their well-known advocacy of open access in promoting the benefits of *Social Sciences Directory* (whilst also avoiding the researchers' complaint that, as the new 'customers', they were suddenly being spammed by publishers soliciting their papers). This would be done mainly through negotiating consortia agreements that would offer tangible benefits for consortia members. Two early models were agreed:

- in the UK, an institutional membership offer was made through Eduserv that would allow 18 months of submissions for £1,800
- in Portugal, universities that signed up for an extended free trial could submit up to 50 papers without charge.

Social Sciences Directory began life with limited budgets for promotion and marketing, so certain choices had to be made about the methods used, priorities chosen, etc. The US is a priority because it is still the engine-room of global research – the US share of GERD remained steady at about 42% over the period 1991 to 2009, meaning significant real-terms increase⁶, along with the UK and other research-intensive countries. Finally, efforts have focused on creating awareness in emerging markets and small economies, where the benefits of open access publishing will be keenly felt. My initial instinct – that many established academics, inculcated in the traditional ways of publishing papers, would prove immovable and that hope for change rested mainly with younger, early career researchers that would be more responsive to new techniques and solutions – has largely been borne out. Consortia and scholarly societies worldwide have been contacted to create awareness and ask for support. It seemed a reasonable assumption that students, young researchers and librarians are heavy consumers of social media, which meant that a good deal of awareness building could be done on a small budget. Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn have all proved useful to reach these audiences. Blogging and listservs have also played a part, giving good opportunities to express opinions and create engagement. Press releases were circulated for key announcements, leading to coverage in trade press such as *Information World Review*. On reading an article by Dame Janet Finch in *The Times* about her working

261 group's findings, I replied with a letter to the Editor that was published the following day. I have worked to forge links with relevant bodies such as the Academy of Social Sciences (AcSS), the Association of Librarians and Information Professionals in the Social Sciences (ALISS), the National Acquisitions Group (NAG) and so on. Using all of these media, a regular communications flow has been kept up, to

- create understanding of the product offering, particularly as open access has previously gained little ground in the social sciences or humanities
- argue the case for open access
- create interest in consortia proposals
- solicit calls for papers.

“Librarians have a key role to play in bringing about positive, equitable change.”

In conclusion, it has been demonstrated that there has been a sudden and accelerating rush in the direction of open access publishing, that I recognized early and have set out to facilitate. Trying to reform such an enormous, monolithic body as global academia is a huge task – particularly so for a small, start-up business operating on very small margins and largely staffed by an enthusiastic group of willing volunteers. Opposition to the practicalities of reform – and even the need for reform – is widespread and will take time to overcome. (A 2011 survey found that 63.8% of UK university respondents thought access levels to journals were 'good' or 'excellent'; 71.8% that journal access is easier than five years earlier; and c26% that the answer to any access issues was simply to increase library budgets.) However, I remain resolute in my belief that change must come about and that it will be a process that is partly voluntary but also heavily corralled. Librarians have a key role to play in bringing about positive, equitable change.

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