

## Academic publishers make Murdoch look like a socialist

Academic publishers charge vast fees to access research paid for by us. Down with the knowledge monopoly racketeers



**George Monbiot**  
guardian.co.uk, Monday 29 August 2011 21.08 BST



'Though academic libraries have been frantically cutting subscriptions to make ends meet, journals now consume 65% of their budgets.' Photograph: Peter M Fisher/Corbis

Who are the most ruthless capitalists in the western world? Whose monopolistic practices make Walmart look like a corner shop and Rupert Murdoch a socialist? You won't guess the answer in a month of Sundays. While there are plenty of candidates, my vote goes not to the banks, the oil companies or the health insurers, but – wait for it – to academic publishers. Theirs might sound like a fusty and insignificant sector. It is anything but. Of all corporate scams, the racket they run is most urgently in need of referral to the competition authorities.

Everyone claims to agree that people should be encouraged to understand science and other academic research. Without current knowledge, we cannot make coherent democratic decisions. But the publishers have slapped a padlock and a "keep out" sign on the gates.

You might resent Murdoch's paywall policy, in which he charges £1 for 24 hours of access to the Times and Sunday Times. But at least in that period you can read and download as many articles as you like. Reading a single article published by one of Elsevier's journals will cost you \$31.50. Springer charges €34.95, Wiley-Blackwell, \$42. Read 10 and you pay 10 times. And the journals retain perpetual copyright. You want to read a letter printed in 1981? That'll be \$31.50.



Illustration by Daniel Pudles

Of course, you could go into the library (if it still exists). But they too have been hit by cosmic fees. The average cost of an annual subscription to a chemistry journal is \$3,792. Some journals cost \$10,000 a year or more to stock. The most expensive I've seen, Elsevier's *Biochimica et Biophysica Acta*, is \$20,930. Though academic libraries have been frantically cutting subscriptions to make ends meet, journals now consume 65% of their budgets, which means they have had to reduce the number of books they buy. Journal fees account for a significant component of universities' costs, which are being passed to their students.

Murdoch pays his journalists and editors, and his companies generate much of the content they use. But the academic publishers get their articles, their peer reviewing (vetting by other researchers) and even much of their editing for free. The material they publish was commissioned and funded not by them but by us, through government research grants and academic stipends. But to see it, we must pay again, and through the nose.

The returns are astronomical: in the past financial year, for example, Elsevier's operating profit margin was 36% (£724m on revenues of £2bn). They result from a stranglehold on the market. Elsevier, Springer and Wiley, who have bought up many of their competitors, now publish 42% of journal articles.

More importantly, universities are locked into buying their products. Academic papers are published in only one place, and they have to be read by researchers trying to keep up with their subject. Demand is inelastic and competition non-existent, because different journals can't publish the same material. In many cases the publishers oblige the libraries to buy a large package of journals, whether or not they want them all. Perhaps it's not surprising that one of the biggest crooks ever to have preyed upon the people of this country – Robert Maxwell – made much of his money through academic publishing.

The publishers claim that they have to charge these fees as a result of the costs of production and distribution, and that they add value (in Springer's words) because they "develop journal brands and maintain and improve the digital infrastructure which has revolutionised scientific communication in the past 15 years". But an analysis by Deutsche Bank reaches different conclusions. "We believe the publisher adds relatively little value to the publishing process ... if the process really were as complex, costly and value-added as the publishers protest that it is, 40% margins wouldn't be available." Far from assisting the dissemination of research, the big publishers impede it, as their long turnaround times can delay the release of findings by a year or more.

What we see here is pure rentier capitalism: monopolising a public resource then charging exorbitant fees to use it. Another term for it is economic parasitism. To obtain the knowledge for which we have already paid, we must surrender our feu to the lairds of learning.

It's bad enough for academics, it's worse for the laity. I refer readers to peer-reviewed papers, on the principle that claims should be followed to their sources. The readers tell me that they can't afford to judge for themselves whether or not I have represented the

research fairly. Independent researchers who try to inform themselves about important scientific issues have to fork out thousands. This is a tax on education, a stifling of the public mind. It appears to contravene the universal declaration of human rights, which says that "everyone has the right freely to ... share in scientific advancement and its benefits".

