

# Cites & Insights

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## Intersections

# The Economics of Open Access

Publishing costs money.

Let's say that right up front. But along with that, you need to say, "Although sometimes that cost is so negligible that it can be absorbed as overhead."

And maybe an alternative addition: "and how much money it costs depends a lot on how you define publishing."

This essay is primarily about open access, but strays into journal publishing in general. As usual, it's a combination of resources (cites) and commentary (insights), divided into ten overlapping segments. I believe the *mélange* will be informative and useful, although I'm certain it won't provide pat answers to most questions, because such answers don't exist.

### *OA and non-OA examples*

Maybe it's useful to offer one example of the first caveat: "sometimes that cost is so negligible it can be absorbed as overhead." Or, rather, 27 examples: the 27 books I've self-published through Lulu over the past eight years. There are *no* direct costs for publishing those items, that is, making them available for purchase. Oh, sure, there are indirect costs: I have to have a computer and broadband, and there are the opportunity costs of writing books instead of, say, greeting people at Home Depot. But Lulu's platform is efficient enough—and people order enough print books and ebooks—that it can afford to maintain the spotlight page and store the book PDFs without any charges whatsoever. (Indeed, it's efficient enough so that Lulu allows me to "sell" PDF ebooks for free, as is the case with my aging *Open Access and Libraries*.)

Incidentally, this also means that OA journals with moderate annual article volume—say up to 70 ten-page articles a year, which for 2013 includes 5,199 OA journals listed in *DOAJ* (roughly 84% of all of the *DOAJ* journals currently publishing articles)—that publish in PDF form, which is nearly all of them, could provide annual book-form print versions for those authors and readers (and libraries) that want print at essentially *no*

cost to the publisher: perhaps an hour initially to set up a Lulu account and build a master cover design (with the volume/year changing each time) and half an hour to an hour each year to build a PDF table of contents from the existing contents HTML, assemble all the articles, convert them into a single PDF, and upload them to Lulu. (A number of OA journals already do this. Many more could.)

That's one example. I'd suggest there are at least 1,860 others that *are* related to OA: DOAJ journals that don't charge fees and that publish 20 or fewer articles per year, a volume that's likely to mean costs so low they can be regarded as departmental or societal overhead.

At the other extreme, one OA journal charges \$5,000—and, as you'll see later, it's claimed that one journal spends \$14,000 per article. Do these numbers make sense?

As to that second addition (at the start of this long roundup)...we'll start with that, and with an article (or, rather, an article-length blog post) that's not directly about OA at all.

## Background

What value does a scholarly journal publisher add to an article? That's too broad a question to answer. Here's a better one: *Which* values (that involve costs) should scholars (in a particular field and at a particular level) be willing to pay for?

Which brings us to the first item, a 4,500-word listicle that's well worth reading and thinking about, even if you aren't a big Kent Anderson fan: "UPDATED—82 Things Publishers Do (2014) Edition," most recently [posted on October 21, 2014](#) at the *scholarly kitchen*.

It's an expanded version of a 2012 post with 60 things a journal publisher does; Anderson states the motivation for that post clearly:

The post was written because journal publishers have been under pressure to prove that they add value beyond managing peer-review and doing some basic copy editing and formatting. Often, authors are the ones asserting that journal publishers do so little, which is understandable, as authors only experience a small part of the journal publishing process, and care about the editing and formatting bits the most, making those the most memorable.

There are 82 boldface items, each with a paragraph and claims as to expense level, difficulty and duration. An appropriate set of questions (for authors or journals) for each item, questions that may be answered differently for a very small humanities journal or a journal that publishes based on an article's validity rather than its "importance" than for a highly selective journal in biomed:

- Is this a function *this* journal needs to do? (As opposed to leaving it to the authors or not doing it at all.)

- How much will this *actually* cost (and how difficult will it be) for *this* journal?
- Is the value added worth the cost?

I have not seen a good review of the whole list, and in a way that's unfortunate—but maybe that's because the range of functions required for a given journal, and the complexity of those functions, depend so heavily on the nature and size of the journal and the expectations of its authors.

Going through the list—twice—I find that I'm as unwilling to try to parse it out as, apparently, others are. Some functions clearly go away with e-journals and some disappear when a journal doesn't charge APCs (relying on institutional subsidy or other sources). Some journals (OA and otherwise) simply don't do copyediting or layout; many do little or no search-engine optimization and article-level (or any) marketing. (Earlier versions of the post—all available from the first post through primary or secondary links—include much longer sets of comments, including one in which a mathematician attempts to respond to a shorter list, albeit in a field-specific manner.)

Here's Anderson's penultimate paragraph:

In the big picture, having publishers doing these things means that scientists and policymakers don't have to do them and can focus on doing their work. We represent a set of trades and associated professionals who do all these things on their behalf.

Maybe—and maybe some of those things simply don't need to be done for some fields and some journals, or at least don't need to be paid for. It's a long and complex list. I could call it “self-serving,” and it is, but in this case that's entirely appropriate.

One could go through that list, look at the apparent resulting “justifiable” costs and conclude that some of the more radical reformers are right: The answer is to scrap the journal system entirely and rely on expanded versions of things like arXiv or some new mechanism that supports and tracks post-publication peer review. Or one could note what some publishers have actually identified as workable dollar amounts...and we'll get back to that in the next couple of sections.

Is the “right” justifiable-cost figure per article \$650 (University of California's new initiative) or \$500 (Ubiquity Press—that includes 16% for waivers) or \$6.50 (*Journal of Machine Learning Research*) or \$1,350 (*PLOS ONE*)? The answer may be “yes,” unsatisfactory as that may be. Of course, even at \$650, to take care of two million articles means total costs of \$1.3 billion—considerably less than American universities alone pay for serials, and somewhere between 11% and 13% of the supposed total scholarly journal marketplace. With the advantage of making all articles available to everyone everywhere for free.

Anderson provides a starting point: an extremely extensive list of things *some* publishers pay for or charge for in the process of establishing

and publishing scholarly journals. The rest of this roundup deals with slightly less broad situations.

### *Three scenarios for the future of linguistics publishing*

This [April 15, 2014 post](#) by Martin Haspelmath at *Free Science Blog* may seem like a strange companion to the previous item, but it's another (if far narrower) case of looking at the big picture, and I think appropriate as background for the rest of this discussion.

Haspelmath specifically wants linguists to discuss the future of their publishing. He admits to preferring the second scenario below, but thinks the other two should be taken seriously as well. Summarizing:

- 1. Continuity. Most linguistics journals and books published by commercial and academic publishers and subscribed to or purchased by libraries—but with more self-archiving and other archiving. He thinks the growth of self-archiving (especially on shared platforms) makes this unlikely.
- 2. Scholar-owned platinum publishing. What he means is no-fee gold OA, of course (and it's *really sad* that he links to a particular source as a basis for using “platinum”). He says many publishers don't do much copyediting anyway and that authors are already using tools that make layout automatic or trivial. There are already quite a few OA linguistics journals, most of them no-fee (as is typical for social sciences and humanities) and most funded as overhead.
- 3. Author fees collected by global companies. He notes that the most prestigious journals are still commercial ones and that these publishers would be happy to go OA—for the right APCs. (Sigh: He calls APC-charging OA “gold OA,” thus helping to confuse the issue further.)

Like other disciplines, linguistics is currently in the unfortunate situation that what seems the best for the discipline (namely the second scenario, scholar-owned platinum publishing) is not the best for junior scholars at the moment. Most of the prestigious labels (journal titles and book imprints) still publish in the closed-access mode, so the present system may appear stable (scenario 1).

However, there are also powerful forces that are pushing toward a change. Increasingly, funding agencies make a certain degree of “open access” mandatory, so De Gruyter has already agreed to allow authors to put their papers on their websites 12 months after publication. This looks like a significant concession, and it is difficult to see how such a system could be stable. Thus, it can be expected that publishing companies will push for scenario 3, because this is the only stable scenario that maintains a powerful role for them.

This is just one field, but it's an interesting push for a discussion that may need to happen in every field—one that won't always yield the same results. Realistically, I don't believe we'll see *the* solution in most fields in my lifetime: it's likely to be a mixed environment almost everywhere for a very long time.

## Actual Costs

A group of items that seem to relate to actual or purported costs for journal publishing, at least in part. Rather than the usual chronological order, we begin with one that at least indirectly addresses Anderson's list.

*In Open Access Publishing There Are No Free Lunches..... but it is really really cheap.*

That's Doug Rocks-Macqueen on October 23, 2014 at *Doug's Archaeology*. His previous post—"[Open Access Does NOT equal You, the Author, Paying](#)"—discusses the phony argument that OA "hurts young scholars...because they can't afford \$2,000, \$3,000, \$10,000 to get published in OA publications." One comment pointed to Anderson's 82 things and wondered how those things could possibly add up for a no-fee (or low-fee) OA journal. This post offers some responses; it's charming and not all that long; you really should read it directly. (But I'll offer a few excerpts and notes.)

The first subhead and paragraph are precious and also pointedly appropriate:

### Publishers Are Like Snow Flakes

No one knows the exact number of journal publishers there are but I have seen ranges of 25-35k journals published by 10-15k publishers. They range from one man bands putting out a few articles a year to giant publishers like Elsevier with thousands of titles to mega journals like PLOS ONE. Which makes it impossible to know exactly how everyone deals with this issue.

How many refereed journals *are* there? I've been using 28,000 as a rough estimate (which makes about one-quarter of them OA), but with no assurance—and it's certainly true that each situation is different.

The graphic that follows is from Ubiquity Press' "Publishing with Ubiquity Press" page, under the heading "Article Processing Charges" (which for this publisher average \$500). It shows how that \$500 breaks down by percentage: 38% "indirect" (costs that aren't article-specific, e.g., running the business, promoting OA, maintaining the publishing platform), 34% editorial and production costs, 8% "publishing, promotion, indexing & archiving," 4% to administer APCs—and 16% "waiver premium," the amount allowed to handle fee waivers for, presumably, up to one out of six articles. That graphic is followed by this (and more):

Ubiquity Press is completely sustainable based on APCs alone. We were born open and electronic, without legacy costs such as managing subscriptions and print distribution. Our platform makes use of open source software wherever possible, and all of our production work is done offshore by a highly skilled but cost-effective team.

In my mid-2014 pass at *DOAJ*, Ubiquity was identified as the publisher of ten journals (there may be others where they publish for a society), none of them prolific (peak total for the ten was 139 articles), so it must be a very efficient operation.

Getting back to the post at hand, DR-M loves Ubiquity's transparency and asserts that they not only do the things a publisher needs to do, they have high quality service.

Then he gives another example (briefly noted earlier): the *Journal of Machine Learning Research*, as discussed in a [March 6, 2012 post](#) "An efficient journal" by Stuart Shieber at *The Occasional Pamphlet*. Shieber notes that Kent Anderson wrote a snarky and somewhat dismissive response to a comment about *JMLR*'s no-APC operation (Anderson ends "You seem to believe in fairies," the mark of a thoughtful response) and, since Shieber knows a lot about the journal, he comments. *JMLR* is one of those wonderful cases I hope to see a lot more of in the future—where the editorial board of a subscription journal resigns and starts a nonprofit (and these days OA) competitor. Shieber's post spells out in some detail how *JMLR* has operated; the costs average out to \$6.50 per article, an amount covered by small donations or institutional subsidy. *JMLR* publishes more than 100 articles per year and has a healthy Impact Factor; it's a significant journal.

DR-M then spells out the actual, unavoidable costs for running a proper OA journal (linking to Martin Paul Eve posts on the issue); it comes out to something like \$535 a year, covering web hosting, DOI/Crossref and CLOCKSS archival services.

There's more here, and part of it (for journals that don't rely on authors for copyediting and layout) has to do with outsourcing to poor nations with educated groups, e.g. India.

True to his theme, DR-M points out that this model won't work for every journal—but that there are other systems that do work. He mentions three national journal systems, but omits perhaps the largest and most impressive of the lot, SciELO in its various national versions.

The close:

Open Access in which the authors and readers don't have to pay is 100% financially and technically feasible, or at the very least small amounts. But, not very likely to happen anytime soon. We live in a warped system where the name of where you publish matters more than what you published. Something I will focus on in future posts on the subject. Needless to say, there are a lot of vested interests in the current system that need to be overcome. That is what we should be

focusing on, not the money or technical abilities which are of a minor concern.

I don't have a lot more to say here.

*Are we paying US\$3000 per article just for paywalls?*

Speaking of SciELO...Björn Brembs offers this brief commentary [on July 30, 2014](#) at his blog.

This is an easy calculation: for each subscription article, we [pay](#) on average US\$5000. A publicly accessible article in one of SciELO's 900 journals [costs](#) only US\$90 on average. Subtracting about 35% in publisher profits, the remaining difference between legacy and SciELO costs amount to US\$3160 per article. With paywalls being the only major difference between legacy and SciELO publishing (after all, writing and peer-review is done for free by researchers for both operations), it is straightforward to conclude that about US\$3000 are going towards making each article more difficult to access, than if we published it on our personal webpage. Now that is what I'd call obscene.

Well...if you go to [the 2009 article](#) about SciELO (the link at "costs" in the paragraph above) and page forward to page 123, you'll see this for SciELO Brazil:

Considering the overall operation of the SciELO Brazilian collection, including the costs related to technical co-operation for the development and interoperation of the other national and thematic collections, the online up-to-date publication of the entire collection averages about US\$90 per each new article. This estimate includes the actual publishing of the new article (\$56 per article, or 62% of the total cost); the operation of the SciELO network portal (\$4.20, or 5%), which provides access and retrieval to all of the collections, journals, and articles; SciELO governance, management, and technical co-operation (\$2.90, or 3%); the development and maintenance of the technological platform (\$22.70, or 25%); and the marketing, dissemination, and expansion of the network (\$4.20, or 5%). Alternatively, if the complete editorial flow, from the reception of manuscripts, the peer-review process, editing, and the online SciELO publication, is taken into account, the total cost for each new SciELO Brazilian collection article is estimated to be between US\$200 and \$600. The costs associated with the other national collections are generally much lower.

I have to say that SciELO strikes me as one of the better OA platforms—as a reader and researcher, I find it more user-friendly than OJS, for example.

The paragraph quoted first (and a table restating the numbers) is all there is to Brembs' post itself (and Brembs is absolutely and unapologeti-

cally one of the more radical voices in the field). In any case, the second paragraph appears to represent real numbers from an authoritative voice.

### *How Much Does It Cost eLife to Publish an Article?*

Back to Kent Anderson at *the scholarly kitchen*, this time [on August 18, 2014](#), with a startling claim based on a link to *eLife*'s [2013 financial statements](#):

Based on these financial reports, it cost *eLife* approximately US\$14,000 to publish an article in 2013.

Even noting that *eLife* apparently wants to be another *Nature* or *Science*, that seems outrageous. Anderson seems to project that \$14,000 as a steady *per-article* cost, thus suggesting that *eLife* will chew through its large grant funding pretty rapidly. Indeed, in response to a question, Anderson explicitly says “I do not think economies of scale apply.”

I won't argue with the last paragraph in the post:

Data points like these are worth adding to discussions of APCs and sustainable OA. Given author behavior and what's emerging on the landscape as various entrants adopt the Gold OA business model, it seems reasonable to think that a wide variety of APCs will develop over time. The market for Gold OA is evolving and maturing, responding as authors vote with their feet and as various approaches to competition and value creation emerge on the market.

In fact, a wide variety of APCs has already emerged—with the dominant figure (especially for social sciences and humanities) being \$0. Of course, “sustainable” is a key term for those arguing that it takes Big Bucks to run a journal, and I suppose you can question a journal's sustainability until it's been around at least a decade. (Do subscription journals ever disappear? Is the Pope Catholic?)

Nobody from *eLife* commented, which I find odd, unless that journal (which Kent Anderson seems to have a *serious* problem with, in posts unrelated to this essay's topic) is simply ignoring *the scholarly kitchen*.

### *The cost of Open Access*

This one's by Bernd Pulverer on October 23, 2014 at Wiley's *Exchanges*—and I'll admit that I get nervous when somebody writing on a major publisher's site starts out with this: “We all want Open Access—authors, readers, funders and indeed publishers alike.” That's true enough—if publishers can redefine OA so they maintain their current profit levels, which makes no sense in the long run. (Yes, that's personal opinion; I originally wrote “corrupts the whole OA concept.”) Pulverer is chief editor for *The EMBO Journal* and claims that one of EMBO's journals, *Molecular Systems Biology*, was “one of the first OA journals to be founded” and that it has the highest Impact Factor of any OA journal. (Cutely, he adds a parenthetical phrase “(for



whatever that metric is worth),” but he also mentioned the IF in the third sentence of the article...) DOAJ shows *Molecular Systems Biology* starting in 2005 and my study universe shows more than 2,000 OA journals started in 2004 or before, so I suppose “one of the first” needs “2,500 or so” added. It is *certainly* not one of the more than 100 pioneering OA journals founded in 1995 or before, the ones I’d think actually deserve “one of the first.”

But never mind. Pulverer is so pro-OA that he finds it necessary to poke at any advantages of OA, and tells us that because EMBO’s journals are so highly selective, “OA at EMBO has to cost much more than the 2,000 US\$ limit currently considered reasonable by most researchers, institutions and funders.” As for being a trifle less selective, he mentions *PLOS ONE* and shortly thereafter says EMBO definitely doesn’t want to “‘open the gates’ to half-baked or low quality science.” Not that there’s any connection, mind you.

He suggests a couple of alternatives, including submission fees; he does *not* provide any transparency as to EMBO’s costs; and he says this, which I find hard to accept as a firm and eternal statement:

At the end of the day, the real cost of publishing a paper will not change, whether or not it’s published OA.

Improved methods? More realistic acceptance levels? The fact that storage costs go down by half every year? Nope: *The real cost of publishing a paper will not change.* He tells us that those lovely funds that could make all papers OA are “currently sequestered in library budgets.” He also says, again without facts to back it up, that “OA at high quality journals barely breaks even at present.” And, to be sure, he fears *powerful library consortia* that, by taking over APC payments, could force APC discounts that would make it hard for independent OA journals to survive “without compromising on quality.” He repeats at the end that, eager as EMBO Press is to go fully OA, “The costs will need to be covered, and at high-level journals they will be higher than a couple of thousand dollars, as has always been the case.” Because he says so.

Cute comments, with Robert Dingwall pointing to Anderson’s 82 things and ending with this (after saying Green OA versions won’t be as good as published versions): “In which case librarians will find a need to continue subscriptions rather than diverting their funds into sofas and coffee shops.” Wow.

