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## The Future of Scholarly Publishing: Paywalls and Profits or a New Plan?

### The Editors, *Geoforum*

#### A Rapidly Changing Landscape

The scholarly publishing landscape is changing rapidly. While many academic peer-review journals began as the independent initiatives of non-profit scholarly societies and other collective institutions (Steinberg 2015), and some remain so, over the past several decades the majority of journals have been acquired by and consolidated under a handful of large commercial publishers (Kallio 2017). In recent years, this situation has been the focus of mounting critique.<sup>1</sup> To briefly summarize, critics considers this situation tantamount to a private enclosure of the intellectual commons. More than this, it can be seen as a massive transfer of public funds into private hands. The majority of scholarship published in peer-review journals is supported by public money in the form of institutional research grants and university salaries for data collection and writing as well as manuscript editing and reviewing. After this even more public money is again privately appropriated via the journal subscription fees and other forms of payment provided by these same institutions and universities.

The response to this situation has been a growing call to make all published research “open access” (OA), thereby returning it to the intellectual commons (see esp. Fuchs and Sandoval 2013; Callio 2017; Batterbury 2017). The Fair Open Access Alliance, a group of scholars and librarians working to transform scholarly publishing, has translated this call into a series of core OA principles, advising that scholars in all disciplines pursue publications in journals where:

1. There is a transparent ownership structure, and the journal is controlled by and responsive to the scholarly community.
2. Authors of articles in the journal retain copyright.
3. All articles are published open access and an explicit open access licence is used.
4. Submission and publication are not conditional in any way on the payment of a fee from the author or its employing institution, or on membership of an institution or society.
5. Any fees paid on behalf of the journal to publishers are low, transparent, and in proportion to the work carried out.<sup>2</sup>

Building on these principles, a collection of European funders, cOAlition S, has developed a new proposal called ‘Plan S’ to push the entire scholarly publishing industry towards fully open access in the future.<sup>3</sup> However, this Plan remains subject to ongoing discussion concerning the specifics of how this intention will be operationalized.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See *inter alia* Fuchs and Sandoval 2013; Batterbury 2017; Callio 2017; Coombes et al 2017; Finn et al. 2017; Kallio 2017; Springer 2017; Wainwright and Büscher 2017

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.fairopenaccess.org/>; accessed 5/12/2018.

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.coalition-s.org/wp-content/uploads/271118\\_cOAlitionS\\_Guidance.pdf](https://www.coalition-s.org/wp-content/uploads/271118_cOAlitionS_Guidance.pdf); accessed 5/12/2018.

<sup>4</sup> e.g.

[https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/sites/default/files/British\\_Academy\\_paper\\_on\\_Science\\_Europe\\_Plan\\_S.pdf](https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/sites/default/files/British_Academy_paper_on_Science_Europe_Plan_S.pdf); <https://www.rgs.org/getattachment/Professionals/Consultation/RGS-IBG-Plan-S-response-Feb19.pdf/?lang=en-GB>; accessed 4/3/2019.

As editors of a journal owned and operated by Elsevier, we have been attentive to these discussions for some time. Among the large conglomerates central to scholarly publishing right now, Elsevier is the largest, with a portfolio of more than 2500 journals, as well as the most profitable,<sup>5</sup> and hence is commonly singled out when concerns regarding publishing paywalls arise.<sup>6</sup> Over the past several years, our editor group and Board Members have been working to address many of the concerns raised in these discussions by negotiating a new relationship between the publisher and the journal. Our most recent negotiations have just concluded and a new agreement has been finalized, to take effect in 2019. In this brief editorial we outline the key features of this new arrangement, our reflections on the negotiation process and how it responds to some of the pressing points highlighted above.

### **The Academic Mode of Production**

Debates around scholarly publishing can be clearly understood vis-à-vis a conventional Marxist analysis of how value is created and distributed within a given mode of production. In a commercial publishing model, private publishers own the means of production while authors, editors, reviewers and other support staff provide the labour entailed in journal publication. While some of these workers receive monetary compensation for their labour, many are not paid at all – or are paid only modest stipends far below what would be the minimum wage in their home countries given the hours of work involved. The surplus value produced by all this labour is then captured by commercial publishers via their ownership of its products: the journal articles for which access is paid via either upfront publication charges, journal subscriptions and bundles thereof, or the private purchase of individual papers (Finn et al. 2017).