Open-access publishing, despite its promise, and some excellent resources such as the Public Library of Science and the physics database arxiv.org, has failed to displace the monopolists. In 1998 the Economist, surveying the opportunities offered by electronic publishing, predicted that "the days of 40% profit margins may soon be as dead as Robert Maxwell". But in 2010 Elsevier's operating profit margins were the same (36%) as they were in 1998.

The reason is that the big publishers have rounded up the journals with the highest academic impact factors, in which publication is essential for researchers trying to secure grants and advance their careers. You can start reading open-access journals, but you can't stop reading the closed ones.

Government bodies, with a few exceptions, have failed to confront them. The National Institutes of Health in the US oblige anyone taking their grants to put their papers in an open-access archive. But Research Councils UK, whose statement on public access is a masterpiece of meaningless waffle, relies on "the assumption that publishers will maintain the spirit of their current policies". You bet they will.

In the short term, governments should refer the academic publishers to their competition watchdogs, and insist that all papers arising from publicly funded research are placed in a free public database. In the longer term, they should work with researchers to cut out the middleman altogether, creating – along the lines proposed by Björn Brembs of Berlin's Freie Universität – a single global archive of academic literature and data. Peer-review would be overseen by an independent body. It could be funded by the library budgets which are currently being diverted into the hands of privateers.

The knowledge monopoly is as unwarranted and anachronistic as the corn laws. Let's throw off these parasitic overlords and liberate the research that belongs to us.

• A fully referenced version of this article can be found on George Monbiot's website. On Twitter, @georgemonbiot

## Comments

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[cbarr](#)

29 August 2011 9:14PM

Though how many people will purchase or utilize a journal who's staffing numbers are often extremely large and who have to in turn purchase copyright material and research to utilize.

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[peitha](#)

29 August 2011 9:20PM

Perhaps it's not surprising that one of the biggest crooks ever to have preyed upon the people of this country – Robert Maxwell – made much of his money through academic

publishing.

That would be Robert Maxwell, the former Labour MP for Buckingham (1964-1970) and substantial donor to the Labour party would it? The 1970's Murdoch ... Of course, the reason why Pergamon Press was so successful was because they realised that academic research publication is time sensitive, and they published far faster than anyone else. And of course in all the diatribe Monbiot fails to give any ideas about how academic publishing is to be funded - no doubt recourse to public funds, i.e. the taxpayer is in the wings somewhere. I trust he'll be happy for pharmaceutical companies to also get academic research for free since they paid taxes that funded it as well? And maybe he'll be happy for those pharmaceutical companies that publish to be recompensed for doing so in his new world?

Recommend (60)

Responses (0)

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LePendu

29 August 2011 9:26PM

I suppose there a very good, genuinely academic, reason why the scene in the pic is differentially focused on the blonde?

Recommend (196)

Responses (0)

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GeorgeMonbiot

29 August 2011 9:26PM

peitha:

Monbiot fails to give any ideas about how academic publishing is to be funded

How about reading the article before you comment on it?:

"It could be funded by the library budgets which are currently being diverted into the hands of privateers."

Recommend (780)

Responses (0)

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cellxcell

29 August 2011 9:27PM

To obtain the knowledge for which we have already paid, we must surrender our feu to the lairds of learning.

Knowledge is power Mr.Monbiot.... and those who have that knowledge want paying for it

Recommend (34)

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[AllyF](#)

29 August 2011 9:27PM

Thanks for this George, it is something that has bugged me for years.

In my occasional forays into writing for CiF and elsewhere, I've often wanted to refer to academic articles. If I were to pay for just two or three of them, I would literally be working at a loss. Because I'm not attached to a university, I can't even get free access to most of them in person.

In practice, with more recent articles, it's usually possible to email one of the authors and they're usually helpful in sending back a reprint but they're not really meant to do so and sometimes they're too busy or can't be contacted, or if you're planning to tear a strip off their work they might not be inclined to help.

