

# Climate change in the subscription landscape

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With the bulk of scholarly publishing in the hands of a very small group of large commercial publishers, the scholarly communications environment is like a landscape dominated by monoculture farming or industry. Flowing through this landscape there is a wide river which represents the money paid by libraries for subscriptions, which rises dangerously each year as subscription fees increase, allowing publisher profit margins to swell beyond 35%. And even as that revenue stream grows each year, there is precious little trickling downstream.

We talk a lot about open access, but one of the greatest impediments to achieving our OA vision is the fact that we, higher education and research institutions, continue to prop up the subscription system, investing our money in big deal packages the pricing for which is often based not on actual cost but on historical print expenditure and utterly lacking in transparency, increasing year after year, monopolising our budgets.

But while we look on anxiously, there is another revenue stream flowing wildly out of control: the monies paid for our researchers to publish their works open access which is, to a large extent, unmonitored, unchecked and growing rapidly.

## **The hazards of hybrid on the OA environment**

It is true, as the recent Universities UK Open Access Coordination Group's December 2017 report ['Monitoring the Transition to Open Access'](#) confirmed, that the funding policies set in place have succeeded in making more content by UK scholars open to the world. But this has come at enormous cost.

Block grant funding was set up to facilitate the transition to open access publishing, but those funds have been drained by higher-priced hybrid publication fees for articles published in paywalled journals, a practice permitted under the current policies. The fact that APC expenditure in the UK is increasing rapidly is, on one hand, a positive sign that UK authors are taking advantage of open access publishing opportunities, but as this growth has been accompanied by a 20% increase in subscription expenditure over the past three years, the system seems highly unsustainable.

Continued support of the hybrid model, outside transformative, or 'offsetting' agreements, will only stall the transition to open access. There is no need to flood scholarly publishing with additional money, the money is already there.

## **There is already enough money in the system**

Data analysis published in a widely-read [white paper by the Max Planck Digital Library](#) demonstrated that the EUR 7.6 bn (GBP 6.7 bn) that the world is currently investing in the subscription system would be more than enough to sustain a transformation of today's scholarly journals to open access publishing.

Under the subscription regime, access to a single article is costing us on average EUR 5000 (GBP 3400). Data cited in the Universities UK report show the cost of publishing an article in a hybrid journal is on average GBP 2095, and only around GBP 1600 for pure gold open access publishing.

These data highlight the *real* cost of publishing and the *inflated* cost of the subscription system which, to reiterate, is generating over 35% in publisher profit margins – money that could be reinvested in expanding the tools and services libraries provide to their researchers, in new and innovative open publishing models and platforms, in more research.

## **Responsible use of our resources can transform the environment**

Data accumulated in the past few years makes clear that there are two uncontrolled streams of revenue flowing from our institutions to the large commercial publishers: subscription fees and publishing fees. But stakeholders must realise that these streams are two tributaries of one and the same river that is scholarly communication.

UK open access policies have served as an incubator for open access strategies, spawning transitional approaches based on the concept of offsetting. Stuart Lawson's [report on Jisc Collections offset agreements](#) demonstrates the cost savings potential of offset agreements, but also highlights the need for international coordination.

The UK is not alone in testing [offsetting agreements](#). Austria, the Netherlands, Sweden and Germany are all taking evolutionary steps forward on behalf of the global scientific community. The [DEAL](#) negotiations currently underway in Germany are giving strong, positive signals and in the UK SpringerNature and Wiley both acknowledge the basic principle that *read-access* and *open access publishing* are two sides of the same coin and should be governed by a single agreement.

The next step in the transition would be to take such agreements a step further, eliminating the concept of paying a toll in order to access content entirely and shift to fair and sustainable models in which the pricing of publishing services is transparent. Transparency in pricing will foster healthy competition among service providers, driving costs down, and, ultimately, allowing innovation and diversity to thrive in the scholarly communication landscape.

In the meantime, individual institutions and national licensing bodies around the world should join the efforts of those who are already engineering the canals to shift the flow of money away from the paywall system. By taking steps to convert our subscription budgets into funds that support open access publishing, we can change the course of scholarly communication.

## **A global problem requires a global solution**

Research is a collaborative process and ever more a global endeavour. Any strategy to transform how our research is disseminated must therefore be a global strategy. Open access is, by definition, open to the world.

When you consider that the majority of the world's scholarly publishing is in the hands of just 20 publishers, then a large-scale transition to open access becomes immediately viable: no longer a matter of opinion, but a mere scientific equation to be studied and solved.

The [OA2020 Initiative](#) is an aligning force that brings together over 100 national and international research councils, funding agencies, Higher Education associations, research institutes and

universities from nearly 40 countries – with increasing participation from China and the US – all of whom are committed to converting the funds they currently spend on subscriptions into funds to support sustainable OA business models.

We call on funders, policy makers and university leaders to look beyond borders and seek points of alignment among our strategies so that we will all be more effective in achieving our common vision. If the nations of the world can sit down and agree upon plans to reduce their carbon emissions – well, at least most of them – then surely our higher education and research organisations can come together to align strategies to divest themselves of the subscription system in order to finally achieve universal open access to knowledge.

This editorial is the extension of a presentation given by Colleen Campbell at the Westminster Higher Education Forum seminar, 'The next steps for delivering open access - implementation, expansion and international trends', held on 20 February 2018 in London. These views are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect the views of UKSG.



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