

The poverty of journal publishing

Organization

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Abstract

The article opens with a critical analysis of the dominant business model of for-profit, academic publishing, arguing that the extraordinarily high profits of the big publishers are dependent upon a double appropriation that exploits both academic labour and universities' financial resources. Against this model, we outline four possible responses: the further development of open access repositories, a fair trade model of publishing regulation, a renaissance of the university presses, and, finally, a move away from private, for-profit publishing companies toward autonomous journal publishing by editorial boards and academic associations.

Keywords

academic publishing, appropriation, cultural industry, exploitation, free-labour, journals, political economy, research, university

The poverty of 'excellence'

As academics our lives are dominated by journals, very much like the one you are holding in your hands right now, or, more realistically, are browsing on the screen of your computer. Although the bulk of our daily working lives are occupied with teaching, marking, administration and the minutiae of organizational politics, journals are the sine qua non of early 21st century academic life, at least in business schools. Whilst other disciplines have retained the book length research monograph as the apogee of academic achievement, in management and organization studies, as in

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many of the social sciences, it is the publication of articles in highly ranked journals that will make or break an academic career.

The power effects of these mechanisms of academic governance have been placed firmly on the research agenda, with technical debates over the accuracy and relative merit of competing ranking systems (Harvey et al., 2010; Mingers, 2009), more critical interrogations of technologies such as the REF and ABS list's dominance of the research environment in UK business schools and elsewhere (Rowlinson et al., 2011; Willmott, 2011), as well as critiques of more global metrics like the ISI Impact Factor (Baum, 2011; Goulart and Carvalho, 2010) on whose basis many of the other rankings are constructed. In parallel, a more contextual discussion has taken place over what responsibilities publishing entails for business and management scholars (e.g. Dunne et al., 2008) and over what might constitute a critical journal (Böhm and Spoelstra, 2004; Parker and Thomas, 2011).

Whilst these debates are crucial for understanding the processes of academic governance, the production of what counts as knowledge, and the construction of academic subjectivities today, we suggest that what must necessarily complement them is an analysis of the political economy of academic publishing—an analysis that has received far too little attention in management and organization studies up to now. The business model of academic publishing is based on a double, or even triple, appropriation of public resources where universities pay for the research, writing, reviewing and even editing of journals, which they then have to buy back for their libraries (HoCSTS, 2004: 37). In both its political economy, and its concern with ranking the productivity of academics through their research outputs, the academic publishing industry is at the forefront of neoliberal strategies of privatization and accumulation of knowledge through intellectual property rights, as well as the measurement and exploitation of immaterial labour (Aronowitz, 2008; De Angelis and Harvie, 2009; Pirie, 2009; Readings, 1996; Slaughter and Rhoades, 2004).

After outlining the basic contours of this model, and explaining why it is a poor basis for the production and circulation of knowledge, we consider four possible responses to these iniquities: a further expansion of open access research repositories; a 'fair trade' model wherein academics are recompensed for their up-to-now free labour; a return to in-house, university press publishing; and autonomous publishing controlled by free associations of academics and affiliated researchers. Of these, we see the most potential in the latter: a radical reappropriation of our academic labour through the simple strategy of cutting out the publishers entirely and publishing open-access, online journals directly under the control of their editorial boards.

The political economy of journal publishing

Elsewhere in academia the political economy of journal publishing is a well-established, practical, day-to-day concern. University librarians have been struggling with rising journal costs, growing numbers of journals, subscription bundling, and balancing traditional paper-based resources with electronic publications, often within a context of declining overall budgets. To put some figures on these rising costs, in 1997, institutional journal subscriptions were 30 times more expensive than in 1970, amounting to an average annual price increase of 13% (Thompson, 2005: 99). While libraries kept the proportion of their spending on journals at a fairly constant rate of 40%, the consequence was that not even the richest libraries could now afford to have access to all journals, and the poorer they were the less access they could provide for staff and students (Hall, 2008: 43).

For publishers, this means that subscriptions—mostly institutional in any case—for individual journals declined significantly. In cultural studies, for example, it is now common for journals to have circulations of only 400–600 copies (Hall, 2008: 47). Increasing prices mean lower circulation, so publishers respond by increasing offerings—which of course means average subscriptions drop

further. Consequently, the number of journals increased by 200–300 a year to around 12,000 in 2005 (Thompson, 2005: 99–102); currently there are around 16,000 journals listed in Thomson Reuters' ISI, although estimates of actual active academic journals far exceed that number. Through offering 'discounted' access to journals by bundling subscriptions, publishers strengthen their monopoly position while driving out competition from independent journals. That is why we have more journals than anyone could ever read but which hardly anyone has access to.