I think journalism, especially comment pieces, should be informed by best evidence. It isn't. This means that people are less informed than they could be, and consequently politics and governance is less informed than it should be.

And as you say, the vast majority of work that goes into academic journals has already been paid for by us, the taxpayers.

A shameful racket.

Recommend (800)

Responses (0)

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[LePendu](#)

29 August 2011 9:28PM

...there's . . . FFS!

Recommend (7)

Responses (0)

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[ikesolem](#)

29 August 2011 9:30PM

Pubication is just one problem - because at the graduate and research level of academia, in many areas of science the publishing comes second, and the patenting and licensing comes first. Only then, after the patent is secured, comes the publication.

This is a common theme when it comes research financed by corporate-academic partnerships. The problem is that corporate business partner has little interest in the open flow of information related to their intellectual property, a basic conflict of interest with basic science, which advances best when claims can be independently verified.

The solution is to separate basic and applied science, which means encouraging corporations to set up (expensive) applied research labs, where they can patent whatever inventions they want to, while excluding them from patenting or licensing anything derived from taxpayer-financed public academic research.

This is not so radical - it was the general rule before the early 1980s, in that public universities maintained an open licensing approach to anything they'd patented with taxpayer-financed research.

Today's exclusive public-private corporate-academic deals and the associated insistence on keeping experimental data and materials secret create massive conflicts of interest and vastly reduce public trust in scientific claims. In addition, such corporate actors always oppose research into their own problematic areas - air and water pollution, environmental carcinogens, industrial toxins in the food chain, infectious diseases originating from factory farms, etc.

Recommend (113)

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[MarshallStack](#)

29 August 2011 9:33PM

PRS is the biggest scam operation going.

Recommend (17)

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[arbitrarynight](#)

29 August 2011 9:36PM

A shameful racket, indeed. I can see no reason why public money - already itemized - should subsidize such racketeers.

Recommend (112)

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[GiuseppeH](#)

29 August 2011 9:37PM

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[HughManatee](#)

29 August 2011 9:39PM

Until academics refuse to publish in journals that charge the people who paid for the research (British taxpayers) to see the results of it, nothing will change. Until University "intellectual property management" types stop granting exclusive licenses to allow foreign companies to exploit research paid for by the British taxpayer, thus cheating the British entrepreneurs out of the one chance they might have had to return something to the British public, nothing will change. Of course, a young university researcher who refuses to publish in "high impact journals" on this basis will probably have a short and unproductive research career, and will be forced to do 50 hours of teaching a week before being elbowed out. You don't get promoted for teaching in a university, only for research. It would be interesting to see somebody who is bloody-minded enough to take on this academic protection racket involving university Vice Chancellors, academic publishers and university administrators. If they needed money to fight in court, or anywhere else for that matter, I for one would cough up.

Recommend (163)

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[zaphthecrap](#)

29 August 2011 9:39PM

Murdoch the man of the people, so says page three in underpants.

Recommend (6)

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[S2Quattro](#)

29 August 2011 9:40PM

"It could be funded by the library budgets which are currently being diverted into the hands of privateers."

You aren't *possibly* suggesting that we cut out a middleman here, George?

Remove a profiteering gatekeeper that keeps the public from accessing publically-funded research?

Why, that's just damned un-capitalist.

Recommend (235)

Responses (0)

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[Strummered](#)

29 August 2011 9:40PM

The Privateers although they love profit, wish the hoi polloi to remain stupid, we truly are living in unenlightened and regressive times. Thank fuck Berners Lee was a decent bloke or the internet would cost a fortune.

Recommend (246)

Responses (0)

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[WillieG](#)

29 August 2011 9:42PM

Well done, George Monbiot. As a non-academic with a wide range of interests, it regularly frustrates me that I can't get access to articles which would enable me to more intelligently participate in public policy debates without severely depleting my meagre income.

Why can't we adopt the US practice of insisting that publicly-funded research is placed in an open-access system?

