

In defence of the membership

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Membership organisations connect us together and they are a vibrant part of our landscape. I've been thinking about their future, but held back from airing my views because I could imagine you saying, "well, she would say that wouldn't she!". However the future is now, so here is my personal view. It is not an official view of any of the membership organisations of which I am part.

Membership organisations come in a variety of flavours, but we can broadly place them in two categories: standards organisations and professional organisations. By fostering collaboration, the first category has improved the scholarly communications environment by developing standards and infrastructure. The second category give us the platforms that enable the exchange and development of ideas and support our professional development.

In the context of the current financial situation, cutting a membership fee can feel like an easy choice. This is because the outputs rather than being a direct membership benefit are often a common good. Just one of many examples is UKSG, which publishes an open access journal (Insights) which does not charge either readers or authors fees as these are paid by UKSG. It also organises free webinars which are open to a community much wider than its membership. But however worthy, why pay for goods or a service you can have without paying anything?

Economists have written about this problem and a common approach is a shift from a collaborative membership model to a charge model, where only those that pay receive the benefits or exclusive rights. I find this a depressing and retrograde scenario.

That is not to say that I am arguing that membership organisations, however good their intentions, should be protected and allowed to rest on their laurels. Far from it! In these times they are in a unique place to show leadership and to facilitate collaboration. They must listen carefully so that they can meet their members needs in tough times, and of course they must also show they are giving value for every penny received.

Members also need to think about what they want and what they value. Cutting a membership fee will usually have no instant catastrophic effect, but over time, finding, identify, citing, linking, counting, reusing and preserving digital resources will become difficult as systems gradually fragment; the platforms that enable discussion and professional development will disappear; and access to content and services that are currently open, will require a fee to unlock them.

These views are the authors' own and do not necessarily reflect the views of UKSG.



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