

You say you want a revolution! Could it finally be time to rethink scholarly communications?

This opinion piece argues that the time finally seems right to truly embrace innovation in the academic publishing market and review the role of large commercial publishers therein. It argues that many innovations already exist but have thus far failed to truly disrupt the status quo due to the omission of due consideration being given to the broader role of scholarly communications within the wider research ecosystem and an inability to compete with the least tangible of publishers' value propositions: prestige. It does this by conducting two analyses: a stakeholder power/impact matrix to ascertain all who have an interest in the scholarly publishing process and their primary motivations, and an exploration of the value conferred by commercial publishers to the publication process. It concludes with a call to bring together all impacted stakeholders to issue a declaration on fair publishing and a commitment to change. A collective approach, united by a common purpose, can lead to real change for a better, more equitable future.

Keywords

scholarly publishing; open access; library

Revolution: introduction

The recent conclusion of the Springer Nature negotiations for a new read and publish agreement to provide both open access publishing and access to paywalled content across the Springer Nature portfolio for UK based higher education (HE) establishments should have been a big success story. By collectively bargaining for a new deal, negotiators were able to successfully advocate for greater concessions from this publisher than had ever been seen before.

Yet the celebrations have been surprisingly muted. There seems to be a general feeling that the deal left a lot to be desired (e.g. there are still concerns expressed regarding the lack of better discount for article processing charges [APCs]), and was therefore only just good enough. For example, there are already concerns about what comes after these kinds of deals, and there is call for a vision as to what it is we are supposed to be transitioning to.

This has coincided with several other key developments in the scholarly communications world that have led us at Lancaster University to pause and reflect on the current market and indulge in thinking about how we could bring about meaningful change.

Help!: current challenges

This article follows, and was indeed inspired by, the recent *Insights* article from Ma, Buggle and O'Neill,¹ which examines the need for bibliodiversity within the scholarly publishing arena and provides an excellent assessment of the current inequalities perpetuated by the existing system, summarized by the pertinent and damning statement, 'scholarly publishing is largely market-driven rather than scholar-led'.



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2 This was indicated prominently by the *Guardian* newspaper which, in a 2017 article,² described Elsevier's profit margin, at 36%, as significantly higher than other digital giants, such as Google or Apple, as well as highlighting the fundamental inequalities of the existing system. The argument is that universities typically provide the major element of value in the publishing process, i.e. the knowledge generated by researchers and academics, and yet not only do they not recoup any of the value generated from it, even worse they can often end up paying for content that their own academic colleagues created.

That article was written six years ago, yet little has materially changed since then. Publishers are still extracting huge profits from work undertaken by academics, either voluntarily, or as part of their employment. These profits are extracted by three frustrating costing avenues:

- open access publishing – facilitated largely through expensive APCs or read and publish deals
- access to paywalled content – including the bundling of large collections and charging high prices for access to what may be significant amounts of irrelevant content
- other charges – e.g. page and colour charges which increasingly seem archaic when the media is primarily consumed digitally.

We can work it out: current opportunities

Of course, in any conversations about academic publishers, it always should be acknowledged that there are already several alternatives to traditional big commercial publishers. This includes smaller presses (e.g. scholarly societies, university presses, independent publishing houses) as well as new payment models (e.g. diamond OA, Subscribe to Open), new infrastructure (institutional repositories, funder mandates) and advocacy (e.g. SPARC³). Lancaster University has a strong commitment to supporting innovation in these areas, including leading on the Open Book Futures, a continuation of the COPIM project,⁴ a new multi-million pound initiative aiming to create open infrastructure to support community owned open access book publishing.

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These initiatives all demonstrate that there is no shortage of ideas or innovation out there, yet so far none of these developments have managed to truly break the stranglehold of the existing status quo. Even green open access (the self-deposit of an author accepted manuscript in an institutional repository), although it has made significant progress in terms of making content freely available, has so far not affected the dominance of commercial publishers, nor dented their profit margins.