Recommend (328)

Responses (0)

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[gordonMack](#)

29 August 2011 9:43PM

As one academic pointed out to me, the cost is now so prohibitive that it's worthwhile matriculating for one ordinary course as a non-graduating student simply for access to the journals database. Indeed the commoditisation of specialist knowledge does raise some problems that are not fully overcome by bitTorrent.

Recommend (181)

Responses (0)

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[NunOfTheAbove](#)

29 August 2011 9:43PM

There are more parasitic bottom feeding profiteers under every rock you turn over.

Revolution anyone?

Recommend (100)

Responses (0)

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C



[AllyF](#)

29 August 2011 9:44PM

**GuiseppeH**

Yes but... most academics now put their working papers in pdf on their own personal academic websites. Just search the title of the paper you want to read "in quote marks" on google with "filetype:pdf", and 90% of the time you'll find it.

In my experience it is more like 20%.

Maybe it varies from subject to subject.

Recommend (176)

Responses (0)

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[shinsei](#)

29 August 2011 9:45PM

Government bodies, with a few exceptions, have failed to confront them. The National Institutes of Health in the US oblige anyone taking their grants to put their papers in an open-access archive.

Fascinating article, Mr Monbiot.

Any idea why government depts in the UK can't just follow the example of the NIH in the US ? Make it a legal obligation that all government/tax payer sponsored research must be published online and available free.

If academics publishing research that was paid for by the taxpayer had to publish on-line for free then surely the academic journals would have to reduce their prices significantly overnight or become totally irrelevant.

There would also be a market for the journals themselves, providing commentary on articles, more professional lay out, classifieds and the odd cartoon but they wouldn't be able to charge \$10,000 and make 40% profit margins.

Surely this would be an ideal project for a back bench MP wishing to do something useful with a Private Members Bill.

Recommend (210)

Responses (0)

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[KendoNagasaki](#)

29 August 2011 9:48PM

Excellent piece. Unfortunately, I remember reading a similar discussion ten years ago.

Recommend (95)

Responses (0)

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[GiuseppeH](#)

29 August 2011 9:49PM

**AllyF**

Economics in my case, it may be a unique case, I don't know. Still an amazing resource though even if it's 20% no?

Recommend (12)

Responses (0)

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[WilliamAshbless](#)

29 August 2011 9:51PM

The extreme extortion annoys me. I wouldn't mind paying a few quid for an article - but \$40 for an 8-page article - or worse - for a single letter is just lording it.

I work for a sub-division (another publishing venture) of one of these extortionists and they have the nerve to call themselves 'educationalists'. They are such cheapskates that I can't even get them to pay for books I need at at work.

Recommend (171)

Responses (0)

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[shinsei](#)

29 August 2011 9:51PM

I trust he'll be happy for pharmaceutical companies to also get academic research for free since they paid taxes that funded it as well?

How much does someone like GlaxoSmithKline spend a year on academic journals ?

It is an inconsequential expense for GSK and yet hugely significant for hundreds of others who aren't multi-national corporations.

Is it at all significant when set against the fact they do pay billions in corporation tax.

Recommend (42)

Responses (0)

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[mintaka](#)

29 August 2011 9:56PM

Good article, and I fully agree with the points raised.

@peitha

And of course in all the diatribe Monbiot fails to give any ideas about how academic publishing is to be funded - no doubt recourse to public funds, i.e. the taxpayer is in the wings somewhere.

The research which is published in academic journals is mostly publicly funded, i.e., by the taxpayer. So, you can pay 100K (or more, depending on the subject) for the research and not have the results publicly accessible, or you can pay 100K for the research, 1-2K for its publication by a non-profit body, and have it publicly accessible. Your choice.

@HughManatee

Until academics refuse to publish in journals that charge the people who paid for the research (British taxpayers) to see the results of it, nothing will change.

I agree in principle, but as George points out in the article, academics are judged on the journals in which their papers get accepted. So it is difficult to change at an individual

level - nobody is going to give up a chance to publish in Science or Nature.