*I am Michael Eisen...*

Technically, [this lengthy stream](#)—a *reddit* AMA (ask me anything) with Michael Eisen from early 2015—doesn’t directly speak to actual costs. But Eisen has opinions on a wide range of things (and does a remarkably frank job of answering questions), and he says more than once that PLOS’s APCs are too high—because of inefficiencies in the publishing system, inefficiencies he believes will be corrected.

Eisen's also one who believes that the review process should be inverted, that is, that peer review should appear after publication. With that model and the right efficiencies, he says at one point that he believes the entire publishing process could cost \$5 to \$10 per article.

I did not read all 736 comments, so I may have missed important notes; I did scan the top 200. Lots of interesting stuff here.

## External Costs

That heading may not make sense. Let's say that here's a group of pieces that seemed to be about publishing costs from an external perspective rather than the perspectives above.

### *Economics 404: Fixing What's Broke*

That's Kevin L. Smith [on November 14, 2013](#) in "Peer to Peer Review" at *Library Journal*. It's an Open Access Week column. He references a [Heather Joseph article](#) about "the first decade of the open access movement." Allow me a grumpy senior moment: the first decade of the open access movement ended in 1999, not 2012 or 2013. Although it's true that the formal definition of OA dates to 2002, there were hundreds (yes, hundreds) of online scholarly journals with open access to all articles before that date. Or maybe it doesn't count as a Movement until there's a Big International Meeting?

Smith makes an extremely cogent point about the future of OA, especially as big publishers have embraced it on their own special terms:

What problems can OA solve? The answer seems obvious: open access will solve the problem of highly restricted and limited access to scholarship. One of the greatest achievements of the OA movement is to have largely won this debate about access. The times are past when publishers argued that the access problem was illusory; now they are tripping over themselves, by and large, to get out front and trumpet their commitment to improved access, as long as it increases their revenues.

And therein lies the problem I want to focus on here; a somewhat different problem that OA can solve. A variety of items over the past couple of weeks have reminded me that the economics of traditional publishing is a mess; it is a deeply inefficient business that has been protected, largely owing to the copyright monopoly, from the ordinary competition that usually forces businesses to get smarter and operate better. So one of the problems that OA can help solve is one of scholarship locked up in the hands of badly run businesses that have come to believe that their inefficient and ineffective ways of doing business must be preserved at all costs.

He uses an interesting example, the business practices of Harvard Business Publications, which does its damndest to demand *additional* fees to make

the articles libraries have already paid for useful in classroom settings. When called to task for this practice, [HBP's defense](#) basically boils down to “we ~~want~~ need more money.” (If you go to that link, read not only the relatively short piece itself but also the comments.)

How does Smith's piece fit into “external costs”? Because he's talking about HBP's inefficiencies and bloated staff, and specifically says this:

The defense of HBP makes the fairly inane point that “high-quality information...comes at a cost.” Of course there is a cost, but as the ones who pay those costs, we are entitled to ask if they are reasonable, or if they have been inflated way beyond the normal amount required to produce the product plus an acceptable profit. In the publishing industry, we can find plenty of evidence of the latter.

He calls for librarians to reject absurd publisher demands and to demand more transparency and even competition. Looking at a proposal for a “web-scale university press” (that appears to have all the old inefficiencies built in), he says:

One of the fundamental prerequisites for a web-scale publishing operation, it seems to me, is a radical reassessment of the entire process, seeking cost savings. That may happen in some cases, but we, the customers for academic work, certainly do not know about it and never see it reflected in the prices we pay. It would be a great shame if that ever-more-costly black box were just moved to the web as is.

I don't have much to add here, but it's worth remembering that “\$5,000 per article” is *not* demonstrable costs for an efficient publisher of a quality online scholarly journal; it's the *revenue* of scholarly journals allocated on a per-article basis, including every inefficiency and 30%-40% profit.

### *Academic Publishing – added cost is not added value*

This post, by Peter Coles [on March 19, 2013](#) at *In the Dark*, may be slightly extreme, but with “some” added to the title before the first “added” I'd be hard-pressed to disagree.

Coles was reading the proceedings of a UK House of Lords inquiry into OA and ran across an exchange between Lord Rees of Ludlow and Steven Hall, managing director of the Institute of Physics Publishing company.

Lord Rees asked about arXiv and the extent to which it was used and seemed to coexist with published journals. Most of Hall's response:

When I speed-read the pile of submissions on the train last night I noticed at least three references to the success of the arXiv and its lack of impact on physics publishing. There are a number of myths about the arXiv and it would be good to deal with those here. First, it does not at all

cover all of physics. There are certain sub-disciplines where there are very high levels of deposit in the arXiv; there are others where there is none whatsoever. To come back to your point, even within a discipline like physics there are real differences of approach. The other thing about the arXiv is that it is essentially a workflow tool... Physicists will deposit early versions of their paper so that they can be looked at by their colleagues. It is a means for physicists to distribute to their immediate peers those early results of their research. It is a sharing tool. Most of the content of the archive is pre-print, though. It is not accepted manuscripts; it is not works that have gone through peer review. My own company's policy there is the author can do whatever he or she likes with the pre-print, *before we have added any value to it*. We take a different view once we have added some value to it. The arXiv cannot be compared directly to, say, typical institutional depositories, which might have lots of accepted manuscripts in them. It coexists with formal publishing. The vast majority of physicists who use the arXiv would say that it is complementary to formal publication.

Rees responded that he'd like to see the model extended to other areas of science and—tellingly—that “Formal publication gives the accreditation but I think most read the arXiv.”

Coles calls Hall's comments “notable only for their irrelevance.”

I'd say that the arXiv needn't be viewed as complementary to formal publication but that the arXiv gives us a way to make formal publication entirely redundant. It's only a small step to turn that potential into reality, which is why IOPP wishes to dismiss it.

Hall is one who “favors” gold OA as long as IOPP can set fees as high as it would like to. But that's not an issue of gold OA vs. green OA or no OA; it's an issue of “Give Us the Gold” OA, where existing publishers retain all their profits but get the money up front.

Where Coles may be extreme is in calling out the italicized sentence (his emphasis, I believe) and saying “IOPP does not add value to research publications, it merely adds cost. Any value that is added derives from peer review, which in most case costs nothing at all and can in any case be done independently of any publisher.” While I'd like to applaud that statement, it may be a *trifle* unfair—IOPP may do copyediting and layout as well. The question, then, would be as it is for other asserted costs and externalities: Is the value added remotely worth the price?

I should applaud something else Coles does here, although it's not relevant to this particular essay: He says the Institute of Physics needs to find a way of surviving that doesn't rely on income from “the [academic journal racket](#).” (That link leads to a 2009 post that's fairly clear about Coles' opinion of the situation.)

The first comment is from a scholar who says every submission he's made to arXiv is of the final version of the article—after acceptance but before publication. He believes that's true for many other researchers, undercutting Hall's claim.

### *The costs for going Gold in the Netherlands*

Wouter Gerritsma posted this piece [on March 5, 2014](#) at *WoW! Wouter on the Web*. He was asked to estimate what it would cost if the Netherlands migrated to 100% gold OA. He shows the slides presented as a result of his investigation and considers how he arrived at his numbers.

To summarize, he says 10.7% of the articles from Dutch scholars in 2013 in the Web of Science were published in OA journals (noting that Web of Science included at the time only 718 OA journals out of more than 6,000—almost all of the 718 APC-charging journals). He calculates an average of \$1,229 (€1087) APC per article and concludes that it would cost €43,500,000 to cover the 40,000 articles he believes Dutch scholars would publish in 2014—which translates to \$49.2 million, about \$12 million more than Dutch universities are currently spending on journal subscriptions. He concludes: “That is a lot of money.”

Well, yes, it is—and it raises more questions than it answers. Some commenters say the actual costs may be *higher*; some say the added cost is \$40 million because publishers won't actually drop subscription prices; one (our friend Brembs) notes that there's something odd about Dutch publishing if the numbers are so far out of whack. (Brembs also notes that SciELO-priced publishing, rather than sticking with the current commercial publishers, would bring the whole price down to about €4 million or \$4.5 million.) One digs into the figures and suggests that full Gold OA would be about 14% cheaper *even without* moving to more efficient/realistic publishers. I must admit that I find it fascinating that, with roughly 5% of U.S. population, Dutch universities apparently only spend 2% as much on journals: either they're getting *really good deals* or the Netherlands has a much sparser higher education system or something's off with the numbers (or some combination of the above).

Perhaps the key point here is in Brembs' comments, whether or not you agree with his generally radical approaches: Gold OA will *only* be truly cost-effective for libraries and the research communities if the gold goes to efficient, contemporary publishing operations or publishing equivalents. Otherwise, it's mostly a shell game, with non-academic readers the big winners but with libraries likely the big losers.

### *Let Elsevier Go: The potential savings from cancelling journal subscriptions would cover the Open Access transition*

A long title for this Cameron Neylon piece [on November 24, 2014](#) at *The Impact Blog* (London School of Economics and Political Science or LSE).

Actually, it originally appeared with a different title on the *PLOS Open Blog*. Yes, he does reference Gerritsma's research. The lede:

A central question for many people involved in Open Access is whether it can, or will save money. Most analyses suggest that a fully OA environment is cheaper (or at worst similar in cost) for institutions (see below for the catch that every analysis that says costs will rise misses). But for research intensive institutions in particular, taking the lead by investing in a transition to Open Access while also covering the costs of existing subscriptions could be expensive. At the same time real concerns are emerging about some traditional publishers successfully driving costs higher. How can countries and institutions invest in creating an Open Access environment that serves their needs and brings costs down without spending too much on the transition?

Neylon offers two routes to minimize the "costs of transition": negotiate direct rebates from subscription prices for APCs paid to those publishers (that is, eliminate double-dipping), or cut subscriptions and use the liberated budgets to support OA. The second is, of course, more radical.

Neylon reinterprets Gerritsma's figures in the light of only about 60% of articles involving Dutch scholars being billed to Dutch addresses, which would mean that 100% OA replacement—even at the current rates—would *save* a lot of money. But that might not be true if Elsevier is able to retain its extremely high APCs (the average for Elsevier papers paid for by the Wellcome Trust is €3,100 or \$3,500). In that case, total costs *might* rise.

The answer, then, is to *publish somewhere else*.

The reality is that if the Netherlands wants to use the leverage that their resources provides they should cancel the subscription and liberate the funding. Those resources can be used to shape the future scholarly communications market. This analysis is highly sensitive to the average cost of APCs paid. The Netherlands, with the resources available to it, has the leverage to shape the market. They could choose to spend that money so as to reduce APCs by favouring lower cost suppliers. This will help to realise the potential savings that an Open Access environment could bring. They could use liberated resources to fund APCs. Alternately they could support new publishing ventures or platforms for low cost publication. All of these are possible – all of these would have a massive boost from €7M. None of them are possible without cutting subscriptions.

The €7M figure? Apparently a guesstimate of what what Dutch universities now pay Elsevier for subscriptions.

*We're a small learned society charging £25. What are we doing wrong?:  
OA for small society journals*

Dr Martin Paul Eve posted this [on November 2, 2014](#) at his eponymous blog (with the prefatory honorific this PhD seems to feel strongly about), and it's his attempt to respond to a question at a speech. The question, as Eve relays it:

“We're a small learned society, charging £25 for our journal. We use the funds to give reductions to Ph.D. students and, when people want their articles to be openly available, we let them. We don't have many subscribers and we publish about 10 articles a year. Tell us what we're doing wrong.”

Here's what *my* answer would be: At 10 articles a year, you're in the very small journal category; costs related to the online articles should be so small that one of the universities with members in the society should be able to absorb them entirely. Go no-fee OA. Keep charging £25 for a print subscription, if there are people who want it that way.

Oh, and another answer: If libraries are paying for those subscriptions, you're asking them to subsidize your students. That's inappropriate.

But never mind. Eve responds in terms of what OA can do for small society journals. He notes that not all journal publishers are the same, but then suggests that the subscription fee instead become a membership fee, possibly with early access to articles: if 120 members signed up, that would be enough to pay for 10 articles at Ubiquity Press cost levels. Finally, he suggests that OA might increase the readership and membership—but the way he says it:

I won't recap the download figures, or the citation studies on OA articles, all of which are well known. Instead, consider that, if you want the broadest audience, it makes much more sense to underwrite the costs to get to OA and then let anyone see the work. Unless, of course, you're happy with a small, insular set of readers. This, though, comes with a longer term danger of disciplinary invisibility and the commensurate reductions in funding for work that this entails.

Eve, of course, very much wants to head up a humanities/social science OA megajournal, presumably with megafunding and megaimportance. That may inform the tone of that paragraph.

## APCs

We move from the costs of publishing to the charges for publishing, which are not at all the same thing.

## What is wrong with the Article Processing Charges market?

Witold Kieńc posted this on April 23, 2014 at *Open Science*. He notes the Wellcome Trust data showing an average of \$3,000 per article in APCs—which, as he notes, is much higher than previous studies of the OA market.

It appears though that the Wellcome Trust paid so much because it supported Open Access publications for the most part in subscription based journals, which in fact is something exceptional since only 1% of scientific articles are published in this way. Publishing Open Access content in Open Access journals is much more popular (about 11% of all articles indexed by Scopus were published in full OA journals) [1] and were much less expensive. We could not see these facts in the statistics on the Wellcome Trust spending, due to two issues: Open Access in “hybrid” journals is more popular in biomedical sciences and the majority of WT funding concerns this field and, even more importantly, since the organization covers entire APC, regardless of their amount, authors have no reason to save money on charges.

I believe he’s saying that only 1% of articles are published as OA articles in *hybrid* journals, which is 1% too high, but the paragraph otherwise makes sense.

Authors, who do not have to economise in addition to having conducted brilliant research thanks to appropriate funding, tend to choose well known journals, owned by big publishers. This tendency is enforced by the criteria of professional promotion that (in some countries) favor journal Impact Factor as the most important measure of scientific quality. A big part of these well known journals are subscription-based, but almost always offer the opportunity to publish Open Access content, for a fee which is two times or more higher than in the majority of Open Access journals.

Not only do hybrid journals double-dip, they overcharge—but if your funders are openhanded and your primary concern is your own Impact Factor, well, why not?

He points to [a study](#) that, among other things, confirms again that OA journals from publishers that don’t also publish subscription journals tend to charge much lower APCs than do those from the biggies. The authors of that study (Bo-Christer Björk and David Solomon) call the hybrid journal market “highly dysfunctional” and suggest three possible scenarios to improve the situation:

Scenario A: Creation of mechanisms at the local level for hybrid articles to ensure savings in subscription costs for a specific institution (for example by an agreement between funders and publishers)



Scenario B: APCs are funded according to multi-tier, value based price caps (funders pay no more than X-value for publication, and the X-value differs among journals, depending on their quality).

Scenario C: The funders cover a fixed percentage of the APCs above a maximum value whilst universities (or authors) cover the remaining portion from other sources.

My preferred solution, “don’t underwrite APCs for hybrid journals,” is almost certainly a non-starter. Although I’m not the only one who feels this way:

One might say that the easiest solution for funders would be to just force authors to publish in fully Open Access journals by not refunding APC in hybrid journals at all. This might be true but some scholars believe that this would be against their freedom to choose a place to publish their work. Others may also think that it is wise to allow authors to publish their work in the top-rank, toll access journals and promote self-archiving in Open Access repositories. Self-archiving is usually allowed after an embargo period, which can last from 6 months to 2 years. As [Kent Anderson has stressed](#), the Wellcome Trust often pays thousands of dollars for immediate Open Access in journals which allow free self-archiving after an embargo period. There is some truth in it, but in fact research has shown that authors themselves are willing to pay for immediate Open Access, even if it is known that the article will be available for free after 6 months. Only the price is a problem. According to the PNAS survey from 2004 half of their authors “were willing to pay the extra charge, and the share of those willing to pay different levels showed a steep price elasticity (79% at 500 USD, 15% at 1,000 USD, 4% at 1,500 USD and 2% at 2,000 USD).”

I might note that delayed access is, to some extent, denied access—that in some fields “6 months to 2 years” means substantially disenfranchising scholars at less wealthy institutions, but that’s another discussion.

### *Open Access Does NOT equal You, the Author, Paying*

I’ve already linked to this Doug Rocks-Macqueen post [on October 20, 2014](#) at *Doug’s Archaeology*, but only in the context of actual costs. It turns out to be a worthwhile post in its own right, beginning with his takedown of the notion that going OA automatically means paying \$2,000, \$3,000 or \$10,000.

I highly suspect that most of you feel this way because you have tried to publish with Springer, Elsevier, Wiley, etc. and have gone through their automatic system that asks you if you want to have your article made Open Access for only \$6,000. Which makes their offer of color printing a steal at only \$1000 extra.

If you have had this experience I would be surprised that you don't view Open Access as a scam to fleece you out of your hard earned research money- or if you are an independent scholar, your lunch/rent money.

Unfortunately, a bit later DR-M seems to adopt the *wrong* definition of gold OA as involving APCs—and he seems to think that a “year or two” embargo period is OA (he says it's “not OA in some people's eyes,” and I guess I'm one of those people). But then there's this:

They Charge But Do They Really?

Famously, PLOS ONE, the mega Open Access Journal, [waives fees if requested](#). Here is what [Internet Archaeology](#) has to say about the issue of affording fees:

'All proposals are assessed purely on their academic quality. The decision to publish an article in Internet Archaeology is wholly independent of payment or ability to pay. However where publication costs can be covered by your research sponsor, we appreciate your assistance in applying for these costs (also called APCs). Waivers are possible and considered on a case-by-case basis.'

Reputable OA publishers will waive fees if you can not afford them. I love the work that Internet Archaeology does and would try my hardest to find funds to support their work. However, that system is based on scholarly comradery and not exhortation.

I have to insert an aside: I would flag Internet Archaeology as “C” for one simple reason: *they don't state a maximum or typical APC*. “APCs are not fixed since articles in IA vary widely in both length and technical requirements, but an estimate can be calculated from a fully formed proposal so the more detail you can provide at this stage, the better.” No, just no. If you're charging by page and for color figures, give the charges. Otherwise, state a maximum charge and say that actual charges may be lower. But that's an aside—and as it happens, this journal apparently wasn't added to DOAJ until December 2014, so it's not in my study anyway.

DR-M also notes that some journals have such low fees that they may not be an issue—e.g., *STAR: Science and Technology of Archaeological Research*, the journal of the Society for Archaeological Sciences, charges \$1,200—but waives the charge for members. And membership costs all of \$20 (\$15 for students).

*Nature-branded journal goes Open Access-only: Can we celebrate already?*

This discussion by Miguel Said appeared [October 26, 2014](#) on the *Open Knowledge Blog*; it's a translation of a post on the Brazilian Open Science Working Group's blog.