To better understand why this is, we need to better understand the role that scholarly communications play in the wider research ecosystem. This will allow us to conduct a more comprehensive stakeholder assessment, including those who have indirect interests in scholarly publishing. It will also provide us with a greater understanding of the value proposition of commercial publishers, an essential element when seeking to disrupt the market.

Across the universe: the role of scholarly communications in the wider research landscape

Scholarly publications (e.g. articles, monographs, conference proceedings, etc.) are the major means by which research projects are communicated and one of the most important ways that researchers engage within their field. They are the primary method researchers use to communicate their findings as well as to engage more broadly. Citations and outputs can also be used to assess researchers' performance (although their use in this way is contentious) and are frequently seen as institutional KPIs.

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As a result, this has created an environment in which there is significant pressure on researchers to be publishing their work and attracting citations. Firstly, this has created a problem of oversupply within the market. A simple SciVal search shows that UK output grew by over 8% between 2017 and 2021. This has made information seeking ever more challenging, in a world where no researcher has the time to read every article on a given topic, feeding into demand for proxies of quality, such as number of citations or 'prestigious' titles/publishers.

Secondly, citations and outputs contribute to other strategically important exercises such as league table performance. This, again, leads to pressure on academics to publish 'quality' works that will attract high numbers of citations, to boost institutional positioning.

The use of citations in both of these concepts is problematic and well documented in the profession. For example, the Metric Tide Report⁵ amply discusses many of the shortcomings and limitations of citation usage in research assessment. This article, therefore, is not seeking to add to that debate, but more to mention that whilst citations continue to be used in this way, scholarly publications will have a high strategic importance to senior stakeholders.

This brings us to the point previously mentioned; when seeking to disrupt this status quo, we need to acknowledge the role of publications in communicating scholarship and research beyond the principal actors. Researchers have been the primary research creators and consumers, with publishers and libraries playing intermediary roles, but there are others with a stake in the future of scholarly communications. These stakeholders will also need careful consideration for any innovation to be successful.

These stakeholders will now be identified and analysed in order to attempt to ascertain their concerns within the process.

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All together now: stakeholder analysis

This section uses a Power/Index matrix (Figure 1) to analyse different stakeholder groups and their position on the two intersections. This has been developed in consideration of the academic publishing process only, and should not, therefore, be used in other contexts. In this context, power should be interpreted as both the means and the agency to effect change and interest means it being of sufficient importance for them to take meaningful action.

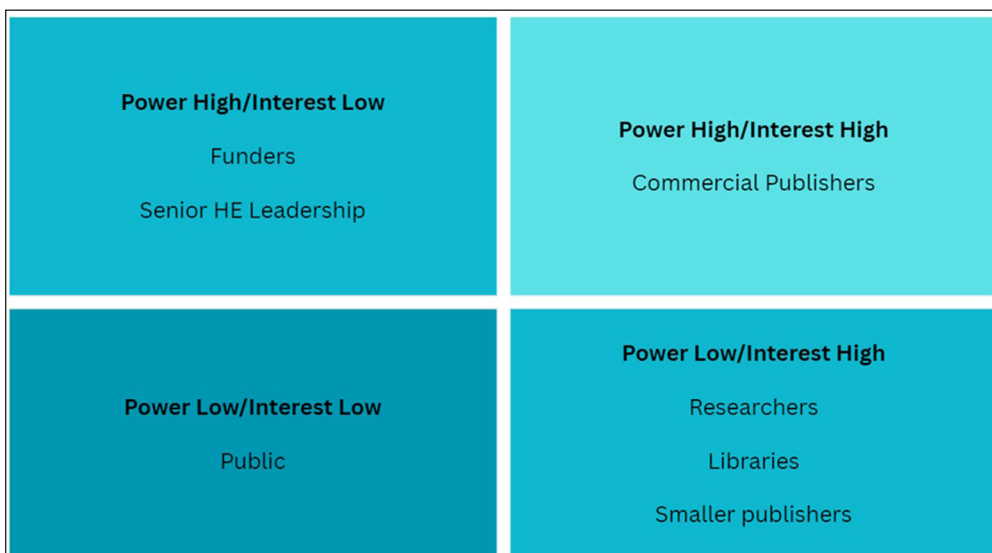


Figure 1. Power/Interest matrix for academic publishing

- 4 These positions are further explored below, as well as justification for their positions in the matrix.