The primary issue here is one of access: the parallel expansion of output on the one hand, and rising prices on the other, has meant that access comes at a premium. Even digitization, i.e. making content available online, usually in the form of downloadable PDF documents, has not improved accessibility of scholarly work: a report by the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee (2004) laments that digital content is often unavailable to the public in libraries due to licensing agreements. It is the publishers that benefit. Journal publishing is big business, with the global market for professional, social science and humanities publishing worth close to \$10 billion in 2010 (Strempel and Kilkelly 2011; Strempel et al., 2010). Of that market, publishing in business constitutes close to \$400 million, and social science—where much of management publishing is counted—more than \$700 million (Strempel and Kilkelly 2011; Strempel et al., 2010).

Globally the market for journal publishing is dominated by a few key players: Reed Elsevier, John Wiley & Sons (including Blackwell), Springer Science + Business Media, Wolters Kluwer, Holtzbrinck and Informa (including Routledge and Taylor & Francis) are the biggest professional journal publishers with a market share of 36% in 2009 (Strempel et al., 2011: 55, 59). In business and management, comparatively smaller publishers, such as Emerald and Sage, also play an important role. Oligopolies enable prices to be held at a higher level than would be possible in an open market, making journal subscriptions unaffordable for many individuals and libraries. For example, in six disciplines, from ecology to physics, commercial publishers charge three to nine times as much per page as scholarly society journals, which tend to be published by university presses (Bergstrom, 2001; Willinsky, 2009: 55).

In organization studies, the situation is typical. Of the 29 organization studies journals included in the ABS list, only three are published by non-profit organizations: Tamara and ephemera (both independently and directly published by academics) are also the only two free open access journals, while Organization Science (published by Informs) is the highest rated and—according to the journal prices database maintained by Bergstrom and McAfee (2010)—also by far the cheapest of the three and four rated journals. University presses are absent. Sage publishes 11 of the 29 journals, including this one. A look at the general management list reveals another common phenomenon: the Academy of Management Journal published by the American Academy of Management is far cheaper (at \$3 per article—Bergstrom and McAfee, 2010) than the British Journal of Management published by Wiley-Blackwell on behalf of the British Academy of Management (at \$50 per article—Bergstrom and McAfee, 2010).

While commercial publishers would claim that they contribute significantly to academic production, they reap profits in the region of 30–40%, unheard of practically anywhere else in the economy. In 2010 the Elsevier part of Reed Elsevier (2011) recorded a profit margin of 35.7% on £2,026 billion revenue; Springer Science + Business Media (2011) achieved a profit margin of 33.9% on €866 million turnover. Even an institution that ideologically has no qualms with high profit margins—Deutsche Bank—commented on the profits achieved by Reed Elsevier (REL) as follows:

We believe the publisher adds relatively little value to the publishing process. We are not attempting to dismiss what 7,000 people at REL do for a living. We are simply observing that if the process really were

[sic] as complex, costly and value-added as the publishers protest that it is, 40% margins wouldn't be available. (Deutsche Bank, cited in McGuigan, 2008: n. p.)

Although REL 'adds relatively little value to the publishing process', it has clearly been very successful in extracting value from this process. This combination of a negligible contribution to value on the part of publishers with exceptionally high profit rates is possible because of a double appropriation at the heart of the business model.

In the first moment, publishers claim the intellectual property rights for knowledge produced in universities even though they do not recompense the producers of that knowledge for its production. In the second moment, the publishers sell, at a massively inflated price, this same knowledge back to the universities so that its producers can deploy that knowledge in further research and in teaching. As a House of Commons report from 2004 put it, 'public money is used at three stages in the publishing process: to fund the research project; to pay the salaries of academics who carry out peer review for no extra payment; and to fund libraries to purchase scientific publications' (HoCSTS, 2004: 37). The genius of this system is that the publishers never pay even the basic costs of the work that goes into this production. The publishers' costs are entirely given over to formatting, printing, marketing and distribution—processes that are increasingly outsourced to low-cost countries, such as India and Malaysia (Dahmann and Huws, 2007). The 'free work', such as writing, peer-reviewing, proof-reading and editing, which produces the content for which publishers then claim property rights, is provided by academics whose work is paid for by the public funding of higher education, student fees and other research income.