I suspect the title gives much of it away: turning *Nature Communications* into a gold OA journal with exceedingly high APCs (\$5,000), where it was previously a “hybrid” journal with exceedingly high APCs, is not necessarily cause for celebration any more than *Science Advances* from AAAS—gold OA with exceedingly high APCs—is reason for celebration. In both cases, we’re faced with examples of the “Give Us The Gold” approach to OA, where publishers continue to meet or even exceed profits by setting very high APCs. (At least *Nature Communications* defaults to a CC BY license; *Science Advances* defaults to an NC license, far less desirable.)

Unfortunately, the post has difficulties of its own. Said describes gold OA “where publication in journals is usually subject to a fee paid by authors of approved manuscripts,” which is wrong on both counts. To wit, and at risk of sounding like a broken record, *most gold OA journals do not charge such fees* (67% of those I studied)—and such fees are typically *not* paid by authors. Indeed, some OA journals with APCs explicitly say that, if an author doesn’t have grant money that will cover it, there is no fee.

There’s a lengthy discussion of “predatory publishers” that not only seems to assume that such journals are a major issue but seems to suggest that APCs inherently corrupt publishing—missing the very real point that, since subscription publishers charge more as article counts increase, the supposed motivation to accept more papers (even if they’re unworthy) is *precisely* as great for subscription publishers as for APC-charging OA publishers. (Oddly, Said seems to think that PLOS’s non-profit nature makes it immune from such pressures; I see no reason to believe that’s true.)

In the end, this seems to be mostly an argument for green OA, and an odd one at that.

### *A Pay-it-Forward Approach to Open Access Publishing: Interview with Neil Christensen of UC Press*

This piece by Danielle Padula appeared [October 14, 2014](#) at *Scholastica*. I love the pull quote that leads the article, above a portrait of Christensen:

“I think what’s really unsustainable is the notion that the academic process can uphold the big profit margins that commercial publishing houses are showing—that’s unsustainable.”

We’ll get to sustainability at the end of this essay, but that’s one of the key points about the economics: publishing has to be sustainable both for entities that produce journals and for those paying for journal production directly or indirectly, including libraries.

Christensen, director of digital development for the University of California Press, was formerly at Wiley and Nature Publishing Group. He’s part of the team introducing a new OA journal with midrange APCs that uses

part of those APCs to “pay it forward,” encouraging editors and reviewers to support institutional OA initiatives or pay APCs for future authors.

Christensen is asserting that UCP’s APC level is “as low as possible.” Berkeley is in a high-cost/high-wage area, so \$625 (the portion of the APC that UCP believes is necessary for publishing functions) is being set forth as a sort of maximal point. Here’s a particularly interesting discussion (but in fact the whole interview is interesting):

When you look at the open access APCs that commercial publishers offer, they charge three, four, and five thousand dollars to publish. That’s a lot of money, and out of that money not a single cent goes back to the reviewers. Of course the editors of those journals get paid for their work. But the reviewers, none of them see that money, and their hosting institutions who provide the offices and the computers, they don’t see any of that money.

Take that three or four thousand dollar APC and then compare it to what we’re trying to roll out: an APC of \$875, and out of that \$875 we are going to pay \$250 to the reviewers and editors, that leaves us with \$625 of revenue we need on the publication side to pay the platform partners and transaction partners. If we can do all of that with \$625 and we’re a small publisher, then you’ve got to wonder what the cost is for those publishers charging three and four thousand dollars who have greater scale than us and can do it for less money. There’s definitely a huge gap there.

The libraries are buckling under journal costs. That’s hurting everyone, and it’s hurting university presses that are trying to solve the problem of not having the same revenues from the books that have been their lifeblood for a long time. So what we’re doing here is trying to help the libraries with freeing up money that they can use on things other than just buying consortia deals from big publishers. And we’re also trying to show the world that there is actually a potential way to share value with the academy. It may not be a lot, but we are sharing value. I think traditionally there has been this notion that the world as we know it would end tomorrow if big publishers had to pay for the services that they’re receiving for free from the academy, and that’s not the case. There will be many people once our journal launches who will come back and say “this is unsustainable.” But I think what’s really unsustainable is the notion that the academic process can uphold the big profit margins that commercial publishing houses are showing—that’s unsustainable.

And there’s that quintessential statement on sustainability.

The new journal may be a bit strange: it has one ISSN but will have several domains. The “pay it forward” portion is certainly interesting—it’s based on the amount of editorial activity (peer review and otherwise) each participant engages in and the total amount of editorial activity. Initial feedback suggests that about 50% of reviewers would keep the money and 50%

would pay it forward; as with everything else in this experiment, UCP will be looking at results.

As regards humanities and social sciences, where most OA at this point does *not* involve APCs, there's this:

The UC Press has always been sort of predominantly based in social sciences and humanities. And with that in mind, what we're also trying to do is say, "can we create a journal model that actually works for both disciplines?" So if you go by what we're expecting, which is that 50% of editors and reviewers will pay it forward, then approximately 15% of all papers can be published for free [based on expected donations and the \$875 APC]. Some significant portion of that 15% could come from the social sciences or the humanities, so that would be the idea. We know that \$875, even though it's lower than many OA journals, is still a big chunk of money. But we could offer 15% of papers full or partially sponsored publication. Maybe a big portion of those papers will be in the social sciences and the humanities, but it's difficult to say. It will also depend on who applies for those waivers.

Is it coincidental that 15% is so close to the 16% of Ubiquity Publishing's APCs explicitly set aside for waivers? (It probably is coincidental that, for 2013 in the 6,490 DOAJ journals I could fully analyze, 14.4% of articles were in the humanities and social sciences.)

It's an interesting approach—and pretty clearly an experimental project. I suggest reading the entire interview. (You can probably skip the comments, including Sanford Thatcher's apparent need to act as an apologist for Elsevier and its buddies.)

### *'Paying It Forward' Publishing*

This Carl Straumsheim article [on February 10, 2015](#) at *Inside Higher Ed* is on the same topic—the new journal's called *Collabra* and the new monograph publisher is Luminos—and offers some additional information on the effort.

*Collabra* is intended to be a megajournal (whatever *that* means—as of 2013, at least, there was a 12:1 papers-published ratio between the largest multidisciplinary megajournal and the second largest) but not an "all fields" one:

Although described as a megajournal, *Collabra* will see a more modest launch. In its first phase, the journal will pair research from faculty in life and biomedical sciences and ecological and environmental sciences—disciplines where research grants are easier to come by—with research from faculty in social and behavioral sciences. The second phase includes a similar pairing: computer science and medical and health sciences with the humanities.

Expectations are to publish 70 papers in 2015.

## *The sticker price on AAAS's Zune journal*

I'm not sure why Zen Faulkes, writing [on August 12, 2014](#) at *NeuroDojo*, thinks “Zune journal” is an appropriate moniker for *Science Advances*, unless she's suggesting that it's doomed to failure. This is a short item and I'm going to quote the whole initial item (which is followed by some updates):

We now have the first look at the American Association for the Advancement of Science's promised open access journal, [Science Advances](#).

Wow, that's expensive.

They want \$3,000 as an article processing fee. I have no idea what services they offer will justify a price that is [double that of PLOS ONE](#) and [thirty times that of PeerJ](#).

It's as if they don't want it to succeed, [as if their publisher thinks that the open access model of scientific publishing is fundamentally flawed](#)...

Ah, OK, so the “Zune” tag is pretty much what I suggested. Now as to that final link...it's to an earlier *NeuroDojo* post, “Will AAAS get burned in the (scholarly) kitchen?” That post discusses Kent Anderson's new role as publisher for AAAS and his clear disdain for OA (unless, of course, it's Give Us the Gold OA). Worth reading, this time including the comments. Also worth noting that *Science Advances* offers \$3,000 as an APC only if you're willing to accept the more restrictive CC BY-NC license and the paper's not too long. For a paper longer than 15 pages and where the funding agency insists on full OA, that is, a CC BY license, the APC could be \$5,500.

## Controversies

The whole OA situation is full of ongoing controversies, especially where economics are involved—but these items seem to fit better here than anywhere else.

### *Apotheosis of cynicism and deceit from scholarly publishers*

The trouble with Michael Eisen, who posted this on [May21, 2013](#) at *it is NOT junk*, is that he's so given to understatement...

In this case, he's just a trifle tweaked about a letter that the Association of American Publishers sent to the California Assembly opposing AB609, a proposal to make state-funded research freely available. The key quote:

State Universities Could be Faced with Open Access Publishing Charges Estimated at More Than \$1 Million Annually

While AB 609 does not require authors to publish in author-funded open access journals, many journal publishers charge an article publishing fee to researchers to cover the cost to the publishers for making the journal articles freely available online. These costs could be substantial and are fundamentally unknowable, but the author of AB 609 has said that they may be similar to those in the implementation of the U.S. National Institutes of Health (NIH) policy, upon which AB 609 has been modeled. In a congressional hearing on open access in 2008, the director of NIH indicated that the agency spends \$100 million a year for page fees and open access charges. Therefore, one might estimate that California could spend \$1.1 million each year on these charges, as California's research budget is 1% of that of NIH (\$332 million vs. \$30 billion). This rough estimate is likely an underestimate, as it only accounts for publishing charges and not for infrastructure, compliance, or the variation in open access charges.

Um. Or, as Eisen says:

Do you follow the publishers' argument here? Any time an author voluntarily chooses to publish in an open access journal, even if they are under no legislative mandate or pressure to do so, the publishers want those costs to count against any legislation that seeks to improve public access. This is pure balderdash.

Eisen notes that the \$100 million figure, an estimate by NIH's Elias Zerhouni in 2008, includes *page charges*—the fees paid to *subscription* journals on behalf of authors. Eisen's best guess is that total revenues for APC-charging OA journals in 2008 was no more than \$20 million, no more than half of that coming from NIH, which says that most of that \$100 million was going to subscription publishers.

He also comments on other segments of the letter, such as the one that says California universities not only won't see any countervailing savings, they may have to pay *more* because publishers will increase subscription prices to make up for cancellations—and that argument is so circular it makes my head spin. The AAP also asserts that somehow publisher ability to carry out peer review will be undermined by all this lost revenue that won't save California any money.

Huh? They can not have it both ways. Either publisher revenues will drop OR California will save no money. These can not both be true at the same time. Even if you buy their argument that the cancellation of subscriptions will undermine peer review, in order for this to happen, subscriptions would have to be cut, which would save California money.

There's more here, and I think Eisen—in this case—is *not* overstating the sheer nonsense of the letter, which also asserts that the loss of revenue (which the letter says *won't happen*) will endanger 17,000 California jobs

in the publishing industry. Eisen doesn't think there are 17,000 Californians working in *scholarly* publishing (and based on publisher and editorial locations, he's probably right)—and, by the way, one sizable group of California-based scholarly publishing employees works in an OA environment. For some bizarre reason, AAP also drags in newspapers. Oh, and of course we get the claim that subscription publishers are “devoted to providing access to research.” Which is why AAP is arguing so strongly against providing such access.

A charming exercise, and one case where I don't have any argument with Eisen. Of course I was joking about understatement—but here I don't think he's overstating the case either.

### *The Perfect Storm of Open Access*

John Willinsky published this [on May 16, 2013](#) at *Slaw*—and while it's worth reading, I have to take issue with parts of it. He quotes an academic colleague:

My students and I publish in the journal *Evolution: Education and Outreach* published by Springer. Great outlet for our work. But, they just went open access (good). The cost to publish for an author now is \$1,600 (bad). For grad students, this is prohibitive. I told my dean and she said there is no money to support grad student publications. That wasn't surprising. Do the math: 60 students times several pubs a year at that cost would be a significant chunk of change. But, more surprising is this journal, which is very good, was now considered by them to be of lesser quality, now that it's a 'pay to publish' journal. My students noted that it won't be able to count these pubs towards tenure now. So, what was a good outlet now is 'tainted.' So, what we need is not only the business model to change, but attitudes have to change too.

Grad students each publish *several* refereed journal articles each year? Well, never mind... The section starting “But, more...” is the really astonishing part: that converting to OA means you've dropped your standards. Even the most predacious big publishers with the highest APC fees for “hybrid” and fully OA journals shouldn't be pushing that line.

Willinsky offers an eight-part response. Briefly, for some of the eight: Talk to your librarian about APC support; there's more to access than APC-charging gold OA; APC-charging simply does *not* equate to low impact or prestige; big international publishers charge higher APCs than others; new models are emerging; for now green OA might be the solution (although Willinsky doesn't use that term). That's the first six. I'm going to quote the seventh and eighth, and you can probably guess where I have problems.

7. The longer term appears to involve the shift of the current \$10 billion or so in publisher revenue from subscription to APC in some coordinated way. The libraries could collectively manage this to ensure that publishing opportunities within all disciplines, from biomedical to philosophy



are covered, likely through both a shifting of library budgets and a taxing of grants that allows the grant-rich disciplines subsidize the rest. What I am unsure about is whether this will simply prove an opportunity for commercial and societal publishers to increase revenue (at the expense of investment in the research itself); whether large discrepancies in pricing by discipline and type of publisher will continue; and whether APCs will lead to price-sensitive competition for journal articles costs, disrupting what has largely been a monopolistic pricing model for subscriptions and now for APC.

8. This formative period makes it hard for graduate students and faculty to figure how best to work within this changing system, but it is ideal time, for the same reason, to look for opportunities to promote greater access to their and others' research, while also showing some vigilance over the cost of this access, so that it is not subject to the excesses of subscription pricing.

Yep. There it is: the first part of #7. Not “use *some* of the current spending on subscriptions to pay for efficient OA publishing,” but “shift...the current \$10 billion or so.” *All of it, John? Really?*

So near and yet so far.

### *Arguments Over Open Access*

The alternate title (web page title) for this [January 6, 2014](#) piece by Carl Strausheim at *Inside Higher Ed* is “Historians Clash Over Open Access Movement.” And here’s the somewhat mystifying lede:

If the open access movement can’t replace the traditional publishing model of scholarly journals, what problem is the effort trying to solve?

There’s a trivially easy answer, “lack of access,” but that presumes that the “if” clause is absolute truth.

What we have here is reporting on a session on OA at the American Historical Association annual meeting—and damned if it doesn’t start early on with The Classic Wrong Definition:

One model, gold open access, requires articles to be made available free online when they are published in print, and the author pays a processing fee—often about \$2,000—to offset the costs.

Fact: Of 136 gold OA history journals in *DOAJ* (included in my analysis), *only three* have APCs at all: one at \$1,200, one at \$300, one at \$50. 98% of the journals, *publishing 98% of the articles*, do not charge APCs.

Mary Ellen K. Davis, executive director of ACRL (which publishes a preeminent no-APC gold OA journal), spoke in favor of OA.

But Davis faced opposition from fellow panelists Robert A. Schneider, professor of history at Indiana University at Bloomington and editor-

in-chief of the [American Historical Review](#), and Harold J. Cook, a professor of history at Brown University who serves on the journal's board of editors.

Cook pointed out that some critics have derided prestigious journals with high thresholds for publication as “luxury journals, as if high-quality publication were a luxury rather than a necessity.” He concluded his presentation by saying open access journals should be considered new types of academic journals, not replacements for established ones, and that individual scholars are best suited to decide how their research should be disseminated.

Nice indirect slap at cost-effective publishing, implying that high costs and high quality are synonymous. Schneider was more direct in his attack:

“I would argue, however, that the author processing fee is ... not only broken, it's wrong. If really the choice is going from subscription—which has got problems or is increasingly difficult--and o another process which I think is utterly unacceptable, then I think the choice is pretty clear.”

Why are APCs “utterly unacceptable”? I guess because Schneider says so. Notably, Davis did *not* argue that OA implies APCs and thought such fees might not work well in the humanities and social sciences (including librarianship).

There's more to the report, including an informal survey showing that about half of the audience favored OA and only one or two explicitly opposed it. Given “utterly unacceptable” and equations of costs with quality, and given the apparent total lack of reality checks about history OA journals, it's hard to say what this all means. Although it doesn't seem as though “need for access” came up much, at least from the defenders of the existing order.

### *Conflation as Insult (On the Gold Open Access World I Live In)*

Jason Baird Jackson posted this [on January 15, 2014](#) at *Shreds and Patches*. The lede:

On Savage Minds, Alex Golub very [generously celebrates](#) the recent publication of a large quantity of open access journal articles in anthropology and neighboring fields. I wish to add one point. I am talking to you under-informed, confusion-promulgating open access skeptics.

The link is to “Tons of newly published open anthropology” (January 14, 2014), and it is indeed a brief celebration on Golub being “deluged with quality open access anthropology”—note the word “quality.”

Here's the hook: “Not one of the journals that Alex highlights...relies upon author fees to achieve this abundance.”

It is fair to say that the growing embrace of gold and hybrid open access by large commercial publishers (old and new) has very properly accelerated discussion of author-side charges and their very significant downsides. This shift has also erased older binaries and made it harder to talk about open access more broadly. But those wishing to advance the pro-/con- discussion of gold open access have an obligation to understand facts on the ground and to stop prematurely overgeneralizing on the basis of ignorance. The widespread conflation of all forms of gold open access with author-pays gold open access is not only unhelpful, it is an insult to all of those academics (and others) who take time out from their own work to help review and publish the writings of their colleagues in free-to-all-internet users and free-to-author ways. It is also unfair to those generous agencies and individuals in the world who are donating cash and services and attention and expertise to the building out of a progressive open access publishing ecosystem.

There are, in fact, a *lot* of voices that conflate all gold OA with APC-charging OA (including hundreds of APC-charging journals and “journals”)—and not always out of ignorance.

Jackson wants to welcome newcomers to OA, even skeptical ones—but says, correctly in my opinion, “if you cannot take the time to study the subject of open access in sufficient depth to make evidence-based pronouncements, then you should stop talking and start listening.”

In a coda, he recognizes that it’s not all just ignorance, pointing to another piece that discusses less innocent reasons for that conflation:

### *Thoughts on Open Access Panels*

This [January 14, 2014 item](#) by Konrad M. Lawson in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*’s “ProfHacker” is nominally about speaking panels—and the extent to which panelists can turn the equality argument for OA on its head:

Here is a four step (with one step for bonus points) program to accomplish this inversion:

1. Associate the open access movement as closely as possible with the idea of a business model that must confront a set of relatively fixed costs.
2. Assert that the only reasonable business model that is compatible with high-quality scholarship is Gold Open Access, and imply that a) Gold OA will almost always take the form of a large monetary sum charged for article submissions and b) that individual scholars or budget-strapped departments will have to have to pay up or not get published. Scholars at elite schools will always be able to pour out a flood of scholarship submitted to high-impact journals thanks to departmental or grant funding while scholars elsewhere will have to

count their pennies and make careful strategic decisions about where and what they submit for publication.