But if the governments that fund research make it a condition that the work has to be publicly available, then it levels the playing field - either top journals will have to make access free or much cheaper, or all academics will have to publish elsewhere.

@GuiseppeH

Yes but... most academics now put their working papers in pdf on their own personal academic websites

This is largely true - either on their personal websites or on sites like arxiv.

Recommend (102)

Responses (0)

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[RichJames](#)

29 August 2011 9:57PM

"The material they publish was commissioned and funded not by them but by us, through government research grants and academic stipends. But to see it, we must pay again, and through the nose."

For God's sake - can we really only gain support for public spending when it profits utterly ruthless private entities? People whinge about money being spent on complex, vital social institutions; yet even Tories - who've spent the last year whining about public libraries (and god knows why: self-education is the only form people will be able to afford under their auspices) - have nothing to say against this racket profiting extortionately from public funding?

I know there are more urgent matters to attend to; but Ally's right: academic research is integral to proper journalism - what little we see; as well as public information. Both of those are vital for creating a just society. Too many vested interests seek to misinform the public; often with disastrous consequences arising.

**Peitha:**

And of course in all the diatribe Monbiot fails to give any ideas about how academic publishing is to be funded

A fairly limp response. Aside from library budgets being devoted to their appropriate purpose; here's what he says:

In the short term, governments should refer the academic publishers to their competition watchdogs, and insist that all papers arising from publicly funded research are placed in a free public database

This is what I mean: the article demonstrates how private corporations are ripping the fabled tax-payer off; and damaging everybody in the process: and yet there are some who people support that dynamic? Mental.

Recommend (145)

Responses (0)

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[DavidPavett](#)

29 August 2011 9:57PM

Very good article.

I have often found when following up references that I hit a financial wall when it comes to reading academic articles. This can't be right - as GM says, we have paid for this work through our taxes. The means exist to make all this material available to everyone electronically. It is an outrage that private interests have control of the work blocking the rest of us from accessing it. I agree with GM's proposed solution to the problem. We need some MP's to take this up as a cause. Are there any who might do this?

Recommend (192)

Responses (0)

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[savernake](#)

29 August 2011 9:59PM

A new blow to the Murdoch Empire:

**NYC Kills \$27M Education Deal With News Corp Over Phone Hacking**

<http://tpmmuckraker.talkingpointsmemo.com/2011/08>

[/nyc\\_kills\\_27m\\_education\\_deal\\_with\\_news\\_corp\\_over\\_p.php?ref=fpb](/nyc_kills_27m_education_deal_with_news_corp_over_p.php?ref=fpb)

Recommend (17)

Responses (0)

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[Telescopier](#)

29 August 2011 10:00PM

I've written about the extortionate costs of science journals here:

<http://telescopier.wordpress.com/2009/11/18/the-academic-journal-racket/>

The solution, however, is simple. All academics should put their publications in the public domain through open-access websites. Good papers will attract attention and the garbage will sink. It already happens in astronomy and other branches of physics via the arXiv. It's just a matter of time before the "official" journals are forced to fold.

The academic journal racket will not survive if academics choose to break free, which we have an obligation to do.

Recommend (98)

Responses (0)

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[Cairncross](#)

29 August 2011 10:00PM

Of course publicly funded research should be free to the public. Time to [set up an e-petition](#), George.

Recommend (36)

Responses (0)

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[GMDUDE](#)

29 August 2011 10:05PM

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[zaphthecrap](#)

29 August 2011 10:06PM

Murdoch owns the coalition so expect very little to change until we have a truly independent opposition.

Recommend (12)

Responses (0)

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[| Link](#)[Jeremiah2000](#)

29 August 2011 10:09PM

Wow. Great essay. One doesn't want to squelch research but if the government is paying for it, it should be in the public domain. The cost of these journals should be going way down. Most of the labour is volunteer work aside from the technical typesetting, a one time cost.

I have the same objections to ebooks. The cost to the "publisher" is negligible, but often one pays the same amount as the hard copy which one can lend to friends or sell back on the internet.