What allows this system to persevere is the fact that the majority of un- or poorly-paid labour is provided part-time by academics whose main income is earned elsewhere. Many of us work at publicly funded institutions, so taxpayers and/or our students implicitly subsidise commercial publishers through our salaries (although given the intense pressure of our university roles, editorial work, as well as reviewing, increasingly has to be completed outside of regular work hours in the evenings and weekends). Additionally, when we write academic papers for such journals, the extensive training and intellectual work, which often takes several years and then becomes embodied in our published articles, becomes the property of the commercial publishers.

Publishing is one of the most rewarding aspects of an academic career for most people in the profession. As academics we enjoy great freedom in terms of our work process and the ability to set our own research agendas. Being a reviewer or editor of an academic journal is also a privilege and has

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<sup>5</sup> In 2017 the RELX Group, of which Elsevier is a part, had revenues of over seven billion euro. Elsevier's profit in that year was over two billion euro (RELX, 2018). The numbers encompass other activities in addition to scholarly publishing of course yet they remain indicative of the scale of the value involved. These high rates of profit are also in evidence for other multi-national publishing houses, such as the Informa group which owns Taylor and Francis and recorded a profit rate of approximately 31.3% in 2017 (Informa, 2018). By way of comparison the yield on stocks in the Financial Times Stock Exchange 100 index never exceeded 6% from 1999 through December 2017 (see <https://www.londonstockexchange.com/exchange/prices-and-markets/stocks/summary/company-summary/GB00BMJ6DW54GBGBXSET1.html>) .

<sup>6</sup> As but one of many recent examples see <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/sep/13/scientific-publishing-rip-off-taxpayers-fund-research>.

many rewards (Hay 2016). For example, we gain an overview of cutting-edge work in the field and are able to provide assistance to early career scholars as they begin to publish and establish their research profiles. Moreover, we are able to shape, albeit in a modest way, the debates and institutional framing of our disciplines. Yet, as noted, publishing is also a business, and in for-profit models it is a business in which most of the requisite labour is provided free or paid for by (mostly public) universities. The main aim of the open access movement is to shift this dynamic so that more of the value produced and funded by our collective labour remains in collective hands (Batterbury 2017; Finn et al. 2017).

### **The Many Faces of Open Access**

Yet not all open access is equal. Indeed, many commercial publishers now advocate OA as ardently as their critics (Batterbury 2017). However, how this common concept is defined varies widely. Part of the difficulty in understanding the terms of debate is thus grounded in how different stakeholders conceptualise OA. At one end of the spectrum is the “gold” OA model, in which authors are required to pay up front for their papers to be published (so-called Author Processing Charges, or APCs, which often amount to US\$2000 or more per article), after which they are freely available for anyone to download. This is the main form of OA advocated by commercial publishers like Elsevier (as well as some non-profits). At the spectrum’s other end stand non-commercial journals that do not charge APCs at all – what Fuchs and Sandoval (2013) call a “diamond” OA model – but simply offer all content free for unlimited downloading under Creative Commons licenses<sup>7</sup> and cover production costs from other sources (such as dues from scholarly societies). In between these extremes lies an array of different models. In so-called “green” OA, for instance, commercial publishers offer free article downloading after an initial embargo period, and/or allow prepublication versions of published articles to be placed in public repositories. Conversely, some non-profit publishers ask for upfront APCs for OA content to cover production costs but at a much lower rate than for gold open access (often in the range of US\$500-1000), since they do not include a premium. Some non-commercial journals, meanwhile, will ask for APCs from authors with institutional funding but waive these for those unable to pay (most commercial publishers offer waiver programmes for gold OA as well). For those advocating diamond-style OA, then, gold OA and similar arrangements that collect fees in excess of basic operating costs are considered exploitative “open-washing” (see e.g. Fuchs and Sandoval 2013; Wals 2018).