3. Juxtapose the gross inequality and hardship created for scholars publishing in this new environment with the presumably minimal additional exposure of our work to an increased number of freeloading “consumers” as a result of open access.

4. Bonus Points: Turn the discussion about predatory pricing of journal subscriptions and other online resources on its head by talking about the predatory practices and horrendous quality of a new breed of open access journal that is thriving in an author-pays environment.

Certainly #2 crops up again and again, with its gross mischaracterization of gold OA and the assumption that pretty much all APCs are high APCs.

There’s more to this interesting discussion. He notes that librarians sometimes “stand alone as strong supporters of OA” and that they need support from other scholars who can attest to the power of OA.

### *Walking the talk*

Maybe [this March 7, 2014 essay](#) by Kevin Smith at *Scholarly Communications @ Duke* doesn’t belong here, but maybe it does—except that it’s about the other side of OA economics, as evidenced by Erin McKiernan, a Ph.D from the University of Arizona who is working as a scientist and teacher in Latin America.

For her, the issue is that open access is fundamental to her ability to do her job; she told us that the research library available to her and her colleagues has subscriptions to only 139 journals, far fewer than most U.S. researchers expect to be able to consult. Twenty-two of that number are only available in print format, because electronic access is too expensive. This group includes key titles like *Nature* and *Cell*. A number of other titles that U.S. researchers take for granted as core to their work — she mentioned *Nature Medicine* and *PNAS* — are entirely unavailable because of cost. So in an age when digital communications ought to, at the very least, facilitate access to information needed to improve health and treat patients, the cost of these journals is, in Dr. McKiernan’s words, “impeding my colleagues’ ability to save lives.” She made clear that some of these journals are so expensive that the choice is often between a couple of added subscriptions or the salary of a researcher.

This situation ought to be intolerable, and for Dr. McKiernan it is. She outlined for us a personal pledge that ought to sound quite familiar. First, she will not write, edit or review for a closed-access journal. Second, she will blog about her scientific research and post preprints of her articles so that her work is both transparent and accessible. Finally, she told us that if a colleague chose to publish a paper on which

she was a joint author in a closed-access journal, she would remove her name from that work. This is a comprehensive and passionately-felt commitment to do science in the open and to make it accessible to everyone who could benefit from it — clinicians, patients and the general public as well as other scholars.

McKiernan also addressed the nonsense about OA meaning low-quality peer review and offered some ideas for early researchers who want to work in the open, beginning with “Make a list of open access publication options in your particular field. Chances are you will be surprised by the range of possibilities.” There are seven ideas in all; I suggest going to the original article. Smith closes:

The most exciting thing about Erin McKiernan’s presentation was that it demolished, for many of us, the perception of open access as a risky choice for younger academics. After listening to her expression of such a heartfelt commitment — and particularly the pictures of the people for whom she does her work, which puts a more human face on the cost of placing subscription barriers on scholarship — I began to realize that, in reality, OA is the only choice.

Good old Jeffrey Beall pops up first among commenters, calling the talk “mostly cheerleading” and saying McKiernan “merely repeated the chief doctrines of the OA movement and then paused for applause.” Since Beall continues to assume that all Gold OA involves APCs (apparently), he wondered where McKiernan would get funds for her articles.

Smith responded briefly—there are lots of journals that don’t charge them—and added, “As for cheerleading, that seems like an odd remark about someone who is an active researcher actually practicing what she was advocating.” McKiernan also responded, setting aside the “cheerleading” nonsense and noting the several options available for OA publishing without heavy grant funding—no-fee journals, automatic waivers for low and middle-income countries, waivers in general, green OA as a final resort.

### *Funders punish open-access dodgers*

That’s the title *Nature* puts on [this April 9, 2014](#) piece by Richard Van Noorden. Another title might be “funders finally enforce funding terms.”

For years, two of the world’s largest research funders—the US National Institutes of Health (NIH) and the Wellcome Trust in the United Kingdom—have issued a steady stream of incentives to coax academics to abide by their open-access policies.

Now they are done with just dangling carrots. Both institutions are bringing out the sticks: cautiously and discreetly cracking down on researchers who do not make their papers publicly available.

Neither agency would name those who have been sanctioned. But the London-based Wellcome Trust says that it has withheld grant payments

on 63 occasions in the past year because papers resulting from the funding were not open access. And the NIH, in Bethesda, Maryland, says that it has delayed some continuing grant awards since July 2013 because of non-compliance with open-access policies, although the agency does not know the exact numbers.

I don't find that part of the story shocking at all, except perhaps that it's taken this long—that is, six years after the NIH policy was approved by Congress. What is shocking is the graph that shows only about 50% compliance in 2009 (if I'm reading it right) and only 82% even with “punishments” in 2014. Worse: Wellcome's only getting 69%, although that's better than the 55% March 2012 figure. (Wellcome adopted its policy in 2006. Six years later: 55% compliance. Imagine if 55% of U.S. wage earners complied with IRS tax requirements?)

It's not just NIH and Wellcome, to be sure: the article goes on to say:

[A]t the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge, which has an open-access policy it does not enforce, just 37% of papers published since 2009 are openly available from the local repository.

### *The Business of Open Access Publishing: Submission vs Processing Fees*

Austin Brown posted this [on December 22, 2014](#) at *Scholastica*; Brown is part of the *Scholastica* team. He begins with what I regard as an odd question:

The effects of the internet within many domains of publishing have been fervently discussed and debated for years now, with scholarly publishing being no exception. The ease and inexpensiveness of electronic distribution challenges the need for traditional publishing business models, but does this inevitably lead to Open Access across the academic journal landscape?

I've rarely heard OA advocates say that the *basis* for wanting OA is that it's easy and cheap, as opposed to the benefits of, you know, providing access to the scholarly literature.

*Scholastica's* in the business of selling peer-review management services to journals, including OA journals. I'm not sure what-all the operation does; it charges \$5 for law review article or \$10 for other peer-reviewed journal articles. And, for some reason, Brown seems to think that the best route for OA is not APCs but ASFs: Article Submission Fees.

[W]e're interested in the potential of submission fees as part of journals' business models. We know that in many cases submission fees can help journals support themselves, and that they are less likely to attract bad actors than article processing fees - that's why we've built a feature into our software for journals that allows them to collect a submission fee (but have not built the ability to charge a processing fee).

In other words, Scholastica is so “interested in the potential” that it makes it easy to collect submission fees but *not* to charge APCs. Brown states flatly that submission fees are “less likely to attract bad actors.” Which, to me, makes no sense at all. If by “bad actors” he means journals, then submission fees are, if anything, worse—and if he means fraudulent scholars, well, what’s the difference? It does a fraudulent scholar no good to say that he’s *submitted* 30 papers; he has to actually have them *accepted*.

I couldn’t read this sentence without laughing a little, which I suppose is mean-spirited of me:

Peer review is a powerful indication of high-quality information—it denotes vetted, rigorous knowledge, hard-won through a methodical and deliberative process.

I must assume that Brown is one who would disagree with the old saying “Peer review doesn’t determine *whether* an article will be published, only *where* it will be published.” If so, I think he’d be the first to question that assertion.

This just gets strange:

With subscription fees becoming less popular and less economically defensible, article processing fees are gaining ground as the de facto revenue source for journals that want to encourage open access to their material. Many legitimate open access journals use article processing fees to support their work, but these fees incentivize journals to “publish or perish” - and in some cases, to overlook or intentionally skip some of the steps to ensure that what is published is properly vetted.

Substituting submission fees would help this *how*? And how is this different from the incentive for subscription journals that raise prices based on publishing more articles to do exactly that, publish more articles?

Then Brown brings up Beall and Bohannon and seems to suggest that APCs “incentivize” crappy or nonexistent peer review. You already know Scholastica’s solution: Charge up front. Except that the assumption here is that the submission charge will be quite modest—which means that it can only substitute for an APC if a journal gets huge quantities of manuscripts and rejects almost all of them. Saying “The journal has a strong financial incentive to attract serious submissions” isn’t quite right: It has an incentive to attract *lots* of submissions.

I find the final two paragraphs wholly disingenuous for a reason that may be obvious if you’ve read my comments so far:

As a business model, submission fees aren’t the norm and don’t yet offer a complete replacement for publication fees or subscriptions, but the rise of open access represents shifting norms in the scholarly community and a willingness to try out new ideas.

We hope experimentation in scholarly publishing's business models can help us all pinpoint the sweet-spot where journals can do the costly work of vetting truly good research while still sharing it freely with the world. Charging a submission fee as opposed to an article processing charge may be a step in the right direction.

*May be?* Which is why *Scholastica only* supports that method?

## Transparency

If I walk into a souk, I expect to do some haggling over price. If I walk into Target or Safeway, I don't: I expect the prices to be right there on the shelf—not to have the manager sit me down in a back room, insist on a non-disclosure statement, and make me an offer, possibly based on my willingness to take the manager's choice of which items I'll buy. Oh, and if I was ever going to publish in an OA journal that charged fees, I'd damn well expect to see the APC stated right there in plain view on the journal site, and not in some vague "we'll figure it out based on your paper" language. (Most of the 294 journals in the *Directory of Open Access Journals* as of May 2014 that I flagged as "highly questionable" get that red flag because they're not up front about article processing charges: that's just not reasonable, and probably never was.)

Let's look at some commentaries about transparency and journal economics.

### *Secrecy, serials negotiations, trust, and gender dynamics*

Begin with the Library Loon, posting on [November 14, 2013](#) at *Gavia Libraria*.

You know someone (let's call hir "Thyme") who repeatedly lies to hir partner (whom we shall call "Madstop"), grabs Madstop's resources without limit and without heed to Madstop's own needs, manoeuvres to cut hir off from hir friends and peers, imposes as many strictures on hir behavior as possible, goes behind hir back to stir up trouble with hir employers, and blames hir as loudly as possible ("ze is overreacting," "did you hear hir language?" and such) should discussion of Thyme's behaviors become public. Needless to say, Thyme invariably asserts publicly that Thyme's behavior is above reproach, responding with hurt amazement or mudslinging should anyone, Madstop not least, suggest otherwise.

Madstop comes to you and says "Thyme wants me to have a coffee with zir privately. What do you think?"

You beg Madstop not to go, of course, if you have a shred of sense and common decency. Gaslighting, exploitation, boundary violation, movement restrictions, tone arguments—this is a disaster, possibly a crime, waiting to happen. Thyme has properly forfeited all Madstop's



trust, and Madstop is under *no obligation* to meet Thyme on ground of Thyme's choosing. (Or, indeed, at all.)

What does this have to do with libraries and publishing? The Loon provides a set of real-world publisher/aggregator actions, either ones she's seen or one she's heard about from trustworthy librarians. Briefly, vendors lie (openly about OA through PRISM, as one example), vendors use non-disclosure to prevent price comparisons (and do their damndest to avoid freedom of information requests), vendors attempt to undermine librarians who are critical of their actions...and more. It's quite a list: go read the original.

There's a specific example at work here, discussed in the next item. Yes, Jenica Rogers did tell SAGE that she wanted things in writing, not "over coffee"—and yes, she did get criticism for that profoundly sensible and thoroughly professional action.

Librarians, we do not have to be nice to vendors. They are not our friends. They are not our allies. They do not respect us or our mission. They are abusing our goodwill, sometimes unethically. *They have forfeited every last shred of our trust* and show no signs of wishing to earn it back. We do not have to make nice with them publicly or privately. We should resist their efforts to divide-and-conquer and to silence us. We should have each other's backs, not theirs.

Vendors, if you do not like the obvious conclusions the actions noted above sustain, stop performing any of those actions you perform, and censure those actions loudly and openly when you see your peers perform them.

### *Put it on the record: My responses to Sage's responses*

Jenica Rogers posted this [on November 12, 2013](#) at *Attempting Elegance*. It springs from a speech she gave at the 2013 Charleston Conference and some issues she was having with SAGE—and this:

Let's talk about the public offer I got during the on-stage Q & A portion of my Charleston speech, to share coffee with SAGE's VP for Sales.

I deflected while I was on stage, saying something about how it'd been a particularly busy week for me and thus my lack of reply to the offers that came in email to meet in Charleston. That was true, as far as I went. There's more, though.

"More" is her email to the SAGE VP later on. In part, omitting some specifics:

I wasn't going engage in this debate from the stage at Charleston, as I was paid to be there and to do a particular job, which wasn't to resolve my own vendor conflicts during the opening plenary. However, I do appreci-

ate your willingness to come forward publicly. I also know that you did yourself a favor in doing so, since you now look better in the eyes of the crowd than you otherwise would. And I thank you for proving my point: when one speaks publicly, one can in fact enable change in our vendor/library partnerships.

All of that said, I am flying home today and did not make a coffee date with you, nor return your phone call. That's very intentional. I want all of this in writing. I understand (truly!) that tone and intent can be lost in writing, but I believe that the written record is the only reliable record. I'd rather conduct these conversations by email. And, in equal seriousness: If you can't explain your pricing structure clearly in writing, then you have a bigger problem than whether or not I blog about you in a negative light. There is no reason why a phone call should be required to explain how you price and sell your product.

At the point of writing the blog post—very shortly after the conference—she didn't yet have a response but wasn't specifically judging SAGE. She was saying something to librarians in dealing with vendors:

I beg of you: get it in writing. I don't want to spend my institution's money with any partner who won't commit to their terms in writing, and I'm not sure why you would want to, either.

Followed by the pushback—a Twitter conversation with a librarian who felt she was “shutting down communication” by not meeting privately, off the record, with a SAGE rep over coffee.

I think that I'm doing the opposite; I'm encouraging and demanding communication that's repeatable, shareable, and good for our community, not just good for Potsdam and Jenica....

Want it on the record? Want to stop the silencing and the bullying and the closed-door negotiations and the abusive licensing terms and the confusion, all of which hold us back rather than drive us forward? Put it in writing. Then put it on the web where it can be accessed, reused, and learned from.

My apologies to Rogers for omitting part of this, but what she's saying strikes me as absolutely right. Pushback in the comments from a (male) librarian who takes her to task? Not so much. A followup (OK, the male librarian is T Scott Plutchak) that strikes me as condescending? Maybe I'm beginning to understand the term “mansplaining.”

### *The cost of academic publishing*

This one's from Michelle Brook, [on April 24, 2014](#) at the *Open Access Working Group*. It has to do with one substantial effort to make more transparent the biggest obscurity of all in the journal field: what academic publishing costs.

Or, rather, *not* what publishing costs, but what publishers *charge*. Those are not at all the same, given not only massive profits but also quite possibly gross inefficiencies and highly paid staff and and...

The act of publishing research has an intrinsic cost, and I don't know anyone who claims otherwise. However, the key questions we as an academic community should be asking is how much this publishing process costs, and if we are receiving value for money.

But we can't answer these questions. Because we don't know how much academic publishing costs.

Historically, the costs of scientific research publication have been covered through subscriptions to academic journals in which the research has been published. Alternative business models are beginning to develop, but the majority of research around the world is still published in journals to which subscriptions are required.

Individual academics are largely protected from the costs of access to these journals. Libraries at universities are largely responsible for managing institution wide access to journals, and through JISC negotiate these subscription costs.

And then libraries are not allowed to tell anyone what these costs are. Libraries are placed under huge amounts of pressure not to release this data, and in the case of Elsevier, they are explicitly forbidden to by non-disclosure agreements in the contracts they have to sign.

This is a UK group, so we're dealing with JISC and with the Russell Group (a self-selected group of 24 prestigious UK universities that may be broadly similar to Carnegie I institutions—or may not).

Tim Gowers has [a massive post](#) (massive in its own right and with more than 170 comments), "Elsevier journals—some facts," and I urge you to read that one in the original if you want lots more detail about the UK side of this. For now, I'll stick with the briefer Brook version, which includes Gowers' figures for universities that responded to his request for their subscription fees to Elsevier. (Why Elsevier? Because it's the biggest and because it's known to be aggressive in attempting to prevent disclosure.)

Briefly, 19 UK universities spend £14.5 million for Elsevier subscriptions (about \$22.3 million at February 2015 exchange rates). Is that a lot? It's hard to say—that is, it's *certainly* a lot, but you need all the other subscription costs to put it in context. More interesting, actually, is the natural effect of non-disclosure pricing: vastly different prices for seemingly similar institutions.

There's a lot more—even just in Britain, there are another 100 universities, plus all the other publishers, plus APCs (especially APCs for "hybrid" journals). At least APCs should be transparent.

[I]t is without doubt in the public interest to have data that can show the cost of publication made openly available. Without this, there can

be no development of competitive markets in either subscriptions or APCs. A chilling effect, created by commercial publishers and non-disclosure clauses, requiring a lack of transparency cannot serve anything other than the business interests of traditional publishers.

One comment notes an estimate that in 2010 UK institutions collectively spent more than £100 million (\$154 million), although that estimate is distinctly non-transparent.

A fairly astonishing statement in the comment stream regarding the “value for money” from commercial journal publishing:

[W]ith the exception of a handful of flagship journals, companies like Elsevier now expect any language editing to be paid for by authors themselves if it is to be done at all.

*Transparency: A bit of grin and bear it, a bit of come and share it...*  
Catriona MacCullum posted this [on May 1, 2014](#) on *PLOS Opens*.

Over the past month, an unprecedented amount of data has been released that throws light on the flows of money in scholarly communication, both subscription and open access. While some of this information is depressing—there is so much wrong with the way the current system works—the very act of releasing the information is surprisingly heartening. These cracks in the publishing edifice are perhaps the first signal of a genuine shift towards price transparency. Transparency will not only throw light on the complexity of the system but will also be the means to foster real change and enable competition and market forces to act.

I think we also need some level of *cost* transparency (the previous post was all about prices, not costs), but that’s a different and in some ways far more difficult discussion. Here, MacCullum notes the Gower results and some interesting aspects of the long Gower post that I didn’t focus on, including *how* Elsevier big-deal prices appear to be set and this:

Gowers’ correspondence also exposes the ‘tricky’ relationships between Elsevier and different institutions that help maintain this status quo. Some negative responses from the Universities, for example, contained paragraphs matching almost word for word the same arguments for not complying with his request, which he suggests points to a template answer that Elsevier provided to the institutions.

Then there’s APC transparency, which should be a matter of how much each institution or sponsor pays to each publisher, not what an article costs (that should be public record as a matter of course)—and some true nonsense, at least partly related to “hybrid” OA: “Papers for which thousands of pounds had been paid were in some cases still behind a paywall or did not have the correct license.”

MacCullum provides links to a number of data sources for APC payments; that part, at least, is becoming more transparent. Worth following up on.