Recommend (83)

Responses (0)

[Report](#)[Clip](#)[| Link](#)[DavidColquhoun](#)

29 August 2011 10:09PM

Thanks for airing a huge problem, not just for the public, but for universities too. The enormous pressure to publish has resulted in an enormous increase in the number of journals. Publishers have cashed in on the "publish or perish" mentality of some senior academics in a big way. At the same time, peer review has become increasingly ineffective. There is always a journal near the bottom of the status pile that will publish just about anything and call it peer-reviewed.

At the same time, the publishers do less and less of the work. At one time, they'd redraw figures, and set hand-written equations in hot lead. Now the copy has to be virtually camera-ready.

I see no reason to have academic journals at all. Very few people read the paper copies now. We can publish our own papers on the web, and open the comments. It would cost next to nothing, and everyone could see them instantly. This would also remove the hegemony of a handful of high-status journals that make life a misery for young scientists (and for the not so young).

Recommend (376)

Responses (0)

[Report](#)[Clip](#)[| Link](#)[mintaka](#)

29 August 2011 10:13PM

zapthecrap

much as I dislike the coalition, the previous government did nothing about it either. It isn't something many people get excited about, so there's little incentive to fight the private interests.

The Web has been around for 15 years, and academic publishing was scandalously expensive even before then. But they had one argument going for them earlier - the claim that expensive titles were cross-subsidising obscure ones that sold very few copies. But now the obscure ones could be published in only electronic format at negligible cost, so that argument (if there was ever any truth in it), doesn't really hold.

Recommend (37)

Responses (0)

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[glmmph](#)

29 August 2011 10:17PM

The clever society that allows the mindless, uneducated and ill-informed opinion to be completely free while informed peer reviewed research is firewalled. Let me see, that will result in a clear win to the former. Welcome to the internet.

John Ralston Saul identified the corporatist takeover of tertiary institutions more than a decade ago. At first, it was just the obscure language of academics that curtailed access, but now that the plebians have pay, their victory is complete. It's as if they don't want the enlightenment project to succeed... where's the money in that?

Recommend (56)

Responses (0)

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29 August 2011 10:22PM

Actually, the right way to deal with this problem is to require the author(s) pay the publishers' for their editorial, marketing and distribution services from their grants, but give free access to the public. That would also help reduce the tendency to publish many small variations on the same thing rather than one definitive work, which is in turn driven by the effect of the mere number of publications on funding and tenure decisions. Some publishers already make this option available, but it should be (and should always have been) the only one. Done properly, the publishers might not even fight against it that hard. The global nature of the scientific enterprise might make it difficult to enforce, but it would probably be enough to get the USA funding agencies to require it. Not sure what the politics of that might look like, however!

Recommend (15)

Responses (0)

[Report](#)| [Link](#)[HarmoniousFrog](#)

29 August 2011 10:28PM

I've written about this elsewhere, but it's worth repeating that the many scientists who are out of work are unable to keep up with their subject, and those of us who are retired are unable to contribute anything further.

A contributor mentioned GlaxoSmithKline. Such companies don't count, because they publish hardly anything compared to the amount of honest research their employees carry out. To make things worse, the literature favoured by pharmaceutical companies is infested by expensive sponsored journals.

Recommend (63)

Responses (0)

[Report](#)| [Link](#)[MrBendy](#)

29 August 2011 10:33PM

Let me add my penn'orth to the debate from the perspective of one who has been exploited not as a frustrated consumer but as a put-upon labourer.

I was a journal editor for several years and, like George Monbiot, was left astonished by the shamelessness with which this racket operates.

In particular, I did all, and I mean ALL, the donkeywork personally, from licking

envelopes to commissioning reviews to copy-editing all contributions. Yet not a cent did I receive from the publisher, a well-known British academic publisher. In effect the considerable operating costs of every part of the journal's work up to setting, printing and distribution were carried by me personally, using my spare time, and to a limited degree by my employer (a university) in so far as I was able to use a little normal work-time on occasion and pass the journal's (substantial) postal costs through my departmental office.