All of this work is freely given, mostly by the universities employing the academics, although for many of us it is work done in addition to our contractual obligations. We may be expected to publish as a part of our employment, and there are certainly career benefits from doing so, as there might be from editing a 'prestigious' journal. However, there are very few direct benefits from peer-reviewing articles, not to mention proof-reading, and this is the kind of work that often spills over into weekends or late evenings. Even where this work is validated and a part of a reasonable working contract, as with the core academic activity of writing, it is effectively paid for by the university and then freely given (i.e. at no cost but also without direct coercion [Terranova, 2000]) to the publishers, who commodify it, repackage it, and then charge the universities for the privilege of accessing the work they have produced.

The people who lose the most in this are the stakeholders of the university: the taxpayer, government, students, academics and civil society as a whole. There is also a global dimension to this process of double appropriation. If libraries in the Global North find it hard to pay the high subscription costs of journals, the challenges are even greater for less economically developed nations (Chan and Costa, 2005). At the moment we have the worst of all possible worlds where a small number of individuals are earning windfall profits from academic publishing without putting anything back into the system that actually produces knowledge. The question is what to do about this situation. In the following sections we outline and evaluate four possible responses.

Open access repositories

Many academics, librarians, universities and even government institutions have come to realize that the public good, and knowledge production, would be much better served by an open process of knowledge publication (ESRC, 2011; HoCSTC, 2004; Suber, 2003). Out of sheer economic necessity many countries of the Global South, for example, have long-running initiatives to support open access publishing (Goulhart and Carvalho, 2010). Many Northern universities are tackling

the issue by establishing open access archives and repositories (see Hall, 2008: 39). The natural sciences here are well ahead of the social sciences: they have had arXiv.org as an open access eprint archive for 20 years already. The benefit of these repositories is that academic research is allowed to circulate ‘freely’, insofar as potential readers have access to a computer and the internet. There are some issues with the ‘second rate’ nature of material on these repositories—it is often pre-peer-review, at working paper stage, and final published versions are not added—although these can feasibly be overcome (Hall, 2008).

Many of us will have realized that such research paper repositories are increasing in number; some are run by universities themselves, others are run by academic societies, but some are also run by profit-oriented private companies (Willinsky, 2009). So long as research funding institutions like the UK’s ESRC continue to demand open access to outputs from the research they fund, such repositories should thrive. There is a question, however, as to how far they can challenge the underlying political economy of the journal publishing industry. Willinsky (2009), for example, points out that these repositories leave the stratified economics of publishing intact. They may solve the problem of access, but they do not solve the problem of exploitation and appropriation. As most repositories do not give access to the final version of an article, they act more like advertisements and preview portals, generating interest in the ‘real product’, which is then sold to the interested party at the usual, inflated price.

Commercial publishers are, of course, very aware that the vast majority of academics prefer an open access model and have started to experiment with open access, exploring ways of maintaining or even increasing their profits. Springer, for example, has recently bought BioMed Central, one of the world’s biggest open access publishing platforms, for an estimated fee of \$35 million (Willinsky 2009: 64). BioMed Central provides free access to over 200 journals, but authors wanting to see their articles published in them have to pay around \$1,350. In 2010 BioMed Central (2010) recorded a profit margin of 17%. Elsewhere Springer offers authors an ‘open choice’ to have their articles, which are published in paid access journals, be made open access. The cost to the author for this privilege is \$3,000 (Willinsky, 2006: 5; Willinsky, 2009: 64). As a result, with this shift towards authors paying for the costs of publishing rather than readers, the overall bill for publishing might eventually be higher than it is currently, leaving the dominant political economy of contemporary journal publishing intact (Willinsky, 2009: 65–66). In any ways, the cost of production, and of publishers’ profits, would ultimately be borne by the universities and the public purse.

Fair trade

One response to this exploitation of public resources and academic labour is to ask publishers to compensate the work that is currently provided freely by academics. The starting point here would be for academics to stop reviewing, proof-reading and editing, or simply to ask for a reasonable rate of compensation for this work. The House of Commons Science and Technology Committee (2004) has in fact already suggested that publishers should pay university departments for the peer review work performed by their employees. If we consider that a review, properly done, probably takes a full day, then a price per review in the region of €500 would be necessary to fully compensate the university for an average academic’s time and on-costs. As a political intervention, however, simply asking for minimum wage would be enough.

To make such a proposal more radical, all or part of such monies could be paid into a special fund to support open access publishing, on which more below. To avoid costs simply being pushed back to the universities in the form of increased subscription costs, we would also need a concerted, cross-institutional boycott of journals making excessive profits. Experiences such as the boycott of

Reed Elsevier in 2007 have demonstrated that such boycotts of journals and publishers can work in practice. We could help libraries negotiate reasonable prices for access to journals and ensure that those profiting from the production and circulation of academic knowledge, paid a share of the cost of its production.