*Universities 'get poor value' from academic journal-publishing firms*  
As this [June 16, 2014](#) article by Ian Sample in *The Guardian* suggests, the trouble with transparency is that it shows up defects...such as poor value for money. Or, as the tease says:

Research finds secrecy over contracts has stopped some institutions realising they are paying too much for journals

Here's the money line:

The analysis by a team of economists found that for leading universities, journals published by non-profit organisations were two to 10 times better value than those published by commercial companies, such as Elsevier, Springer, Sage, and Taylor & Francis.

Although this is in a UK newspaper, it's at least partly U.S. data—from Freedom of Information Act requests to 55 university libraries and 12 library consortia resulting in 360 copies of contracts with publishers. Based on those contracts, the economists looked at cost per citation, with ratios ranging from Elsevier's three times as expensive as nonprofits to *ten* times as expensive for some of the other biggies.

There's something else in the article that I'd missed when it first came around—a rather startling admission from one of Elsevier's honchos:

Many journal publishers require universities to sign secrecy agreements that forbid them from saying how much they paid for journal subscriptions. Elsevier argues that confidentiality agreements allow them to tailor their prices to suit individual subscribers, though David Tempest, a deputy director at the publisher, told a meeting in Oxford last year that they stopped customers from [driving down prices](#).

And indeed, Tempest says it, although he phrases it as having “fair competition between different countries”:

Well, indeed there are confidentiality clauses inherent in the system, in our Freedom Collections. The Freedom Collections do give a lot of choice and there is a lot of discount in there to the librarians. And the use, and the cost per use has been dropping dramatically, year on year. And so we have to ensure that, in order to have fair competition between different countries, that we have this level of confidentiality to make that work. Otherwise everybody would drive down, drive down, drive drive drive, and that would mean that ...

[The last part is drowned in the laughter of the audience.]

The post embeds a two-hour (!) video for those who suspect that Taylor's making it up. I'm satisfied he's not—and I note that nobody from Elsevier commented on this post, as far as I can tell.

*Secrets of journal subscription prices: For-profit publishers charge libraries two to three times more than non-profits.*

This Ted Bergstrom piece on August 12, 2014 at *The Impact Blog* appears to be the study referred to in the previous item—but the title seems to understate the reality.

Bergstrom says it's not just Elsevier demanding nondisclosure agreements—this is common with the big commercial publishers. Elsevier went so far as to sue Washington State University to prevent its release of figures on Bergstrom's FOIA request—a suit that a judge treated suitably: when a state has open records laws, as many do, any nondisclosure agreement by a public institution (with very rare exceptions) is *itself* illegal and can be ignored.

There's [a link](#) to a free version of the (paywalled) article (the link is to a page on Bergstrom's website that contains that link and related links and explains why that's how the link has to appear). Some of the results of the study (which involves 150 U.S. university libraries):

1. Even with the discounted Big Deal bundles, Elsevier charges typical research universities in the US about 3 times as much per citation as non-profit publishers. But other big commercial publisher bundles are even worse bargains. Wiley's bundled costs more than twice as much per citation as Elsevier's. Taylor & Francis, Emerald, and Sage prices per citation are more than 10 times those of the nonprofits.
2. Bundle prices vary widely between universities. Much of this variation cannot be explained by such differences as enrolment, number of PhD's granted, or presence of a medical school.
3. Colleges and universities that do not focus on research and do not offer PhD's get much better bargains from the major commercial publishers. The average prices charged to these by Elsevier, Springer, and Wiley are about 1/10 of the prices they charge to research universities. In contrast, non-profits charge the non-research institutions about  $\frac{3}{4}$  as much as research universities. For non-research institutions, Elsevier's prices per citation are similar to those of the nonprofits. The other for-profit publishers charge non-research institutions "only" 2 to 4 times as much as do the non-profit publishers.

Bergstrom's summary and commentary is excellent, worth reading in the original. I'll quote a little more:

Why are the commercial publishers so eager to conceal their prices from the public view? We suspect that part of the reason is that they do not want scholars, librarians, and university administrators to

know just how high their prices are compared to costs as measured by the prices of non-profits. We also suspect that they do not want some universities to find out that they are paying much more than similar universities for the same package.

Profit-maximizing publishers will attempt to sell access to each buyer for a price close to the most that buyer is willing to pay. Thus journal sales becomes a guessing game in which publishers try to set each buyer's price just a little below that buyer's maximum willingness to pay. In the early days of online publishing, publishers had a reliable clue of a library's willingness to pay for their list of journals. This clue is the amount that a library spent on paper journals in the late 1990's, before internet publishing became the standard. In the initial Big Deal contracts, publishers simply calculated the total amount that each library had been spending on paper subscriptions. They then offered universities 5-year contracts that started with a price 10-15% greater than their expenditure on paper and with a 7% annual increase...

### *Journal subscriptions – Wiley, Oxford University Press, Springer*

One difficulty with the work done to reveal journal subscription costs, at least in the UK, is that it mostly focused on Elsevier—not surprisingly, given that publisher's sheer size. But there are other big names in the game, and this [November 14, 2014](#) post by Michelle Brook at *Quantumptions* discusses the results of her initial attempts to get figures for three other major commercial publishers.

There's not a lot to discuss here; she links to a [figshare spreadsheet](#) and discusses some of the results. Mostly a significant broadening of the data available. She does not have numbers as to how many journals each library subscribes to from each publisher (that is, are these all Big Deal bundles or are they more variable?), and she offers this paragraph:

Without knowing what universities are purchasing access to, it's impossible to make statements about why there are price increases over the 5 years (and in some cases very significant price increases). It may be that the universities are purchasing more journals from the publishers, or it may be that publishers have put their prices up.

I have my suspicions as to which it is, although there may be elements of both (although “purchasing more journals” and “getting more journals in a bundle whether they want them or not” are not exactly the same thing).

### *Freedom of Information requests uncover the lack of transparency in journal subscription costs.*

That's the title for this October 15, 2014 post by Stuart Lawson and Ben Meghreblian at LSE's *The impact blog*—and while that's part of what the post is about, it's mostly about the authors' attempts to get subscription

costs from 100 UK institutions for six large academic publishers: Wiley, Springer, Taylor & Francis, Sage, Oxford University Press and Cambridge University Press.

They say the process was relatively straightforward “and just required a lot of persistence and a little knowledge of library processes, which allowed us to know how to phrase the request and how to respond to any queries from the institutions.” There’s some discussion and, again, a link to a [figshare spreadsheet](#).

### *22 universities spent £9m on open access in 2014, Jisc data reveals*

Most APCs themselves are transparent—at least they are in any reputable OA journal. But knowing how much a journal charges doesn’t tell you how much the publisher is making (especially when “hybrid” journals are involved) and doesn’t tell you how much each library or university or funding agency is spending on APCs.

This [February 11, 2015](#) piece by Adam Smith at *\*Research* summarizes one set of figures, those provided to Jisc by 22 UK universities for APCs in 2014. The numbers are, to my mind, very high—they seem to say that most of the money is going to the highest-APC journals (many “hybrid” pseudo-OA journals). And, sure enough, in at least a couple of cases, articles for which exceedingly high APCs had been paid *still* showed up as closed, at least until the publishers were pushed on the matter:

Jisc’s release also contains insights into the challenges universities face in making their articles open access. One submission from a university that paid an APC to make an article free says: “On initial publication the article was still closed access, with a statement to the effect that the publishers owned the copyright.” Another says: “Incorrect licence on PDF initially, Wiley changed it after it was queried.”

## “Hybrid” OA

It’s fairly clear that libraries and other subscribers to scholarly journals could *substantially* reduce their costs through an overall transition to gold OA—even if every gold OA journal charged reasonable APCs, and even if “reasonable” meant \$1,350 on average. But, of course, that means a *lot* less money going to traditional publishers. They have a solution: charge exceedingly high fees to make individual articles in subscription journals open access (eventually, to some extent, if they’re bugged about it)—while generally *not* lowering subscription prices as a result. Most people working on effective OA, as opposed to trick “give us the gold” OA, call that double-dipping, and it’s one reason to be suspicious of “hybrid” journals, ones with some (few) articles supposedly openly available. Not that I have an opinion about this, or anything...and I note with applause that *DOAJ* does not include “hybrid”



journals. But, as you'll see in at least one of these items, that doesn't mean that the big publishers aren't siphoning off a fair amount of money.

### *Gold for Gold FAQs*

[This page](#) on the Royal Society of Chemistry site is a case where a publisher is making an offer that mitigates double-dipping. Here's a short version: RSC has a Little Big Deal, RSC Gold, consisting of "37 international journals, databases and magazines." RSC also charges a flat £1,600 (call it \$2,458) for making a full paper OA—as usual, a *very* high APC (of 51 chemistry journals in *DOAJ* that charge APCs, *none* charge more than \$2,000 per article).

Here's the twist: if an institution subscribes to RSC Gold—not to any of its journals on their own, but only the full Little Big Deal—then RSC will give it a voucher code for each £1,600 it pays. So if a university library's paying \$25,000 (a bit more than £16,000), its researchers will be able to publish ten papers in RSC journals without paying the fee.

The voucher codes don't roll over: they can only be used in the year issued. Institutions that have more accepted articles than vouchers can buy more voucher codes at a slightly discounted rate, but only in blocks of 10, 25 or 50 (apparently).

The notice discusses 2013, but since it's still there, I'll assume it's still operational. It's at least a step in the right direction. (As for green OA? RSC has a full 12-month embargo, so it's very much delayed access.)

I should note that RSC claims that it *does* adjust future subscription prices based on articles that have been "opened"...but when the opening is done using these vouchers, the adjustment will not happen. So it's at best a mixed bag.

### *Wellcome Trust APCs: Towards a New [Open Access] Serials Crisis?*

This discussion by Ernesto Priego appeared [on March 20, 2014](#) on Priego's blog. It's based on Wellcome Trust's release of data on what that trust has been paying for APC charges (Wellcome mandates some form of OA but also explicitly covers APCs for grantees) and Cameron Neylon's massaging of that data. (Wellcome Trust did not normalize publisher names, so the same publisher may appear under several different forms.)

Priego did more normalization, refining the number of publishers to 101, and shared [his own version](#) of the dataset, which includes a page focusing on totals, maximum APC and minimum APC for 11 high-profile publishers.

I believe they offer a glimpse of the average cost of "Open Access" as currently charged by major academic/scientific publishers. I use scare quotes because most of these publishers (if not all?) do not generally publish born-Open Access journals but so-called "hybrid" journals—that is, traditional subscription-based journals that permit authors –

ideally via their funders— to pay a fee to make their article available “Open Access”.

I can't imagine any reader will be surprised to learn that Elsevier has the largest number of APC payments for 2012/13 and also the highest maximum APC of the group of 11—an astonishing £5,760 (\$8,849). The eleventh largest number of APC payments was to Taylor & Francis, and while T&F's maximum APC was not one of the highest (£2,476.42 or \$3,805), T&F's lowest APC was considerably higher than any of the others (£1,804.19 or \$2,772). Wiley and Oxford University Press are the second and third most commonly used publishers in the table; while those two combined still had fewer paid papers than Elsevier, they're the only others with more than 100 Wellcome-funded papers in 2012/13.

Why do I think it's important to focus on these figures?

For at least two main reasons:

1. To create awareness through evidence of the price scale of the “Open Access” options offered by hybrid journals from major publishers as paid by the Wellcome Trust (a forward-thinking institution pioneering in their support of Open Access; for their OA policy, go here).
2. To create awareness of the prevalence of at least three of the publishers, indicating that many scientists still favour them with their work.

It is a truism that “Open Access” was developed in part as a response to “the serials crisis”...

However, these figures reveal what to me at least appears as a mere inversion of the business model, reliant on academic outputs for which considerable funding and/or financial means seems to be taken for granted. The high prices charged to libraries in the paywalled model seem to have been shifted now to the researchers through, ideally, their funding agencies...

I believe it is time for those of us involved in enabling Open Access to refine our critical engagement with the term and the current publishing landscape.

The average of all APCs (excluding the £13,000 one for a Palgrave book) in the Wellcome Trust dataset is £1820.01. There is an APC payment for what appears as a single article of £6000. If only all research funders were like the Wellcome Trust. With these rates, who is being excluded from Open Access publishing as currently implemented by the major publishers in scientific/academic publishing? Arts and Humanities research cannot possibly compete. Aren't we clearly rushing towards a new “OA serials crisis”, where publishing is still dominated by the same major publishers who partly led to the serials crisis in the first place?

£1820.01 is \$2,796—call it \$2,800. There are 15 DOAJ journals (all in biology and medicine, most from big traditional publishers) with APCs that high; the average for all APCs in 2013 was \$1,045 per article, just over one-third as much. (That’s for all articles published in *real* OA journals that charge APCs, as opposed to the \$630 average including non-fee articles.)

### *The sheer scale of hybrid journal publishing*

This Michelle Brook piece appeared [on March 24, 2014](#) at *Open Access Working Group*, and it’s also based on Wellcome figures—the same set of figures, I believe, covering October 2012 through September 2013. During that year, Wellcome paid £3.88 million in APCs (\$5.96 million)—of which only £0.7 million (\$1.08 million) went to gold OA journals. Also telling: while 74% of the articles paid for were in “hybrid” journals, 82% of the payments went to those journals—as we’ve already seen, “hybrid” charges are consistently the most expensive form of OA. (Of the payments that *did* go to gold OA publishers, 80% of the papers were in Bio-Med Central and PLOS journals.)

A table details the number of articles and full costs (and maximum APC) for “hybrid” and gold OA journals from each of five publishers—for example, while Elsevier does in fact publish some gold OA journals, those journals accounted for 21 articles while “hybrid” journals accounted for 402 articles.

Brook calls the amounts paid to Elsevier and to Wiley-Blackwell “outrageously high sums of money” and notes:

Journal articles should be published in a way that means they are freely available – and not just to academics, but also to wider public audiences. And I’m not critical of article processing charges. However, I’m unsure how any publisher can justify charging an academic an average cost of £2,443 to publish in a journal that is already being supported by library subscriptions from not just one university, but many universities around the world. And surely no cost based model should charge more for publication in a hybrid journal with multiple funding streams than in one supported purely on author charges (as appears to be the case with Wiley-Blackwell).

That last sentence is almost assuredly true but suggests that “hybrid” charges are in any sense “cost-based.” If that’s true for any journal, I’d be surprised.

### *A true transitional open-access business model*

Stuart Shieber posted this lengthy item [on March 28, 2014](#) at *The Occasional Pamphlet*—and it harks back to the first item in this section, at least indirectly. He goes into some fairly detailed math to show some problems of the “hybrid” model even if publishers were legitimately trying to avoid

double dipping. As a solution—a revenue-neutral way to *transition* to full OA, which he assumes to be the goal—he proposes something like RSC’s vouchers, albeit without the Little Big Deal bundling. It’s a detailed commentary; you’re better off reading it in the original.

But there’s this:

A few months ago, I spoke to a group from a major commercial publisher about this business model. (The topic came up in a question about why Harvard’s open-access fund doesn’t cover hybrid fees.) The reaction to this kind of proposal—which was not news to them because of the RSC program—reveals a deep problem in how this publisher thinks about the OA transition. The problem with this approach, I was told, was that as a larger percentage of articles became available open access, libraries may start to cancel their subscriptions, reducing revenues to the publisher in a way that is not made up for by the OA fees.

This is, of course, true. (It would hold also for the hybrid approach, except for the fact that uptake is so low that there is essentially no incentive to cancel subscriptions merely because of hybrid OA articles, and there is unlikely ever to be.) It is because of this possibility—that over time as the transition happens that subscriptions may be cancelled—that I refer to revenue neutrality in the short term. Examining revenues related to the marginal article, the scheme I described is revenue neutral, but overall as the larger-scale transition starts to occur, aggregate phenomena can change the revenue neutrality.

In the face of these changes, publishers have choices. If a publisher wants to achieve revenue neutrality in the face of subscription cancellations, it could raise its OA fee accordingly. The higher fee might have the effect of reducing the attractiveness of the journal to authors as they compare the fee against that of other journals, but that must be traded off against the attempt to maintain revenue. Setting prices is a business decision, a decision that should be made by the publisher to maximize its revenue. The fact that that’s harder to do in the transitional model as the anticompetitive features of the subscription market are reduced is an advantage of the model, not a flaw.

This publisher claimed that their concern was that the transitional model could substantively affect their bottom line. But what they were really admitting is that *open access* could substantively affect their bottom line. If uptake on the transitional model could induce cancellations that could not be recouped by increases in article fees, then the same is true for the hybrid model. Why is this publisher (like many others) an enthusiastic supporter of the hybrid model? I’m guessing it’s because they know that the hybrid model will never have substantial uptake. Since the transitional model might, they oppose it.

The point of the open-access journal model is not to maintain publishers' revenues at the current levels made possible by the dysfunctional journal market. It is to provide publishing services without using access limitation to fund them. If doing so also introduces a competitive free market mechanism that saves money – as this publisher implicitly corroborates – so much the better.

Perhaps many current publishers, seeing the likelihood that any realistic approach to an OA transition would harm their revenues in the long term, would avoid a model like the one discussed here that has a real possibility of navigating the transition. But there may well be forward-thinking publishers (society publishers perhaps), who would honestly like to make the transition if it could be done in an appropriately gradual manner. For them, this transitional open-access model may be just the thing. If so, they should be supported in taking it up.

There's a key in there: publishers love "hybrid" journals because they *know* very few articles will be freed, meaning that they'll almost never actually be successfully pressured to cut subscription prices and libraries won't be able to get out from under. Let me repeat the parenthetical: "(It would hold also for the hybrid approach, except for the fact that uptake is so low that there is essentially no incentive to cancel subscriptions merely because of hybrid OA articles, and there is unlikely ever to be.)" Emphasis added.

### *Publishing giants back down on double dipping*

That's the title for this Adam Smith piece [on October 29, 2014](#) at *\*Research*, based on an agreement between Jisc and two large publishers to somehow offset some portion of APCs for hybrid journals with reductions (or at least reduced increases?) in subscription prices. A couple of key quotes about the current situation:

"The situation is indefensible," says Phil Sykes, the University of Liverpool's librarian. "Article processing charges for hybrid journals are far too high, and double dipping is rife."

... [Recent research] cannot show clear evidence of double dipping, but reveals that subscription costs are rising at the same time as publishers' income from APCs. With most publishers refusing to release the amounts universities are paying them, Pinfield's research is the closest yet to proving double dipping.

His work also confirms that APCs for hybrid journals are higher than for fully open-access journals...

Carrie Calder, director of open research at Nature Publishing Group, says the difference can stem from some journals having lower acceptance rates and therefore a greater burden on editors.

Sykes, however, says that publishers refuse to explain the difference in workload. “None have come anywhere near justifying the average APC.”