Power High/Interest High

Commercial publishers

Commercial publishers have both high power and interest. Their interest is in maintaining or even further entrenching the status quo so that they continue to maintain their profit margins. (N.B. this is not offered with any comment – commercial enterprises have duties to their shareholders and will act accordingly.)

We see this high power/interest dynamic manifest itself almost daily with their ability to impose unfavourable contract clauses and/or high fees.

The key question for any new developments is to what extent can or should commercial publishers be involved in change?

Power High/Interest Low

Funders

The changes brought about by the recent UKRI open access policy demonstrates the power that funders have in this arena. If a funder (particularly a large one like UKRI) introduces policy demands, then the academic community must comply, and publishers therefore have no choice but to facilitate this. You could argue that their interest should be in the 'low' bracket, given the high level of interest demonstrated by their push for open access, and the extent of the change that has achieved. However, it is worth bearing in mind that were we able to engage them even further in the changes we wish to see, then we could achieve even more.

Senior HE leadership

Again, their classification as power high but interest low is debatable. Given the wider role and importance of research publications within the research ecosystem, it could be argued that their interest is high. However, we have chosen to put them in this quadrant because in general, their interests in this area are more to do with the secondary effects of research publishing, such as impact or positions in league tables, and they do not often concern themselves with other elements.

Power Low/Interest High

Libraries

Whilst their high interest in the process is beyond doubt, there may be more contention regarding their position as having low power, particularly when you consider their budgets and purchasing power. However, the justification for allocating them this segment is that they have been expressing dissatisfaction with this process for years, and yet have been unable to effect real change, due to the demands of their researcher communities and general unwillingness to challenge long-standing traditions and practices within institutions.

Libraries are keen to engage in change, and indeed have already proven how creative and persistent they can be in this sphere, but recognize the need to meet the needs of their researcher colleagues, and the importance of academic freedom.

Researchers

The ranking of low power in this transaction refers to the power of an individual researcher to bring about change (in particular early career researchers). Although they may encounter frustrations with the high costs of open access publishing (particularly if they are non-funded), on their own they have little ability to impact upon the status quo. These frustrations are becoming increasingly visible. For example, over 90 signatures were added to a recent open letter⁶ to UK library directors to articulate growing dissatisfaction with read and publish deals, articulating many of the inequalities they can perpetuate. This could

5 perhaps give us hope that there will be support for change, even if individuals are not able to demand it on their own.

It should also be acknowledged that not all individual researchers will be in favour of challenging the status quo, particularly those who may have benefitted from it or for whom it works well, and they may lead resistance to any attempts to make changes to the current model.

Smaller publishers

It is recognized that not all publishers have the same power as the larger corporations. Some society publishers, or smaller university or library presses also have significant interest in this sphere, but with less ability to change the status quo, as they have to compete in a world that contains the likes of Elsevier, Springer Nature, Wiley and other international conglomerates.

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Power Low/Interest Low

Public

Given that one of the drivers of the open access movement is to allow the public access to information that they so often have funded, it is only right to ensure that their position is reflected here. That said, the public generally has little awareness of the open access movement, and so they have been classified in the low power/influence quadrant.

It is recognized that these classifications are highly subjective, and that they should not be interpreted as anything more than a tool to help develop thinking around the wider stakeholder groupings in order to consider how best to engage them all in any change. The rather simplistic nature of the exercise is also recognized and the many generalizations that are built therein.

Two of us: the role of publishers

At the same time as better understanding the broader stakeholders we will need to engage with, we must also take the time to understand the value that the existing publishers do bring to the current process. If we are looking to deliver change, or even devise an alternative approach, we have to be clear about the functions we would need to replicate. Librarians are not typically publishers, although the two professions are inextricably linked and have a good deal of overlap. Going back to Ma et al.'s observation that scholarly publishing is market-driven rather than scholar-led,⁷ it is imperative that we take the time to better understand that market.