Ultimately, this proposal might be something like a ‘fair trade’ model of academic publishing, where certified journals would charge a reasonable price for access and would pay a reasonable price for those ‘working’ for the journal. However, such a campaign, involving boycotts, strikes and collective bargaining, would require a coordinated effort across the sector. Large, national, sectoral organizations, such as the UCU and other academic labour unions, and even universities’ vice-chancellors and government agencies, would have to work together to make this happen. Commercial publishers will not give up their profits easily, and there would be immense lobbying by them to defend their position and the status quo. It would also leave the basic structure of the industry, and the private ownership of rights to reproduce and circulate academic knowledge, intact.

University presses

An alternative challenge to commercial publishing is a kind of halfway position between completely open/free publishing, discussed below, and the current for-profit system. Bergstrom (2001) has demonstrated that university presses provide journals—in his case in economics—at a fraction of the cost of commercial publishers. Traditionally, the university presses did the most prestigious academic publishing. In some disciplines, particularly in the humanities, this is still very much the case, but for management and organization studies much of the prestige of book publishing has withered in the light of productivity assessment systems like the REF. When the number of publications is what counts, it is simply bad economics to write one book, when each chapter could be profitable published as a separate article. The university presses, even Oxford and Cambridge, have been slow to adapt to this changing landscape and have little presence in the journal market, especially in management and organization studies.

Given that universities are currently doubly exploited by commercial publishers—first, their staff do not get remunerated for the work they are doing, and, second, the publishers then sell academic staff’s knowledge back to the universities at inflated prices—it would make sense for universities to redirect their resources to publishing research directly. Even if the current business model were maintained, with high-profit rates and free labour in production, taking academic publishing in-house would provide universities with an additional income stream, which should be welcome in the current climate of economic hardship and austerity. If a proportion of university library budgets, which is currently given over to buying in high-price journals, was given over to publishing some of those journals at a reasonable price, this would not only return control over the production, circulation and exchange of academic knowledge to academics, but would recirculate the profits from academic labour back into the universities.

Unfortunately, apart from Oxford and Cambridge, currently there are hardly any viable university presses in the UK, nor elsewhere in Europe. In Germany, for example, a few university presses, such as Göttingen, have been established on an open access basis, but by and large they—like most of their small equals elsewhere—only serve their respective universities (Bargheer, 2006). In the USA, where many more sizeable university presses exist, they also struggle for their financial sustainability. Endeavours to reinvent university presses for the digital age (AAUP, 2011; Brown et al., 2007) emphasize the need for strategic collaboration between presses, libraries, scholarly societies and funding bodies to combat the systemic underfunding of university presses.

A similar political act, and some degree of entrepreneurship within the university, would be required in the UK to establish and/or reinvigorate university presses.

There is also a risk associated with this model that, given the increasing managerialism in universities and the separation of managerial administrative careers from the professoriate (Aronowitz, 2008; Slaughter and Rhoades, 2004), a renaissance of the university presses would be seized upon by vice-chancellors solely in terms of increasing revenue streams. Whilst this would help university balance sheets, it would do nothing to improve the free circulation of knowledge, as the business model would remain dependent on limiting access to knowledge by creating artificial scarcity. Ultimately this can only serve to restrict access to knowledge, and therefore the ability to apply it in the production of new knowledge, to those in the relatively privileged position of stable employment in a university or research organization that can afford subscription costs.

Self-organized open publishing

A more radical but also simpler alternative is a completely open and self-organized publishing system. Costs for self-publishing are manageable since the ‘free work’ that is performed in any case is now given to the journal, while additional tasks like proof-reading, layout and website management require comparatively little additional effort. In our experience with publishing the online, open access journal ephemera, this has proven to be a significant but not insurmountable workload (see also Cavaleri et al., 2009). The burden is much eased if some resource can be found within a university to provide editorial assistance; in the history of ephemera we have had such support from Warwick, Leicester and Queen Mary. There is also ample support available from the open access community; the Public Knowledge Project (PKP), for example, provides and supports Open Journal Systems (now used by Tamara), a free software developed specifically to make open access publishing more efficient and therefore feasible.