### *The costs of double dipping*

Another item related to UK research on actual APC payments and the overall situation, this time by David Prosser on—well, I’m not sure, but possibly [February 8, 2014](#) on the *RLUK Blog*. It may represent additional research as well.

There is an interesting division in the ranks of publishers in their approach to double dipping. Many are engaging positively with the academic library community and accept that the increase in gold open access article processing charges (APCs) in hybrid journals means that they should adjust their subscription prices accordingly. Others, however, appear to feel that it should be business as usual.

That’s the lede, and certainly suggests that double dipping is a reality. But then there’s Elsevier’s take:

Recently, Alicia Wise, Elsevier’s Director of Access and Policy, suggested that she was ‘[not exactly clear what the term \[double dipping\] means in conversation any more](#)’. She went further and claimed that double dipping was effectively impossible as subscriptions and APCs were ‘decoupled’ – the gold OA papers in hybrid journals are additional to the total number of papers published as part of the subscription and so not part of that subscription.

Prosser looks at the actual situation, based on a paper looking at 2013 payments at 23 UK universities.

Let’s take the first publisher listed: Elsevier. In 2013 the 20 institutions surveyed spent in total £14,259,959 on subscriptions and £937,531 on APCs in hybrid journals. It is clear that the UK’s embracing of gold OA brought to Elsevier an increase in their revenues from these institutions of over 6%. The ‘double dipping is impossible’ argument appears to be that these are two completely separate revenue streams. The OA papers are viewed by Elsevier as ‘additional’, over and above what a subscriber gets access to. However, if the UK had not gone for gold, these OA papers would still have been published as subscription-access papers, only available to subscribers. The payment of the APC takes the paper out of subscription-control. If no APC had been paid the total number of papers under subscription access would have been higher. And the subscription income? It would still have been £14,259,959. Without hybrid OA the total from these 20 institutions is £14,259,959. With hybrid OA it is £15,197,490. It is clear that this is additional revenue for the same content – i.e., double dipping!

Perhaps it is unreasonable to expect that an adjustment of the subscription price would happen in 2013. A publisher with an anti-double dipping policy would take the proportion of papers being published as gold OA in one year into account when setting the subscription price in the next year. That appears perfectly reasonable. Unfortunately, it does not reflect the reality of how libraries purchase big deals. For example, the UK is part way through a five-year deal with Elsevier for access to their journal package. The deal started in 2012 and an annual increase in the price was agreed. This was obviously before the Finch Report, RCUK's provision of block grants and the UK's commitment to fund gold OA. Despite the almost £1 million of extra revenue Elsevier received from the surveyed institutions in 2013, those institutions saw exactly the same increase in their big deal price in 2014 as if there had been no gold OA spend. And for 2015 the subscription price increase took no account of hybrid OA in 2014.

The effect of this is that the UK is seeing no change in the prices it pays Elsevier for big deals, despite spending ever-increasing sums on their hybrid OA options. That is the very definition of double dipping. Some funders worldwide are now refusing to pay APCs in hybrid journals. Perhaps the UK is not ready for that, but while a minority of publishers refuse to engage seriously with the library community on the issue, perhaps an option would be for funders to refuse to pay APCs for publishers who do not have an acceptable double dipping rebate mechanism in place.

I think I'm with "some funders"—"hybrid" OA is a joke and neither institutions nor granting agencies should pay APCs to such journals.

*The "total cost of publication" in a hybrid open-access environment: Institutional approaches to funding journal article-processing charges in combination with subscriptions*

This formal peer-reviewed article (first available [February 13, 2015](#)) by Stephen Pinfield, Jennifer Salter and Peter A. Bath appeared (or will appear) in *JASIST*, the *Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology*—and I guess *JASIST* must be an example of what the article's about, since it's a subscription journal and this is an OA article (at least as a preprint).

It's an analysis of data from 23 UK institutions (sound familiar?), but this time covering a broader period, 2007-2014. Here's the abstract:

As open-access (OA) publishing funded by article-processing charges (APCs) becomes more widely accepted, academic institutions need to be aware of the "total cost of publication" (TCP), comprising subscription costs plus APCs and additional administration costs. This study analyzes data from 23 UK institutions covering the period 2007–2014 modeling the TCP. It shows a clear rise in centrally managed APC payments from 2012 onward, with payments projected to increase further.

As well as evidencing the growing availability and acceptance of OA publishing, these trends reflect particular UK policy developments and funding arrangements intended to accelerate the move toward OA publishing (“Gold” OA). Although the mean value of APCs has been relatively stable, there was considerable variation in APC prices paid by institutions since 2007. In particular, “hybrid” subscription/OA journals were consistently more expensive than fully OA journals. Most APCs were paid to large “traditional” commercial publishers who also received considerable subscription income. New administrative costs reported by institutions varied considerably. The total cost of publication modeling shows that APCs are now a significant part of the TCP for academic institutions, in 2013 already constituting an average of 10% of the TCP (excluding administrative costs).

It looks to be an excellent article, well worth reading. It cites and links to a number of other studies, including one noting the wild variation in *average* APCs: \$1,418 for all-OA publishers, \$2,097 for OA journals from subscription publishers, and \$2,727 for “hybrid” articles. (Even the \$1,418 is higher than what I find in DOAJ journals; that can either be differing samples and sizes or the fact that my figure—\$1,045—is weighted by articles published in 2013: it’s an average *per article* for APC-charging journals, not an average *per journal*.) Those differing figures only make sense if publishers are trying to gouge protect existing revenues, not based on either costs or costs plus fair profit.

But, as the article says, it’s not even that simple: given Big Deals and various special deals for APCs, it’s far more complicated.

While the analysis goes back to 2007, most institutions only started making APCs from a centralized account in 2012, so that’s where the most complete data is. We’re also not talking huge quantities of articles—in 2013, the latest year with complete figures, 23 institutions paid APCs for 2,443 articles (there were at least 361,000 articles in OA journals in 2013 *not* including hybrid journals).

I won’t go through the entire article, but it’s definitely revealing and says to me that traditional publishers (in some cases) are not only *preserving* revenues in the face of OA, they’re *increasing* revenues thanks to double dipping.

This study yields somewhat different averages for APCs than the study noted earlier: \$1,931 for OA journals from OA publishers (considerably higher than the earlier study), \$1,979 for OA journals from subscription publishers (just a bit lower), and a staggering \$3,143—*average*—for hybrid journals.

The article speaks for itself. The need for ongoing research—and for reforms aimed to prevent double-dipping and discourage the wholesale takeover of OA’s future by the big subscription publishers—seems clear.



## Libraries

Many of these items involve libraries indirectly; the ones here seemed more directly focused on libraries and the economics of open access.

### *Funding open access journal publishing: Article processing charges*

This article by Christine Fruin and Fred Rascoe [appeared in the May 2014 \*College & Research Libraries News\*](#), which is freely available online but (unlike its sister no-fee gold OA journal, *College & Research Libraries*) isn't primarily composed of peer-reviewed scholarly articles.

The introduction does a quick and clear job of laying out the situation with OA. Excerpts:

APCs range from \$200 to \$5,000, with \$904 reported as the average in the United States.<sup>6</sup> Senior researchers and faculty may be able to cover this cost by writing the fees into their grants. However, APCs can be overwhelming for graduate students or junior faculty without grant funding. To respond to this need, many institutions have established OA publishing funds as a means of covering some or all of the APC cost incurred by their faculty, staff, and students.

The range is actually broader than that: 487 DOAJ journals charge APCs between \$8 and \$199 (very nearly one-quarter of all APC-charging journals), and those journals published 45,720 articles in 2003—not as many per journal as more expensive journals, but a healthy number. The \$904 average for the U.S. (based on one sample) is somewhat lower than the overall \$1,045 I found for 2013, but it's not a huge difference.

A section on where money will come from suggests portions of collection budgets or use of discretionary funds—but also the larger institution's research divisions and individual departments.

Institutions secondly need to consider what types of OA publishing will be supported. Will “hybrid journals,” which are publications in journals that charge subscriptions but allow individual articles to be OA for a fee, be supported? Some institutions have elected to support hybrid publishing at a reduced rate while others have chosen not to support it at all. Additionally, institutions should consider whether to apply any criteria of journal quality in determining eligibility. Will only journals listed in the *Directory of Open Access Journals* be eligible for funding or will there be a narrower class of eligible journals, such as only those not included on Jeffrey Beall's List of Predatory Publishers?

As you can guess, I applaud institutions that don't support “hybrid” publishing at all, believe that DOAJ inclusion is one good criterion (which automatically eliminates hybrids) and think Beall's list is an irrelevant sideshow. (One which, incidentally, would *not* significantly narrow the

class of eligible journals, since less than 10% of DOAJ journals are on Beall's 2014 list.)

A third issue that institutions need to consider is who will be eligible for funding. This requires not only determining what institutionally affiliated persons will be eligible for support but also whether unaffiliated coauthors will be eligible for support. Institutions may elect to prorate publishing fund awards based upon the number of affiliated authors. That is, if there are three authors on a paper, and only two of them are affiliated with the funding university, then funding reimbursement is two-thirds of the maximum allotment. A final issue that institutions may want to consider is whether to impose award caps on a per-article and per-author basis. Imposing caps is a means to maximize the number of articles and authors that benefit from the funds.

I have to admit a certain fondness for award caps as well; for the moment, I'd suggest \$1,450 as a possible cap (which would include three-quarters of DOAJ journals that charge APCs), but more realistically the caps should be different for different fields.

One thing I particularly like about this article is that it doesn't stop with APCs: the authors provide some examples of "Emerging models for funding OA publishing" in addition to APCs. Unfortunately, it doesn't include "library/institutional underwriting, possibly indirect" as one such model, which it certainly should be (and is), at least for smaller journals in the humanities.

The conclusion adds a useful point:

Libraries are viewed as the primary resource at academic institutions for information on scholarly publishing issues, including OA. Faculty interest in OA publishing is increasing, and when recent federal mandates for OA are implemented, the interest from those doing federally funded research will grow quickly. As such, librarians should be prepared to answer questions from faculty and researchers on how they can cover the costs that are often attendant to publishing in OA journals. While librarians should advocate and educate their constituents on the availability of green OA and the cost-free options available with many gold OA journals, they should also be cognizant of the frequency at which faculty and researchers are publishing in gold OA publications that charge a fee and the available options for covering those costs.

I should note that quoted excerpts include a number of digits, each of which hotlinks to a linked article or resource.

### *How to prepare for the financial side of open access*

Neil Jacobs published this [on October 17, 2014](#) on the *Jisc blog*—and while it's a backgrounder for academic institutions, it speaks specifically to library budget needs. It's Jisc, so it's distinctly UK, including some situations that

are significantly different in the U.S., but it's still worth reading and thinking about—some libraries might find the arguments useful in advocating for larger budgets as part of a “transition” that I suspect will last a whole lot longer than the “number of years” in the article (although I guess that number could be, say, 100 or more). (I have my doubts that we'll ever reach 100% OA, and I'm nearly certain that won't happen during my lifetime, but that's just me.)

Substantial portions of UK APCs will come from research councils. But not all...

At present, since funding for APCs from the research councils is additional to funding council allocations, the shortfall is – in theory – simply the APCs which are not covered by block grants.

However, this is where the APC model can come unstuck. Although wholly OA journals seem to restrain inflation, partly OA journals – those where OA is optional, which make up a significant proportion of the market – have been identified by the [same Wellcome Trust study](#) as having far higher APCs on average, and potentially leading to excessive costs.

The article includes brief notes on possible ways around these excessive costs.

### *Counting the Cost: A Report on APC-Supported Open Access Publishing in a Research Library*

This peer-reviewed article by Mark P. Newton, Eva T. Cunningham and Kerri O'Connell (all at Columbia University) [appeared December 11, 2014](#) in the *Journal of Librarianship and Scholarly Communication (JLSC)*, a no-fee gold OA journal. Here's the full text you get before going to the 31-page PDF:

**BACKGROUND** At one-hundred twenty-two articles published, the open access journal *Tremor and Other Hyperkinetic Movements (Tremor)* is growing its readership and expanding its influence among patients, clinicians, researchers, and the general public interested in issues of non-Parkinsonian tremor disorders. Among the characteristics that set the journal apart from similar publications, *Tremor* is published in partnership with the library-based publications program at Columbia University's Center for Digital Research and Scholarship (CDRS). **DESCRIPTION OF PROGRAM** The production of *Tremor* in conjunction with its editor, a researching faculty member, clinician, and epidemiologist at the Columbia University Medical Center, has pioneered several new workflows at CDRS: article-charge processing, coordination of vendor services, integration into PubMed Central, administration of publication scholarships granted through a patient-advocacy organization, and open source platform development among them. Open access publishing ventures in li-

libraries often strive for lean operations by attempting to capitalize on the scholarly impact available through the use of templated and turnkey publication systems. For CDRS, production on *Tremor* has provided opportunity to build operational capacity for more involved publication needs. The following report introduces a framework and account of the costs of producing such a publication as a guide to library and other non-traditional publishing operations interested in gauging the necessary investments. Following a review of the literature published to date on the costs of open access publishing and of the practice of journal publishing in academic libraries, the authors present a brief history of *Tremor* and a tabulation of the costs and expenditure of effort by library staff in production. NEXT STEPS Although producing *Tremor* has been more expensive than other partner publications in the center's portfolio, the experiences have improved the library's capacity for addressing more challenging projects, and developments for *Tremor* have already begun to be applied to other journals.

What we have here is an actual accounting of actual costs for a gold OA journal (one that *does* charge APCs), along with added discussion.

There's a *lot* here (did I mention 31 pages?), including useful background on APCs in general and reported costs of running a journal. There's quite a bit of information about library-based publishing programs (CDRS is a library unit) and *very* detailed information on how *Tremor* operates.

As biomed journals go, *Tremor* to date is a relatively sparse journal: 42 articles in 2012, 50 in 2013 and 26 in the first half of 2014. It's also relatively inexpensive as biomed journals go, with a \$650 APC when I checked it in the fall of 2014 (the article shows \$750 for full-length articles, but the site shows that, thanks to growing numbers of manuscripts, the journal was able to lower the APC in September 2014).

It's tricky to give an actual cost figure without the pages of background in the article—for example, although the journal itself is not massive, it gains from CRDS' range of other publications. Still, here's one set of costs: from April 2011 through June 2014, *Tremor* received \$31,300 in APCs and spent \$21,147 in vendor costs—leaving more than \$10,000 toward future costs.

As for waivers of the relatively modest fees, all waiver requests were granted—and although guesses had been that up to 50% of articles might involve waiver requests, in fact just over 11% of the articles had (or requested) waivers.

I've just provided a few glimpses of what is clearly a landmark article, showing in considerable detail what one variety of gold OA journal actually costs to run. The article shows what's covered and what's not. We need more similar articles (preferably, like this one, in gold OA journals!).

## OA Article Charges: Good Business, Bad Business, or Just More Business?

This “Viewpoint” by Scott Warren appears in the [Fall 2014](#) issue of *Issues in Science and Technology Librarianship*, another no-fee gold OA journal.

What seems clear from reading the important new research by [Anne Rauh and Jeremy Cusker](#) in this issue is that STEM authors do not wish to pay OA article-level charges themselves. But do they want someone else to pay? That still seems vague. If authors want to participate in OA, but do not want to pay, whom do they *expect* to pay? Is this any different than whom they believe should pay? Interested faculty sometimes seem to fall along a spectrum from hoping to waiting to assuming that some external party, be it a library or an office of research or some other agency, will pay those nettlesome fees, before making any real commitment themselves. Rauh and Cusker, though, do not show any evidence of significant external pressure from faculty on libraries to pay OA charges. Rather, most initiatives to cover costs start within libraries. Perhaps librarians have a sense of obligation to put “our money where our mouths are.” From my vantage point as an administrator charged with oversight for Syracuse University Libraries’ collections budget, I have to ask if it is cost-effective for my library to pay OA article charges. Unfortunately, the answer I repeatedly come up with is no.

You might want to follow that link; I haven’t chosen to comment on it. The last sentence here is key, as it forms the basis for the rest.

My reasons have nothing to do with believing whether open access is good or not -- rather they arise from efficacy and the desire for prudent stewardship. Open access was born as a reaction to the rising cost of serials subscriptions in the 1990s, a practice deemed unsustainable. But now some libraries seem comfortable paying three- and even four-figure fees to publish an individual article! Charges that journal package deals have eroded the budgets for monographs and hence are bad are also part of the lore. Yet OA charges also come at the cost of procuring one-time content. This concerns me because while our missions have expanded and become more complicated, no other unit besides the library is charged with supplying academic content for the entire campus, even though other actors do have the ability, if not the wherewithal, to pay APCs for individual faculty.

The second sentence in this paragraph is bad (or at least incomplete) history: the desire to provide access to all the rest of us has nothing to do with the rising cost of serials subscriptions. Otherwise, I have little to add.

Make no mistake, if libraries choose to begin regularly and consistently paying for article publication en masse, neither authors nor research offices nor any other campus group holding funds will ever try to assume

that financial responsibility in the future. They will permanently eschew any ownership stake in the matter. And why shouldn't they? As long as someone [read: the library] picks up the tab, that's a rational decision. What that will mean for libraries is that alongside journal packages and repositories will sit a permanent new cost -- paying for individual articles authored on their campus to be published open access (here I'm hedging a bet that article charges will not, at least any-time soon, supplant subscriptions, particularly packages, as the primary means of securing journal content). Rather than eliminating or even mitigating the high expenses of licensing toll journals, OA charges will simply become a supplementary cost to be borne on top of it.

Bingo—and much as I'd love to argue with Warren's parenthetical, I think he's right.

To me, that's bad business, both in the short and long term: it assumes that any form of OA is worth paying *whatever* a publisher asks for.

Not only bad business but institutionally suicidal. While I could legitimately quote the rest of the essay—which notes some alternative ways that libraries can support OA without ponying up individual APCs—I won't; you can read it in the original. I find the possibility of libraries offering blank checks for APCs quite as abhorrent as Warren does. I'm less certain of one of his preferred solutions (Gates Foundation's insistence on immediate OA and willingness to pay the fees) only because it has a blank-check feel to it, and that simply encourages subscription publishers to charge ever more aggressive APCs (while still charging high subscription prices).

Warren also notes that STEM researchers have been paying their own *page charges* for years and didn't expect libraries to pick up those charges—an excellent point.

### *Reason, Risk, and Reward: Models for Libraries and Other Stakeholders in an Evolving Scholarly Publishing Ecosystem*

I'm closing this section with a link to this [May 2014](#) peer-reviewed article by Paolo Mangiafico and Kevin Smith in *Cultural Anthropology*, and I think it's worth reading, but I won't be excerpting or commenting on it. The article is, in part, about *Cultural Anthropology* (which became OA in February 2014 but is not currently in DOAJ) but also about—well, see the title. Worth reading.