At one stage, when under a lot of pressure at work, I did try to persuade the academic trust that oversees the journal to buy me a little help in the form of a part-time assistant from amongst our graduate students. But no dice. They wanted to use the few financial crumbs they were handed by the publisher to sponsor worthy projects, such as prizes for contributions, rather than actually resourcing the operational activities that made their journal possible. (My experience suggests that other academics who believe that it is essential to commit superhuman levels of time and effort to the job, and not even to expect any support while doing it, are as implicated in the continuation of this outrageous scam as the publishers who are reaping excessive profits from it.)

Needless to say, the journal I'm talking about absolutely dominates my field and is the universally-acknowledged document of record in the discipline. As a result no-one who wishes to progress professionally in this area can afford to confront its racketeering or that of the trust, staffed by senior academics, that is also implicated (let alone go to war against the publisher itself, which also dominates monograph production in the field). The final indignity for me was, on inquiring of the trustees about succession planning, being told that it was essentially up to me to persuade someone else to become editor. In short, it was my problem and mine alone and I was expected to continue working for free to generate large profits for the publisher and a small rake-off for the trust until or unless I could find a mug to replace me. Naturally, after calming down, I responded with a year's notice and told them that they had better have found someone else by the stated deadline.

For the publisher, of course, this extraordinary combination of unpaid and unresourced amateur production, which reduces costs to a bare minimum, and the opportunity then to maximise revenues through the lucrative exercise of legal and financial power, is immensely attractive as a business model.

I gather, though the trustees never divulged the true picture (even if they were aware of it), that the journal I was editing made a huge margin for the publisher. No surprise there, then. But it stinks and badly needs confronting more systematically.

Recommend (331)

Responses (0)

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[SD1000](#)

29 August 2011 10:41PM

Great article - this urgently needs to be said.

One thing you forgot to mention though is that all the intellectual labour behind these journals is done for free - the academics who write the articles, those who review them, and even the editors of these journals (the latter usually receive a nominal stipend, but that isn't why they do it, and it's an infinitesimally small fraction of the publishers' profits). The publishers add very little indeed - certainly nothing whatsoever that couldn't be done much more cheaply.

Academics of all stripes and disciplines really need to get behind the campaign to overthrow these monopolistic practices, because they're destroying our libraries and hence our universities.

Recommend (160)

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[Drake8](#)

29 August 2011 10:44PM

ThisOldMan is correct and there is a trend towards open access journals where the burden of costs is covered by the submission fee charged the authors.

In my field the New Journal of Physics is a good example, these journals typically have no printed version to save on costs.

All journals have a rating called impact factor based on the citations of articles in the journal, the higher this value the more widely read within the academic community a journal is suppose to be. Nature and Science have very high impact factors as they publish work that is relevant to multiple fields of research unlike more specialised journals. There is great pressure in Universities to get publications in the highest impact journals as that is a major component of how people are accessed.

The good thing is that the open access journals impact ratings (if we have to have them) are rising as they are easily and freely accessible to everyone with internet access. Unlike subscription based journals which have to be carefully chosen and rationed by University libraries to contain the costs.

The next challenge is accessing historical archives of articles of journals. Usually for a current subscription the cost is relatively low, where the subscription fees rapidly rise is in getting access to the article archives of a journal. A silver lining of this is that the journals have had the incentive to digitise all their old articles which were published before the dawn of the internet.

Recommend (30)

Responses (0)

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[myfellowprisoners](#)

29 August 2011 10:46PM

Very good, George. And while we're at it, can we please withdraw charity status from those university presses, who charge a fucking *fortune* for works that students have to buy. £50 for a 80 page monograph is simply not on.

Some have small print runs but the price is still bollocks. Publishing these days is dirt-cheap.

Recommend (151)

Responses (0)

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[JeffFromMA](#)

29 August 2011 10:48PM

@ AllyF & GiuseppeH

I too find that articles by particular individuals are only available ~20% of time.

This is an excellent and timely article.

Recommend (41)

Responses (0)

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[myfellowprisoners](#)

29 August 2011 10:48PM

Academics have to get published to get jobs these days. Students have to read their work, once published. It's a situation that's bound to end up with ridiculously inflated

prices and an oligopoly of publishers.