The domain of ‘free work’ here is extended, but only in order to make the fruits of this labour publicly available for free, rather than exploited commercially. Such an option might also be feasible for other journals, including *Organization*. The editors and editorial board of *Organization* could quit from Sage, en masse, and set up *The Journal of Organization*, taking their network of reviewers and contributors with them. Sage would doubtless just find other willing workers, but in the meantime the collective intelligence of the journal would be taken back into public ownership. This is what the editors of the journal *Topology*, published by Elsevier, did in 2006, setting up the *Journal of Topology*, published by Oxford University Press on behalf of the London Mathematical Society (Lilley et al., 2011). Where journal titles are already in the hand of scholarly societies (e.g. *The British Journal of Management* (British Academy of Management), the *Journal of Management* (Southern Management Association), or the *European Management Review* (European Academy of Management)), the move to self-publishing would be even easier. To provide further financial stability, publishing cooperatives could be formed (Crow, 2006).

However, where the sustainability of such a model based on ‘free work’ seems questionable, an alternative might be a non-profit, open access model similar to that of the Public Library of Science (PLoS), where income is generated through author fees. Even conservative reports on the costs of publishing, such as one by the Wellcome Trust, suggest that costs for this kind of open access publishing are potentially lower: \$1950 or less per published article in a good-to-high-quality (meaning: high rejection rates) journal instead of \$2750 or more (2004: 3). The Wellcome report suggests that submission fees of \$175 and publication fees of \$250–750 would be sufficient to fund such a model (Wellcome Trust, 2004). Which university would not be willing to pay such fees for their academics to submit and publish REF-able articles? Projects like PLoS also already provide

fee waivers for academics from the Global South whose universities cannot afford such fees. And with potential further cost savings (Clarke, 2007) and any surpluses reinvested in the system, a model based on authors paying for open access might be a viable transition.

Conclusion

The poverty of the current journal publishing system is one described by a double, or even triple, appropriation of public resources. Universities pay for staff who write, review and edit journals for free; they then have to buy these journals back from the commercial publishers at highly inflated prices. The result is that more and more journal content is stored behind the firewalls of for-profit publishing conglomerates, whereas the public, which has vested interests in seeing the outcomes of (taxpayer-funded, if not all) research, has little or no access to that knowledge.

Having outlined the exploitative nature of this model, we have considered four possible responses to, what we have termed, the poverty of the current journal publishing system: a further expansion of open access research repositories; a 'fair trade' publishing model that compensates academics for their labour; an expansion of university press publishing; and self-organized, open access publishing controlled by free associations of academics and affiliated researchers. We have discussed problems and shortcomings with all of these alternatives, yet we see the most potential in the self-organized, open access model. We believe that real progress can be made by simply cutting out the publishers entirely and publishing open-access, online journals directly under the control of their editorial boards. This is precisely what we have done with the journal *ephemera* since 2001.

Probably the greatest challenge open access journals, such as *ephemera*, have faced has been one of credibility as much as the practicalities of publishing. In a world of online publications, what is there to distinguish a peer-reviewed, academic journal from any other source? Where the journals are pay-to-access, the cost can stand as a surrogate for quality. Whenever the content is freely available, however, this can carry connotations of being value-less. *ephemera* only recently made it onto the ABS list, and is not listed in the ISI. It has done very little to promote alternative methods of measurement and valuation, such as the article-level metrics developed by PLoS.1 Nor has it attempted to change the contours of academic knowledge production, for example, by exploring open-process academic publishing (Prug, 2010).

Nonetheless, academic endeavors rarely sit comfortably with market-economic regimes of valuation, and it may be that a system like the REF or even the ABS journal ranking, which are based on principles of peer review or citations etc., could offer an alternative to the prevalent market-based logic. After all, if the content of *Organization* were suddenly opened up to free access, would the work contained in the journal lose any of its value? Quite the opposite, for the academics publishing their work in the journal would be more widely accessed and read by a greater range of people than those who either have an institutional login, or a research budget to buy individual articles.

While in the past there might have been a legitimate role for commercial publishers to play in the dissemination of academic research, particularly considering the kinds of financial investments required for traditional print, storage and distribution (McGuigan and Russell, 2008), today the appropriation of free academic labour by for-profit publishing houses is nothing but accumulation by enclosure. It exploits not only academics, but the public purse and students, who are ultimately paying for the publishers' profit margins with their fees financed by debt. The digital revolution in publishing (Thompson, 2005: 307) means there is no more need for academics and universities to succumb to exploitation by commercial publishers. Rather, it is time for academics, and our

institutions, to take publishing into our own hands. This will involve building new alliances between academics, librarians and research administrators. It will also almost certainly change the make-up of academic output, but only, we would argue, for the better.

Note

1 See <http://www.plosone.org/static/almInfo.action>.

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