## The Marketplace

The most miscellaneous set of items in this roundup, items dealing with the OA (and journal) marketplace in general and in various aspects.

*Media research analyst at Exane BNP Paribas Sami Kassab on the state of Open Access: Where are we, what still needs to be done?*

Let's begin with this [October 6, 2013](#) interview by Richard Poynder at *Open and Shut?*—not because I necessarily think that Sami Kassab is right, but because if Kassab is right, then something has gone very wrong. Maybe it's enough to quote the lede:

Sami Kassab is an Executive Director at the investment company Exane BNP Paribas, where he runs the Media Research team covering professional publishing. Amongst the companies Kassab monitors are Reed Elsevier, Thomson Reuters, Informa, John Wiley, Wolters Kluwer, and Pearson. Currently, Kassab is positive about the sector, arguing that scientific publishing offers “best in class defensive growth in a very resilient industry”. Kassab believes that Open Access (OA) is still a marginal activity and in any case poses neither a short-term nor a long-term threat to large scholarly publishers. In fact, he says, it will enable them to monetise more articles than they have been able to monetise historically.

I'll assert that OA is only a “marginal activity” when viewed strictly in terms of revenue dollars. At 20% of scholarly articles, it's certainly not a marginal activity in terms of the *intellectual* marketplace. That's where I'm inclined to believe Kassab is wrong. Unfortunately, given the ease with which the big publishers have taken over a large share of OA funding with very high APCs and (generally) without reducing or stabilizing subscription prices, it's harder to argue with the last sentence and the last half of the penultimate sentence.

As usual with Poynder interviews, you're dealing with Poynder's own perspective (as illustrated by his phrase “the so-called serials crisis”), but he does good interviews. In this case, BNP Paribas *had* viewed OA as a threat to Elsevier and its ilk—but no more. Consider:

“We estimate Elsevier generates over \$4,000 of revenues per article published. Our calculation of the average APC charged by publishers is around \$2,000.”

While this is a significant fall, Kassab believes that publishers can take it in their stride, or at least large publishers can. “[A]s the whole industry switches to Gold OA, we believe that publishers' rejection rates are likely to come down. In other words, for the large publishers, we expect an increase in published output to compensate for lower price points.”

More specifically, in a recent report Kassab and his colleagues estimated that Elsevier currently rejects 700,000 out of 1 million articles each year. With Gold OA, they argue, “these articles are likely to be monetised.”

Except that as long as granting agencies don't cap APCs, Elsevier will charge \$4,000 and up, even if/as it loosens peer review or otherwise in-

creases published output. Because, of course, *as long as it can keep demonstrating that the number of non-OA articles is growing, it can keep raising subscription prices.*

There's more: Kassab actually believes that the image of Elsevier and friends is better now than in the past—and he claims that the equivalent of APCs represented the *dominant* publisher revenue in the 1950s and 1960s (with page charges rather than subscription prices being primary drivers).

You also get the view that the only access that matters is access by other researchers (I think you can substitute “researchers with institutional affiliations”), a strikingly narrow view of OA that is, unfortunately, a reasonable “marketplace” perspective: the rest of the public doesn't matter.

There's more to the article, and one commenter says page charges were never a major factor in publisher revenue. In any case, this is the sort of marketplace commentary that makes both “hybrid” journals and, in general, gold OA activity by the major subscription publishers seem suspicious and ultimately not in the interests of libraries or all but the wealthiest scholars—and certainly not the public outside of researchers with institutional affiliations.

### *The cost of open access publishing: a progress report*

This [March 28, 2014](#) item “by Wellcome Trust” at the *Wellcome Trust Blog* reports on details of 2012-2013 Wellcome Trust APC payments—and much of that's been discussed in earlier items. I note it here both to provide the link to the item (which links to the detailed report) but also to note a couple of things:

- Roughly 7% of the 2,000 articles paid for during that period had problems, i.e. not being in PubMed Central or still being behind paywalls. Wellcome follows up on those items.
- I find it shocking that 74% of the articles paid for during this period were in “hybrid” journals—especially since the second largest publisher (in terms of number of Wellcome-paid articles) was PLOS, with 14% of them, given that PLOS doesn't have hybrid journals. Add those up and it says that only 12% of Wellcome's article payments went to *real* OA journals not published by PLOS.

We've already seen that “hybrid” APCs run about twice as high as true Gold OA APCs, and at least Wellcome is somewhat concerned about this:

The bigger issue concerns the high cost of hybrid open access publishing, which we have found to be nearly twice that of born-digital fully open access journals. We need to find ways of balancing this by working with others to encourage the development of a transparent, competitive and reasonably priced APC market.



## *Can ‘author pays’ journals compete with ‘reader pays’?*

This article by Theodore C. and Carl T. Bergstrom appeared on [February 19, 2013](#) on the *Nature* site. It’s interesting if somewhat incomplete—for example, the Bergstroms completely ignore no-fee Gold OA, splitting the scholarly article market into Reader Pays (which is generally inaccurate—libraries aren’t the readers) and Author Pays (which is also generally inaccurate). Indeed, as is noted a bit later, “Reader Pays” (really mostly “Library Pays”) is frequently “both sides now.” Contrasting scholarly journals to, say, automobiles, the Bergstroms say:

In the academic journal market, the direction of cash flow is different. The middlemen, publishers, receive payments from consumers (readers) and also from suppliers (authors). Most journals charge subscription fees to readers. Many also charge page fees to authors and most maintain an implicit requirement that those who publish are obliged to donate refereeing services. Very few scholarly journals pay their authors for content. [Emphasis added.]

They say “of course [publishers’] ability to collect revenue from either source is limited by competitive forces: in the input market for submission of high quality articles and in the output market for library subscriptions,” but—as they admit—the output market is *not* a competitive market: each journal is a monopoly. It’s also a skewed market, as they say:

[L]ibraries typically must pay 4 to 6 times as much per page for journals owned by commercial publishers as for journals owned by non-profit societies. These differences in price do not reflect differences in the quality of the journals. In fact the commercial journals are on average less cited than the non-profits and the average cost per citation of commercial journals ranges from 5 to 15 times as high as that of their non-profit counterparts.

There’s more discussion, including the suggestion that a wholesale shift to gold OA *might* improve the competitive situation—and a suggestion that neither variety of subscription publisher is likely to embrace Gold OA because it would reduce revenues. Unless they manage to “embrace” it in their own way...

The Bergstroms assume “substantial” author fees—I guess presuming that nothing will upset the high-profit applecart of the current system.

There’s more. Worth reading, even if I find parts of it questionable.

## *The Exploitative Economics of Academic Publishing*

Samuel Gershman wrote this fairly long piece on [May 6, 2014](#) at *BetaBoston*, a *Boston Globe* site. As you can guess from the title, Gershman is not overly enamored with the current situation. He’s also one of those

scientists who can personally attest to how Elsevier deals with Green OA if it's not done precisely to Elsevier's liking:

Like many scientists, I provide access to my research papers on my website. I view this as a commonsense way to disseminate knowledge, but not everyone shares this view. A few months ago, I received an email from an official at Princeton University, where I attended graduate school, informing me that a lawyer representing the publishing giant Elsevier had demanded the removal of these papers from my website. When I published these papers in Elsevier journals, I was required to hand over the copyrights. Therefore, I had no choice but to remove the papers.

I'll pick a few highlights from this good, broad-ranging discussion. For example, Gershman on the value added by academic publishers:

What value is added by academic publishers? In my opinion: very little. Elsevier claims that they add value as they “coordinate the review, consideration, addition of text and references, and other production and distribution mechanisms.” In fact, all of these contributions are or could be obtained at almost no cost. First, reviews are typically coordinated by a combination of volunteer editors (academics) and an automated email system. The cost of setting up and maintaining such an automated system is negligible (a point I will return to later). Elsevier does not add text and references to research papers – academics do. In my experience, corroborated by anecdotes from other scientists, publisher-employed copy editors are mostly superfluous and in some cases even introduce errors into papers or cause substantial publication delays.

He also notes that layout and typesetting could be handled nicely without publisher costs (e.g., by using templates). He discusses the costs to libraries and the growth of OA—but he thinks the author-side charges (he says “thousands of dollars per article,” which is true for quite a few) are too high.

Why is it so expensive to publish in these open-access journals? According to the journals, these fees defray their publication and operating costs. However, this argument is undermined by the existence of open-access journals that charge authors nothing and have negligible operating costs.

Here he cites *JMLR*, which was discussed in an earlier item. I question one figure, the claim that a hosted webserver would only cost about \$15 a year, but even at \$150/year (what I pay for web hosting), that's still a trivial amount. *JMLR* would still be cheap even if it was paying for commercial servers.

This proves that cheap open-access publishing is possible. So why isn't this model more widespread? The main reason is that academics in many fields rely on publishing in prestigious journals for career advancement,

and almost all of the most well-respected journals are owned by closed-access publishers...

I think a practical goal for the future is the establishment of open-access journals on the model of JMLR. This model is non-exploitative and does not burden taxpayers with the costs for existing open-access journals like PLOS and Frontiers. The crucial step in embracing this model is the recognition that the primary function of journals is to provide rigorous peer review, something that is already universally supported by volunteer labor from academics. Because this function costs nothing, publication should cost very little. In the age of the internet, other traditional journal functions like formatting and dissemination have become virtually free.

Universities should be strongly incentivized to support this alternative publication model, since they shoulder a large portion of the current system's financial burden. They could easily provide servers, information technology resources, and accounting services at a tiny fraction of the cost they are currently paying for journal subscriptions. A more radical proposal is for universities to collectively stop subscribing to closed-access journals. This would force academics to reconstitute new open-access versions of these journals. If done in tandem with university support for open-access platforms, such a move could replace the current publication system without destroying the journals themselves.

I know, I know: It's not that simple. Still, this strongly made, thoughtfully argued case is worth considering.

### *Beyond open access for academic publishers*

This piece, posted [May 15, 2014](#) "by Publishing Technology" at *Content-Forward*, should be read as another cautionary tale: What does it mean that the big subscription publishers now seem to have "figured this OA thing out" and the industry can expect continued growth (as this piece seems to say)?

*Of course* the piece assumes that all gold OA involves author payments. What would you expect in an industry-oriented post?

At the Professional Scholarly Publishing (PSP) Annual Conference in February I was impressed by the confident and robust nature of presentations from publishers such as Wiley, Springer and Elsevier. The prevailing feeling was that these publishers have now come to terms with OA, they now know what works and what doesn't and have a clear vision on the business models and structures that will deliver growth in the future.

Whether there is an industry-wide standardisation of gold or hybrid gold OA models remains to be seen, but many publishers certainly appear to be looking upon these options increasingly favourably...

It would appear that many publishers no longer consider OA to be a problem and more so an opportunity.

Need I say more? The “opportunity” almost certainly doesn’t involve freeing up library money for other purposes, just to name one problem.

### *The prevalence of Open Access publication fees*

This [June 15, 2014](#) piece by Ulrich Herb at *scinoptica* carries a subtitle: “...in the ten countries that publish the highest portions of Open Access journals.” It’s based on *DOAJ* research, looking at country-by-country information (something I chose *not* to do in my own, more direct, research into *DOAJ* journals).

As I also found, Herb found that you can only go so far with the information in *DOAJ*’s downloadable spreadsheet, so he worked directly with the superb online advanced search interface. Unfortunately, that means that it’s only possible to work at the journal level (not all journals provide article-level information to *DOAJ*). There’s also the issue of “conditional” charges, but that’s relatively minor.

The core of this item is two tables covering the ten top nations, one arranged by number of journals per nation, one by the percentage of journals with APCs in each nation.

It isn’t entirely obvious that the U.S. *would* lead in number of *DOAJ*-listed OA journals, but it does, with 1,206 (40% charging APCs). Brazil being second with 927 OA journals says something about SciELO and other initiatives, as does the percentage of APC-charging journals: 4.5%. A more troubling case is third, the UK, with 615 journals—of which nearly 64% charge APCs. And so it goes, on down to Iran with 264 journals (just under 10% charging APCs).

The by-APC-percentage chart is also interesting, if a bit misleading: Egypt comes in first or worst, with more than 86% of its 461 *DOAJ*-listed OA journals charging APCs—but that’s primarily one publisher, Hindawi. After the second-place UK comes India with 593 journals—but the APC percentage is already down to less than half at 43%. The bottom five are all under 10%; in addition to Brazil, that includes Italy, Romania, Iran and Spain.

If you’re not already aware of my overall figures for *DOAJ* journals at least partly accessible to English speakers (but without national filters), 33% charge APCs—but those 33% published 64% of the articles in 2013.

### *Something I’ve been meaning to post for a while...*

Google+ messages don’t generally have titles, including this [October 10, 2014](#) item by Timothy Gowers. He’s pointing to [another depressing market-](#)

[oriented](#) item picked up by Richard Poynder, this one a September 24, 2014 report by Claudio Aspesi and Helen Luong at Bernstein Research: “Reed Elsevier: Goodbye to Berlin - The Fading Threat of Open Access (Upgrade to Market-Perform).” I’d quote from that report more extensively, but it’s too depressing (and I’d expect research firms like this to be aggressive about protecting copyright). Briefly, Aspesi and Luong think that the threat of OA is receding, that OA funding may be *adding* to the profits of STM publishers (yes, the report does use the phrase “double dipping”), that libraries will continue to renew Big Deals and that “OA policies adopted by governments around the world appear deferential to the interests of subscription publishers.” I didn’t read past the first few pages of the 23-page report, but you can if you have the stomach for it.

Gower’s take:

The report is quite long, but the depressing part is on the first page which I recommend for the sheer masochistic pleasure it offers. The brief message is that in their judgment, current Open Access policies do not seem to be any threat to subscription revenues and may in fact be increasing the profits of publishers, who pocket article processing fees on top of what they rake in through Big Deals.

My personal view is that many people involved in Open Access have put the cart before the horse. There are two big problems with the current system: the fact that so much valuable material is behind paywalls and the fact that libraries pay such vast amounts to subscribe to journals. Too much attention has been paid to the first problem and not enough to the second. If there were a concerted focus on the second problem, I think the first would largely take care of itself.

I honestly don’t see how you can solve the second problem without focusing on the first (and, to be sure, since I lack any institutional affiliation, it’s the first problem that causes me the most trouble), but, well, wouldn’t it be nice?

A short post with lots of comments, some of them taking issue with what Gowers says (and one that says 36% profit isn’t all that great—actually, this one shows up again and again and starts to feel trollish after a while, as when he’s dismissing scholars as unimportant).

### *Gold OA journals market ‘set to double by 2018’*

This brief piece by Benedicte Page appeared on [October 27, 2014](#) at *The Bookseller*—and it’s important to clarify that “market” means monetary value, period. It’s based on a report from “strategy consultants OC&C,” which estimated the current “value” of gold OA publishing in 2013 at €200 million (call it \$227 million—not that far from the \$230.7 million in potential 2013 revenue I arrived at in my broad *DOAJ* study). The report also suggests that gold OA will account for 35 to 50% of total research output by 2018—and will then plateau.

The report also offers advice to publishers on how to wring every last dollar from changing publication models, but then, that's what consultants are for. That "the market" is equated to "the revenue" is also no surprise, sad as that is.

### *The Size of the Open Access Market*

This post by Joseph Esposito appeared [October 29, 2014](#) on *the scholarly kitchen*. It's worth noting and maybe reading despite a remarkably snotty lede:

Usually discussion of open access (OA) has a utopian cast. It begins with the benefits to researchers and rapidly moves on from there—because it is a foundational premise that what is good for the research community is good for everybody. Expanded access will serve to cure horrible diseases, the science behind new technologies will cool a warming planet, and insights into people and power will make a veritable Woodstock out of the Middle East. Resistance, as the Borg say, is futile, but also immoral: Who, after all, wants to stand between a parent and an afflicted child?

Getting past my immediate response, which involves a one-fingered salute, we get to the meat: how "refreshing" Esposito found it to read an examination of OA that "is sober and descriptive, one that examines how OA has been brought within the economy at large." Oh, and one that mere mortals are never going to read, since it's a Simba Information report that goes for a cool \$2,500 (for a 61-page download). There's a very silly final sentence in the paragraph introducing the Simba report: "I will be curious to see if any OA advocates find anything in it that is wrong or unfairly presented." I would be astonished to find many OA advocates ready to pony up \$2,500 for a marketing report, one that apparently assumes that if it's not money, it doesn't matter.

If we can assume that Simba does, somehow, magically have the ability to know exactly how much every OA publisher is getting in APCs and exactly how much is being spent overall on scholarly journals (Esposito says "STM journals," I guess because nothing else matters?), there are some figures: Simba says 2013 APC revenues totaled \$242.2 million out of a total \$10.5 billion spent on journals (or STM journals—Esposito is also apparently confused on this issue).

Apparently Simba sees that rising to \$440 million by 2017, and it's in his commentary that, to my mind, Esposito goes straight off the rails:

Simba sees OA rising to \$440 million by 2017, which sounds reasonable. That would make OA 3.9% of the total market. That is neither a big number nor a negligible one. The more important point to make, which cannot be stressed enough, is that while traditional publishing continues to grow modestly, the OA portion of the market is growing much faster. Any publisher working in the research area would be remiss if they did

not develop a strategy to tap into these growing sums. And of course just about all of them are.

This only makes sense if “the market” is defined solely by revenues—if all free goods are simply regarded as not existing. By my calculations, around 20% of scholarly *articles* are gold OA, so I’d call gold OA about 20% of the scholarly article marketplace *now*, not in 2017.

There’s more and it gets back into Esposito’s condescending tendency; I won’t bother to comment directly on it. He ends with “As for where OA is headed, it’s just business.” Well, when you *explicitly rule out* all aspects that *aren’t* just business, I guess that’s true. It’s ignorant and offensive, but that’s another issue.

There are 32 comments, with Mike Taylor being almost alone in claiming that value is about something other than The Bucks, and some of the regular *scholarly kitchen* crowd doing little to improve my opinion of them. *Of course* there are dismissals of the suggestion that anyone other than (affiliated) researchers would ever want to read or gain value from any scholarly article, because if you suggest otherwise, then you have to take into account more than actual revenues. Perhaps quoting one Esposito comment and Taylor’s response, the latter being the final comment, offer a suitable perspective.

Esposito:

It’s a very bad idea to politicize everything. It reduces a society to endless squabbling. The entire social justice argument concerning OA strikes me as silly. OA reaches researchers at major corporations and privileged academics at private universities. Let’s leave our pieties at home and focus on what something actually does.

