

Misdirection

By John Ewing

Journals publishing is in crisis. For years, subscription prices have increased rapidly, often at annual double-digit rates. Prices for some journals have tripled in the past ten years, and the average increase is now close to ten percent. The budgets of university libraries have fallen far behind, forcing librarians to cancel subscriptions. Publishers have used declining subscriptions as a rationale to increase prices even more. And the literature has expanded, creating fatter journals (and yet more reasons for publishers to increase prices). Scholars and librarians have become increasingly unhappy about the state of affairs, and they demand action.

So what action do they suggest? They want to change the way in which publishers collect the money. Go figure. Instead of collecting money through subscriptions, they plan to charge authors a fee — perhaps \$1,500 per article (although higher amounts are suggested). We are told that the real problem is access to information, and that we should focus our attention on making material more accessible. Magicians call this technique misdirection, and it's at the heart of all tricks.

Are open access advocates really trying to trick everyone? No—this misdirection is caused by a mistake.

When the Internet was new, people thought that electronic publishing meant free publishing. Subscriptions were unnecessary, they argued, because there was no reason to collect money to pay for something that had no cost and required no effort. Everyone would have access to all journals.

By the time people realized that electronic journals did have costs—editing, hardware, and software are not free, for example —what had been considered a side benefit (open access) had become an ideology. “Information must be free” was the slogan. Barriers to scholarship must be eliminated, and no one should profit from scholarship. How, then, to support journals without subscriptions? The solution was that authors should pay.

The open-access movement caught on because it was ideologically fashionable. Government agencies, philanthropists, and many scholars found that making scholarship accessible to everyone was far more enticing than bringing journal prices under control. The press saw a good story—a battle between venal publishers and idealistic scholars. After all, who can argue with open access?

Well, I can, and so can many others. One needs to distinguish rhetoric from deliberation, slogan from fact. Who says information must be free? Why must it? Proponents of open access want to make readers' lives easier, but they don't acknowledge how much access readers already have. It's therefore hard to know how much the increase would be. And the proponents seldom ask key questions: What are the consequences of increased access? Would it prevent some scholars from publishing because they lack financial

resources to pay author fees? Would it diminish the incentives to maintain quality through peer review and editing? Would some disciplines suffer while others gained from greater access? Open access concentrates on a single, short-term goal — immediate reader access — while ignoring all other issues.

The most basic unanswered question is this: Will open access solve the real problem of scholarly publishing, the exorbitant and unsustainable prices of journals? We are asked to accept on faith that changing who pays will somehow magically change how much we pay altogether. The only evidence to support that argument is a calculation that multiplies the number of journal articles in all scholarly journals (at present) by a per-paper charge, which is highly uncertain. The calculation shows that the total charges to authors are less than the total revenue from all present subscriptions.

But does that calculation tell us anything? What if the number of papers increases significantly? What if the per-paper charge increases? If colleges end up paying the same in authors' fees as they now pay for subscriptions, how would institutions benefit? And does anyone really believe that the commercial publishers, who are used to making a handsome profit on journal subscriptions, would not find a way to make an equally handsome profit on author charges?

Commercial publishers are delighted by the inadvertent misdirection because it diverts attention from the exorbitant prices they charge. As savvy business people, they understand that changing how they collect money does not have to change their profit margins. The commercial publishers are dominating scholarly publishing more and more, year after year as they consolidate and occasionally take over journals from small society publishers, who are often overwhelmed by the complexities of electronic publishing. The dominance of commercial publishers in mathematics, for example, has been relentless. In 1991, commercial publishers accounted for only 25% of mathematics journals, while they published 38% of all articles; by 2001, they published 30% of the journals and 48% of the articles!

Scholarly societies and many independent publishers publish journals at prices that are one-third to one-sixth the prices of commercial publishers. In most cases, these publishers make a modest profit on their journals and reinvest that profit in their publications or other services. They keep prices low because they operate efficiently and have low overhead (the often forgotten cost of journals, although usually the largest fraction of the total). Why are commercial journals overtaking their lower-priced competitors? Partly because of clever marketing (bundling, for example, is a powerful marketing device for publishers with thousands of journals); partly because commercial publishers have the financial resources to expand by publishing more articles and new journals; and partly because most scholars have not been attentive to the problems of journals, leaving it to librarians to solve the journals crisis.

Ten years ago the central problem of journals—high prices—attracted much attention in academe, and few people mentioned access. Librarians worried about the relentless growth in the literature, editors worried about the reluctance of scholars to serve as peer

reviewers, and a few scholars worried about long-term archiving of electronic products, but people seldom mentioned access. Since then most publishers have begun to provide free access to tables of contents and abstracts. Many publishers provide free access to complete articles after some period of time. And many publishers allow authors to post their own articles on their Web pages or on publicly available preprint servers. Of course, e-mail makes it possible for another scholar to ask an author for a copy of an article and receive it the same day.

But as access has increased during the past decade, journal prices have continued to escalate. In spite of that deepening crisis, we focus on access.

We must turn back to the issue of prices. Do we need to destroy our publishing system to find a solution? Perhaps. But the argument that an open-access, author-pay model would solve the problem of prices is tenuous at best. Such a revolutionary restructuring of journals goes against Occam's razor, the idea that the most effective solutions are usually the simplest ones.

How can we solve the problem of high prices? When well-placed universities negotiate lower subscription prices, they are not solving the problem for the other universities who don't have their clout. When well-intentioned philanthropists subsidize new journals in one or two areas, they are not solving the problem for the other disciplines. When scholars shout slogans that information must be free, they contribute to the problem—publishers are grateful for the distraction.

The solution is to create demand for lower prices: Scholars and librarians have to stop dealing with high-priced journals, as authors, editors, referees, or subscribers. Soon the publishers of less-expensive journals will grow, and those of more-expensive journals will decline. The less expensive journals will publish more papers, making them more efficient, and society publishers will earn (slightly) more profit, which they can reinvest in the discipline. Would cutting off ties to high-priced journals be easy? Surely not. But it is far more likely to solve the problem of prices than changing the way we collect the money.

No magic is needed. We have only to focus our attention on the real problem.

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