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At its most basic level, publishers provide the tangible infrastructure by which research is curated, disseminated, preserved and promoted. Ma et al. rightly highlight the great strides that libraries have made in assuming many of these roles, particularly given the rise in usage of institutional repositories.⁸

In addition, although curation (e.g. peer review processes, editorial decisions) is carried out under the auspices of a particular journal or publisher, it is often actually undertaken by our academic colleagues, and therefore it could be argued that this too could be replicated, although it would require some staff resource to facilitate the co-ordination of peer reviewers and manage the relevant organizational process. This can be quite time-consuming and the requirement for resources to manage it needs to be acknowledged.

Not all functions are so tangible nor so easily replaced, however. Ponte et al. in their article examining the transformation of the academic publishing market, provide an excellent analysis of some of the opportunities and challenges within the academic publishing world.⁹ This article insightfully alludes to the fact that titles do not compete on price, but rather 'prestige' and it is this factor, the least tangible part of the process, which proves the most difficult for innovators and change agents to match or replace.

6 This brings us back to the role that citations and outputs play in drivers of institutional success, such as league table performance. Now of course it is not necessarily the only option to be able to replicate this function. Alternatively, the HE sector could choose to push back on these practices and demand change in research assessment practices (such as those advocated in the SCOPE framework¹⁰) but this would require a collective approach. Indeed, one of the biggest blockers to individual researchers or institutions being able to really change behaviours is that without the rest of the sector engaging, they will lose out in an unfair system.

Come together: call for a declaration on fair publishing

Reviewing the stakeholder analysis and exploring the value proposition of publishers as per the above makes it clear that any solution requires engagement with a broad range of stakeholder groups. If we are to try and disentangle ourselves from the current stranglehold of traditional publishing models then, for it to be acceptable to our researchers and senior managers, we will need to be able to provide the reassurance that engaging alternatives will not be detrimental to individual researchers or institutions. This article started with reference to the Springer Nature negotiations. The very fact that any concessions were wrought from the publisher was entirely due to the united front the libraries presented. That success should give us the courage to be even bolder in our demands, even more assertive in our efforts for change and to involve more partners as active participants in these discussions.

What is needed now is a declaration on fair and equitable publishing, similar to the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment¹¹, to consider this issue with representatives from all key stakeholder groups, including researchers, libraries, HE senior managers, funders and (dare I say it) even publishers? There is evidence that there is significant appetite for change across a range of these stakeholders, as shown by the recent open letter to library directors, for changing funder mandates and the discontent with the latest Springer Nature deal.

Such an approach would not only give us a mandate for change; it would allow all the different stakeholder groups to articulate their acceptance criteria for any alternative systems, any suggestions for how they can effect the necessary changes and, importantly, includes those not directly involved in the publishing process. This has been the crucial missing part of the puzzle thus far.

Libraries are excellently placed to lead this change. They have the links, the expertise and the understanding of the current challenges to be able to bring the relevant parties together and combine for change. Therefore, this opinion piece ends with a call to action for libraries to bring these stakeholders to the table and start discussing a better future.

Tomorrow never knows

All the signs are there. There is huge appetite for a new approach among so many key stakeholders. We at Lancaster University Library really believe that the time could well be right for a systematic change. However, in order to ensure that it really is the step change we dream of, we need to ensure we are engaging with the entire research community to create infrastructures and methods so that we leave no vacuum. To do this, we strongly advocate for a declaration on fairer publishing that will see a wide-scale commitment to ending the quasi-monopolistic position of the commercial publishers and stem the scale of the profit they extract.

A risk? Perhaps, but one worth taking if we want to actually see the change that so many of us in libraries have advocated for, for so long.

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7 After all, when the disparate research partners living in HE agree, there will be an answer. Let it be.

Abbreviations and Acronyms

A list of the abbreviations and acronyms used in this and other *Insights* articles can be accessed here – click on the URL below and then select the 'full list of industry A&As' link: <http://www.uksg.org/publications#aa>.

Competing interests

The author has declared no competing interests.

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