Taylor:

It’s a very bad idea to make everything about money. It reduces a society to endless squabbling. The entire economic argument concerning OA strikes me as silly. OA reaches researchers at SMEs, academics at minor, underfunded universities, and those with no affiliations at all. Let’s leave our finances at home and focus on what something actually does.

I’m with Taylor on this, but that’s probably no surprise, especially since I have no affiliations at all.

*PLOS is anti-elitist! PLOS is elitist! The weird world of open access journalism.*

This one’s by Michael Eisen, appearing [December 25, 2014](#) at it is *NOT junk*.

In 2005 I submitted an essay about science publishing to a political magazine. I got a polite reply back saying that the article was interesting and the issue important but that my approach wasn’t right for them. My piece was too straightforward. Too persuasive. They preferred articles

that had a simple “hook” and, most importantly, were “counterintuitive”.

Zoom forward a decade and I finally get what they were looking for. In the last few months two articles about open access have appeared in political magazines, both having “counterintuitive” points.

The post looks at those two articles—one in *The New Republic* which, basically, says that *PLOS ONE* is a bad idea because journalists and scientists need to be protected from all those articles that wouldn’t appear in the “top” journals.

So, basically, Robb was complaining that PLOS is bad because it is anti-elitist – that we may not like elitist journals, but we NEED them, lest we leave poor science journalists dangling in the wind, forced to actually read papers and figure out what’s interesting on their own.

Nevermind that said meritocracy is demonstrably flawed. Nevermind that the current system of peer review sucks at identifying good quality and important science. Nevermind that anyone who pays attention to science – and *Science* - should know “high quality” journals routinely publish crap. After researching the issue, Robb concluded that even a dysfunctional elitist hierarchy is better than no elitist hierarchy.

The *Atlantic* article takes the other tack: that OA is too expensive for researchers and therefore elitist. (As is typically the case with this sort of article, the assumption seems to be that *all* OA journals charge high APCs.) The sleight of hand here is that APCs come out of research budgets, where subscriptions come out of library budgets: thus, the fact that current subscription costs are probably several times as high as needed to fund efficient, cost-effective, non-40%-profit OA publishing is irrelevant *to the researcher*: somebody else’s pocket is being robbed.

Eisen says a lot here (noting, for example, that many subscription journals *also* charge author-side fees: for *PNAS*, at least, the fee is more than the *PLOS ONE* APC). He notes the “disturbing trend in journalism about open access” of taking a problem in publishing and turning it into a problem with OA—e.g., the Bohannon “sting,” carefully applied only to OA journals and even then mostly to journals already tagged as sketchy.

There’s one minor point where I’d disagree with Eisen. In criticizing a point in the *Atlantic* article where the outgoing publisher of *Science* is quoted as saying that it costs \$50 million a year to publish *Science*, Eisen says—among other things—“Yes, it costs \$50,000,000 to publish *Science*.” I think there’s a need to push *hard* at those figures: are they revenues or actual, quantifiable costs?

You may want to read this in the original—and read the comments as well, including Mike Taylor’s somewhat harsher note on the two articles.



## Sustainability

Many anti-OA discussions—and especially anti-no-APC-OA discussions—use “sustainability” as a mighty club: free journals and journals with low APCs “just aren’t sustainable.” We’ll see a few discussions of sustainability here, but to some extent I think the term has become a straw man.

After all, for an author, the goals are publication, readership (although that may be idealistic), impact and possibly credits toward tenure or promotion. Those all hinge on the *article* being recognized, read and retained. Sustainability of the scholarly enterprise may be vital.

Does that mean that sustainability of a given journal is vital? Only if the only way to sustain access to articles is for the journal itself to survive. If, on the other hand, repositories (national, institutional and otherwise), LOCKSS/CLOCKSS and other initiatives mean that readily accessible final versions of articles will continue to be available even if a journal goes under, then journal sustainability is less critical. DOIs *should* work this way—they should provide access to a certified copy of an article, not to “the article on the publisher’s server.”

Journals come and journals go. Realistically, *if* true OA becomes the dominant model (“true OA” certainly not meaning “eventual access to a version of an article that’s similar to what was published but can’t really be cited”), and if “hybrid” journals are the scam I regard them as, *then* some fairly large number of existing subscription journals are going to go away. If those subscription journals have been published by publishers with ethics, there will continue to be access to the articles. If I was a gambling man, I’d place a very large bet that hundreds and probably thousands of subscription journals have disappeared over the years.

So maybe this whole section is silliness. But maybe not. And, as the first piece here shows, “sustainability” isn’t just an issue for OA—in fact, there are good reasons to believe that it applies more strongly to the current state of affairs in scholarly journal publishing, unless you believe that libraries can and will keep up with Big Deal price increases forever.

### *Pondering a solution to the problem of Learned Societies and the transition to open access*

For that matter, as discussed in Martin Eve’s [October 4, 2014](#) post at *Dr Martin Paul Eve*, there’s another facet of sustainability: the extent to which some scholarly societies have become dependent on excess revenues from journal subscriptions, whether the society publishes them or has one of the big publishers do it for them. The lede:

One of the biggest problems faced in the transition to a pure open access environment for journals is that learned societies have become dependent upon subscription revenue to subsidise their activities. This is not an a-historical phenomenon but has emerged most prominently

since the 1960s when the societies outsourced their journal productions to either commercial publishers or to university presses. As a result, they now expect to receive funds back from their publishing operations which they then use to fund other parts of their outfit. Low-cost options for open access usually find it incredibly hard to give such revenues back to societies and so, as Janet Finch noted in her report, there is ‘no doubt’ that some learned societies will face ‘some difficulty finding a business model that will work’. In this post, I want to explore what’s happening here and propose one potential solution to a transition.

I find that “*the transition to a pure open access environment*” is a phrase I wouldn’t use: I’m pretty certain I won’t live long enough to see a 100% “transition” happen, and I’m not sure any of my readers will either. The first sentence of the second paragraph: “The academic journal serials market is unsustainable.” There are many issues I might argue with Martin Eve about. That’s not one of them. The rest of the paragraph offers some numbers behind the statement.

I have to quote the fourth paragraph (after a brief discussion of what learned societies are) in full, since in part it’s saying something I’ve been saying over and over for something like a decade now. My short version is this: *Libraries should not be expected to fund the activities of non-library societies*. Eve is slightly less succinct:

[A]t the moment, the activities of learned societies are paid for by academic libraries. By bundling the costs of activities that are not publishing, within a budget that is meant to be for access to knowledge, societies contribute to the budgetary crisis of access to information. Furthermore, societies are claiming an unsustainable activity (the for-profit journal subscription market) as the basis of their sustainability. This is not to deprecate the claims that there may be financial challenges for associations and societies in any transition to open access. It is, rather, to note that calls to protect society revenue models are often inextricable from calls to protect publisher profits; the two are interwoven. This rhetoric of economy and sustainability, it must also not be forgotten, will always make one group’s sustainability possible only at the expense of another: usually the library.

After more discussion (including the apparent fact that most humanities disciplines won’t go for author-side fees), we get to Eve’s solution, and if you’ve read any of Martin Eve’s stuff, you already know what it is: his pet project, the Open Library of Humanities.

You can read his take in the original article. I’m not convinced that “economy of scale” works the way Eve thinks it should for humanities journals; I’m not convinced that the fields wouldn’t be well-served by a large number of small journals, mostly supported by incidental subsidies from universities and libraries. The fact is that in 2013, and excluding

journals I couldn't investigate because I only read English, 718 journals in the humanities published 16,320 articles—and only 6% of those journals (publishing 22% of the articles) charged author-side fees. (Of the 39 humanities journals charging fees, 17 charged nominal fees, \$200 or less; 16 charged low fees, ranging from \$201 to \$600; and six—publishing a mere 300 articles in total—charged medium fees, ranging from \$601 to \$1,450.)

In any case, it's clear that some societies would have a hard time offering grants and the like without subsidies from libraries through subscriptions—subsidies that, in the long run, are not sustainable for the libraries.

### *Closing Open Medicine*

[This editorial](#) by Claire Kendall, James Maskalyk and Anita Palepu appeared in *Open Medicine* 8:4 (2014). It begins:

Despite our passion for making high-quality medical information freely and widely accessible, we always knew it would come down to sustainability. This is our final editorial in *Open Medicine*. It has been an inspiring journey for all who have been involved in the journal's inception, launch, and day-to-day operations. Around the idea that there is a need for unbiased, publicly accessible platforms for the dissemination of medical research and discussion, a lively community gathered... We are closing *Open Medicine* knowing that we have made a meaningful contribution to something bigger than ourselves, and that our efforts have helped to change the landscape of medical publishing.

After discussing reasons for founding the OA journal (with a hefty APC—just under \$2,000 for research and review articles) and some of the effects it may have had, there's this:

While inspiring, the process was also chronically frustrating. Despite everyone's best intentions, it was challenging for a small team to keep stoking the interest and engagement of the general academic community, and it was difficult to recruit members to our editorial board and board of directors who could provide the kind of hands-on involvement that our small but ambitious operation required... By the end, despite continual efforts to deepen our bench strength, there were few stalwart supporters...

The work was also exacting. Launching and running a medical journal is more work than it might seem. Based on our previous experiences, we thought we might need operational funding of about \$3 million dollars per year. Ultimately, by dint of optimism and volunteerism, we were able to run the journal and publish articles for a tiny fraction of that... [Emphasis added.]

I read this editorial as an interesting case of something that happens: journals do run out of steam (the journal, with its broad scope, published 20 research and review articles in 2011, 15 in 2012, 9 in 2013 and 7 in the first half of 2014; going back to the beginning, there were 12 in 2007, 8 in 2008, 19 in 2009 and 10 in 2010). Then I hit the sentence I've bolded above: *Three million dollars a year*. Even in 2013, there were all of four OA journals that *might* have had that much revenue (none of them solely in medicine); it struck me as such a high bar that I wanted to know more: What would cost so much? I don't find that in the editorial, and maybe it's the wrong place to look.

I won't quote the rest of the editorial—it's not that long, and you can certainly read it in the original. This paragraph is interesting (and notes the existence of double dipping), but I find it sad that the authors don't put scare quotes around “predatory journals” and cite one of Beall's blasts as apparently credible.

Despite these achievements by *Open Medicine*... further change is needed. First, while there has been a substantial shift toward making articles freely available, whether in scientific journals or in institutional repositories, many of our colleagues still do not understand that, in view of the restrictions imposed by traditional copyright licences, “free to read” doesn't necessarily mean free to distribute or to create derivative works. Second, budget lines for open access fees in grant funding are rarely adequate, are often incorporated with skepticism, and are generally used with reluctance. Third, many traditional toll-access publishers have capitalized on the open access movement by adopting the appearance, but not the spirit, of open access, charging hefty subscription fees to individuals and libraries while offering free access after charging a substantial fee to their authors. This double-dipping leaves little incentive to adopt new models and further entrenches an unfavourable view of open access. Finally, the onslaught of predatory journals has added confusion to the mix by causing authors to associate publication charges with unscrupulous behaviour.

### “Open Medicine” Closes Down Raising Questions on Sustainability of Open Access Journals

“Pranab” posted this [on November 28, 2014](#) at *paperblog*.

One of the first open access, online journals I started reading was *Open Medicine*, not because I was a crusader for open science of anything, but simply because I had Googled “open access medicine journal” and had happened to land on that particular site! Subsequently, as I got familiarised with the terrain of open access publication, I started looking at more and more journals and somehow, OM slipped out of my reading list. Still, it was a considerable shock when I received an email on the

OKFN/Open Access mailing list where they had forwarded an article in OM stating that the journal was closing down...

In their final editorial, Kendall et al take a gloomy, melancholic tone as they make no secret of the fact that the journal is being shut down for sustainability issues. While it is a very romantic idea to have an open access journal run by academics, for academics, without any interference from financial considerations, unfortunately, in the end, The Joker's words stand true: "If you're good at something, never do it for free."

What I see here so far: a journal *that the author had stopped paying attention to* shut down (possibly because others had stopped paying attention to it?) and a conclusion that seems overgeneralized from the datum.

*Have De Gruyters enclosed previously open-access Bepress journals?*

Mike Taylor asks that question in a [November 16, 2014](#) post at *Sauropod Vertebra Picture of the Week*, and the quick answer is No. But it's a little more complicated, and it may or may not say anything about sustainability.

The story: Taylor had [posted an item](#) saying, *correctly*, that articles published under a CC-BY license can't be "re-enclosed" if their publisher is acquired (although *new* articles in such a journal might not be OA, the CC license is a permanent broadening of rights). He wrote the post because Heather Morrison, who seems to be waging a one-woman campaign against CC-BY, was quoted as saying this:

"There is nothing in the CC BY license that would stop a business from taking all of the works, with attribution, and selling them under a more restrictive license—not only a more restrictive CC-type license (STM's license is a good indication of what could happen here), but even behind a paywall, then buying out the OA publisher and taking down the OA content."

Taylor says that's flatly incorrect—and he's right, at least in any meaningful sense: for a new publisher to claim copyright restrictions over existing articles would be illegal.

One of the commenters noted that deGruyters acquired some journals from bepress (67 of them) and that at least some of these journals were now behind paywalls. Mike Taylor asked the bepress people..and it turns out the journals were never actually OA, at least not in any formal sense. The key statement, which does relate to sustainability, I believe:

To answer your question, the bepress journals were not open access in the formal (Budapest) definition of the term, and they never used a CC license. The copyright was traditional publisher-owned copyright, with permission to authors to post their articles on their websites and university IRs.

The bepress journals did have an unusual access policy: we made all articles available to readers for free, as a way to demonstrate demand and urge libraries to subscribe. Basically, if a guest filled out a short form we would grant them access to the article. We would tally those forms by institution and then call the library and ask them to subscribe. There's an article in *Learned Publishing* that describes the model in more detail. It wasn't open access but it was a good balance for many years. Unfortunately, libraries facing strong budget pressures stopped subscribing. They said "we can't justify paying for a title that our authors can get for free. We have to spend the money on titles that are otherwise unavailable."

The response (from Irene Kamotsky, Director of Strategic Initiatives for bepress) notes something else: bepress now operates the Digital Commons, an institutional repository and publishing platform—and Digital Commons now supports "nearly 800 journals published by libraries...the vast majority of which are open access (and none charge author article fees.)"

The question is whether authors submitting to bepress journals believed they were publishing in OA journals. The journals didn't meet proper criteria for OA: they required registration.

### *Peak PLOS: Planning for a Future of Declining Revenue*

Phil Davis posted this [on December 2, 2014](#) at *the scholarly kitchen*, and I suppose you could say it's about sustainability, if you're willing to take everything Davis says and implies at face value.

Publication output in the world's largest scientific journal, *PLOS ONE*, has fallen nearly 25% since peak output in December 2013 and doesn't appear to be recovering.

When I do a date search, I come up with 32,986 items in 2013 and 31,882 in 2014—a "decline," but not much of one. But Davis is looking at monthly totals, and drawing a *lot* of smoke out of one or two monthly figures: "The rise and fall of *PLOS ONE*'s output curve raises a few concerns about the future success of this journal and to its parent organization as well."

Davis informs us that PLOS subsidizes its more selective journals with the excess revenue from *PLOS ONE* and asserts that the increased spending by PLOS is largely due to "incremental costs of handling, processing and publishing each manuscript." He goes on, mostly—I think—to make the case that OA journals are inherently more risky than subscription journals. Take this:

Prior to the downturn in 2014, one could look at the *PLOS ONE* publication graph and believe that growth could go on forever. One could be optimistic and plan for a future of continued growth, new staff, new software, and new office space. Since the vast majority of revenue for this

publisher is tied to APCs, a downturn in publication rates makes all of these investments look more like gambles than sure bets. It's hard to plan for the future when your revenue stream starts resembling the stock market. In comparison, a publisher dependent upon subscription revenue may plan on a 2-3% annual revenue decline and still be able to plan with much more confidence than a publisher that is dependent upon APCs.

Because we all know that libraries would *never* actually cancel subscriptions in large numbers? Is that why a subscription publisher can plan with such confidence? And we are to believe that *anybody*—much less the folks at PLOS—believed that the rapid growth from 2011 to 2012 and 2012 to 2013 could continue indefinitely or even for very long? Surely not.

Davis manages to make the future look even more gloomy: A larger number of recent articles will probably mean a lower Impact Factor, which means that authors chasing IFs will be less likely to submit papers, which means... You could also explain the “decline” in papers by the recent open data policy (which Davis says isn't being enforced but at least one commenter says is being enforced).

On one hand, I'm inclined to believe that *PLOS ONE* won't continue to grow rapidly and may decline, especially if it doesn't reduce its APCs: there are more high-quality competitors (as noted in the comments) and there are, one hopes, not an unlimited number of articles out there.

On the other, we mostly have Davis' word that PLOS' highly selective journals can only survive if *PLOS ONE* keeps bringing in more and more money; we don't have any long-term indication that submissions have fallen rapidly and will stay down; and much of this—including some comments from other *scholarly kitchen*—has the feel of FUD. The comments are interesting (including Mike Taylor's stance that *PLOS ONE*'s APC is too high).

Let me clarify: I am *not* saying that *PLOS ONE* will clearly remain in robust health indefinitely. Who knows? I *am* saying that I get the sense of overstating the case for imminent massive decline.

### *PeerJ—A PLOS ONE Contender in 2015?*

Let's close with a recent Phil Davis piece at *the scholarly kitchen*, this one dated [February 2, 2015](#). This time I'm not going to comment extensively; I suggest you read the post (and possibly earlier posts about *PeerJ*). To be honest, I find the *PeerJ* model puzzling enough (especially for a VC-funded publisher) that I don't feel I can say much intelligently about Davis' comments.

In reading them, you may sense some of the myriad issues involved in so-called sustainability. Will *PeerJ* ever become profitable? I have no idea. Will having a lower IF than *PLOS ONE* (and a *much* lower cost) mean that scholars will ignore it? I also have no idea. It does strike me that Davis is

making a case that big publishers are *always* at an advantage, and I'd like to think that's not always true—but I may be reading too much into it.

## Conclusions

When I started this roundup, I expected the usual “lots of quotations, a little bit of mild commentary” route, probably resulting in an essay that would make up most or all of a nice 24-page to 26-page issue. I didn't think I had strong feelings about the economic issues being raised.

I was wrong. I do have strong feelings. There's a lot more of my commentary here than expected. The economics of publishing are tricky and generally opaque. The economics of OA are even trickier and not necessarily a lot more transparent. The deliberate conflation (in subscription publishing) of *cost* and *revenue* is an ongoing problem, one that will no more go away rapidly than subscription publishers will go away rapidly.

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# Masthead

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