Recommend (31)

Responses (0)

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[SD1000](#)

29 August 2011 10:49PM

P.S. There is an answer - Robert Darnton has written frequently and well on this. He's an eminent professor at Harvard, and largely through his initiative (I believe) they have set up a system there where all Harvard academics agree to grant open access rights to their published research. Thus avoiding the publisher-pirates. (Although they are free to opt-out if they wish.)

But it takes some real clout. No academic could go solo on this, they'd need the support of management. Probably would need to begin in this country with Oxbridge - any sign of them doing the same?

Recommend (105)

Responses (0)

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[whohe](#)

29 August 2011 10:57PM

Excellent case, let down by a small hole.

The publishers claim that they have to charge these fees as a result of the costs of production and distribution, and that they add value (in Springer's words) because they "develop journal brands and maintain and improve the digital infrastructure which has revolutionised scientific communication in the past 15 years".

This has never been the case presented in academic circles. Far too business oriented and hence scary for boffins.

Instead the journals justify their prices on the basis of the expense of managing peer review, hardly "production". As you say, this process pays nothing to the reviewers, hard pressed academics with their own papers to push, and a vested interest in keeping the journals sweet, but loads to the people who manage it.

It is, of course, up to the academics to subvert the system by putting their own papers on their websites. But when did you last see an academic's website that was worth visiting? There is, indeed, a new model arising for journals. Instead of charging arms and legs to readers, they dismember authors, or the people who fund them. The journals don't care where the money comes from. Just shovel it into this open sack please.

Cheers all round, as Lord Gnome would put it.

Recommend (34)

Responses (0)

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[kbg541](#)

29 August 2011 11:12PM

*And of course in all the diatribe Monbiot fails to give any ideas about how academic publishing is to be funded - no doubt recourse to public funds*

But the tax payer is funding it now. The tax payer funds the research, which is then given away for peanuts to the publisher who then packages it into a journal and sells it

back to the tax payer through licencing agreements with libraries and universities. Huge chunks of research budgets are going into paying academic publishers to provide access to research the public have already paid for.

It may be cheaper for the government/universities to publish the stuff themselves or at very least create an online database for this research. The public paid for it and so should be able to access it.

The current situation is costing the tax payer millions. It can't be beyond the wit of the clever people producing the research to come up with a system that will cost less.

Recommend (98)

Responses (0)

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chappelle

29 August 2011 11:32PM

There was an interesting article over at wired.com about the open science movement and cheaper availability of papers (£1 a pop) earlier this year which you might find interesting.

<http://www.wired.com/wiredscience/2011/05/free-science-one-paper-at-a-time-2/all/1>

Recommend (17)

Responses (0)

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ellis

29 August 2011 11:33PM

Quite right: it is virtually impossible for anyone who is not a millionaire to get access to most journals.

This is not a field which should be left to profiteers or indeed to elitists who are often happy to minimise the number of critics reviewing their research.

I recently paid \$30 (read only, available for 24 hours) to get access to a tedious, useless piece of tat published in a "learned journal" in the sixties. In any scholarly work of history there are hundreds of references to journal articles, most of them literally inaccessible except through University libraries.

Everything should be put online. If Academics had any social responsibility they would ensure that this was done. A good start would be to institute a 20 year rule: if an article is 20 years old it should be accessible either free or at a minimal fee.

Recommend (62)

Responses (0)

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AndySkuce

29 August 2011 11:34PM

An excellent article, thank you.

I would gladly pay a small fee to access an academic article, let's say about the same amount as an iTunes song. The American Geophysical Union currently allows its members, in lieu of subscribing to its journals, to purchase blocks of 20 or 40 papers for costs of this magnitude per article, so it can be done.

The publishers should be aware that the whole racket could be undermined if a critical mass of the public decided to start sharing articles. If the Pentagon can't stop Wikileaks, how could Elsevier stop article sharing?

Recommend (58)

Responses (0)

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