Idiot’s guide to ethical publishing in a competitive world.

by HANNAH BRADBY Sep 3, 2012

Photo: “Consumables - a licence to print money” from macspit’s on flickr photostream

Pay walls preventing access to research funded by tax-payers: **bad**.

Open access publishing: **good**.

Greedy multi-national publishers with high profit margins: **bad**.

Academics working for greedy publishers for free: **absurd**.

Individual academics declaring boycott of greedy publishers: **good**.

Academics’ collective boycott of greedy publishers: **good**.

And fixing the contradictory interests of researchers, academics and publishers, not to mention learned societies? **Um. Tricky**.

It’s obvious that the free circulation of research findings, especially those funded by public money is a good idea, right? UK research councils and the European Commission clearly think so, since open access publication is a condition of receiving research monies.

But how to achieve such desirable accessibility? The working group into the future of academic publishing chaired by Janet Finch, seems to favour the system – ‘gold open access’ – whereby academics pay publishers a fee for publishing their article without paywalls. This means that ultimately the costs of open-access publishing will be borne by the commissioners of research and so come out of the national science budget. The Finch report seems less keen the ‘green open access’ model which allows researchers to make their papers freely available online without costly intermediaries.

Needless to say the ‘green’ model is not welcomed by the publishing industry since it would put them out of business. The working group chaired by Finch included representatives of the commercial publishing industry, but no advocates for a more radical form of open publishing and, according to critics, did not subject the ‘green’ system to serious consideration. This is perhaps surprising given that the technology is available to produce electronic journals, using open source software. One such critic summarises the absurd situation as follows:

The publishing industry is the only business I know of that receives its raw material free of
charge, receives financial subsidy in the editorial process from the institutions providing that raw material, and then charges excessive subscription costs to the same institutions. The technology now available renders the commercial publisher redundant in the scholarly publishing process and it is only the timidity of government and the academic institutions that prevents the development of radical alternatives.

Health researchers (like the mathematicians that have led the boycott), have a top impact-factor-rated journal owned by Elsevier. If government devote a portion of research-councils’ budget to create a system that maintains the publishers’ profit-margins in a digital world, should we be boycotting ‘Social Science and Medicine’? Researchers, authors and editors are experiencing the disadvantages of working in a radically ‘marketized’ economy of research with none of the advantages of living in a digitized, hyper-connected era.

What if we self-published our research findings on an openly available digital platform? Would we dodge the disadvantages of the marketization of research and knowledge, reaping the much vaunted benefits of living in a digitally-connected world? One man thinks so. In fact he is so keen that we all adopt a scholar-run model of open publishing that he’s published a guide on doing just that, based on his own experience.

Authors have always complained about their publishers. Publishers have regularly felt their job to be all but impossible. In a long-view, the latest disagreements over open-access (gold) versus open-publishing (green) is simply one more grievance in an inherently conflicted relationship.

4 COMMENTS

JUDITH GREEN on Sep 4, 2012

As an editor, author, reviewer and reader, the issue is also about the sustainability of academic publishing. As a reader, I want journals to have some kind of ‘quality standards’ – and journals are a handy short cut to identifying what is likely to be of interest, and likely to be worth reading. Through moving the costs of publishing to the author [funder] not the reader, ‘gold’ or ‘green’ models may open up access to academic journals marginally (though I suspect not much…most current ‘readers’ are also ‘authors’, so have access already – I fear there are few new readers desperate to get their hands on Social Science and Medicine papers) but they don’t touch the issues of how academics can continue to do the work of reviewing and editing, still largely done unremunerated ‘in our own time’.

SIMON CARTER on Sep 15, 2012

Authors should also be aware of the new phenomenon of ‘predatory publishers’ – these appear to be open access online journals but are actually counterfeit journals to exploit the open-access model. Authors to these will be asked or invoiced, after submission, for a large fee. The journals often have eminent and plausible titles but are willing to accept any article as long as the fee is paid. More details here: http://www.nature.com/news/predatory-publishers-are-corrupting-open-access-1.11385

HANNAH BRADBY on Nov 12, 2012

Here’s another exhortation to academics to take publishing into their own hands: http://www.guardian.co.uk/higher-education-network/blog/2012/nov/08/open-access-academic-publishing-models?CMP=

and the result of this conviction in the form of a new online independent academic publisher of monographs: http://openbookpublishers.com

HANNAH BRADBY on Feb 7, 2013

Uncertainty that RCUK’s open access policy is appropriate, particularly for humanities and social sciences: http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?sectioncode=26&storycode=422609&c=1
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