Contention also results from the fact that it is unclear exactly how much of APCs go to direct production costs, and how much to publishers’ profits. Commercial publishers claim that quality publishing at scale demands substantial investment beyond the modest APCs small non-profits are able to demand, in order to cover costs associated with production, marketing, administration, and so forth. Cautionary tales like the recent implosion of *HAU* (an anthropology journal that began as an independent OA initiative but was subsequently forced to change to a subscription model with University of Chicago Press),<sup>8</sup> give pause in endorsing OA without first securing financing for sustainable production. Yet other diamond OA journals are indeed able to publish substantial content with little or no direct production charges at all.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://creativecommons.org/>; accessed 5/12/2018.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2018/06/15/promising-open-access-anthropology-journal-moves-modified-subscription-service-amid>; 4/3/2019.

Within the OA discussion, journals that charge both subscriptions and upfront APCs are called “hybrids”. Such journals are accused of “double dipping,” since institutions desiring both access to all journals’ content – as well for as all content produced by their own researchers to be freely available to everyone else – must pay both subscription fees and advance APCs simultaneously. Elsevier, for instance, denies engaging in double dipping as subscription fees are ostensibly adjusted in accordance with the amount of OA purchased (see <https://www.elsevier.com/about/policies/pricing#Dipping>). Concerns over this and other questions recently promoted a coalition of German universities calling itself Projekt Deal to cancel their contracts with all Elsevier journals until a less costly arrangement could be agreed upon.<sup>9</sup> At the time of publication, this dispute remains ongoing. Other universities and coalitions have since followed suit to advance similar demands of Elsevier and other commercial publishers,<sup>10</sup> culminating in a decision by the University of California – the largest university system in the US – to end its contract with Elsevier altogether.<sup>11</sup>

### **Elsevier and *Geoforum***

Discontent with Elsevier in particular has been growing for some time. In 2012, there was an active boycott campaign launched against the publisher by academics.<sup>12</sup> We see the continued impact of this campaign through reviewers choosing not to review for Elsevier journals, including *Geoforum*. Elsevier responded by making old articles in a number of journals freely available online and withdrawing their support for the Research Works Act (which contained provisions to limit open access and the sharing of scientific data in the United States), because of the reputational damage the boycott was inflicting on them. Yet several years on, discontent with Elsevier’s publishing practices continues, provoking increasing critique in a variety of print and visual media. This inspired the actions by Projekt Deal and other universities previously noted and has since led to a formal complaint filed with the EU competition authority regarding RELX Group and its subsidiary Elsevier.<sup>13</sup>

All of this has triggered ongoing discussion between Elsevier representatives and the editors and Board Members of *Geoforum*. In 2012 Board Members demanded a “new deal” outlined in an editorial subsequent published in the journal, which explained:

At their core, our concerns center upon whether or not Elsevier is providing us with enough value to justify the relationship. Elsevier owns the rights to *Geoforum* and operates the journal, as one would expect from a corporation, with an attention to profitability. On the other hand, the journal is created through many acts of unpaid labor contributed by authors, reviewers, board members, and Editors (though the latter do receive a modest stipend). Collectively we contribute a considerable gift to one another, but also to Elsevier. . . what exactly do we receive in return for our gift, the contribution of our unpaid labour to Elsevier?

(Editorial Board of *Geoforum*, 2012: 657).

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<sup>9</sup> <http://www.sciencemag.org/news/2017/08/bold-open-access-push-germany-could-change-future-academic-publishing>; accessed 26/10/2018.

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/sweden-cancels-elsevier-contract-open-access-dispute-spreads>; accessed 15/12/2018.

<sup>11</sup> [https://www.universityofcalifornia.edu/press-room/uc-terminates-subscriptions-worlds-largest-scientific-publisher-push-open-access-publicly?fbclid=IwAR0r9ps7qv1tBP8WEaXJ2o\\_PDeqnyX-VOCUTBAE2NRHB0tUZFrxLXmhwk](https://www.universityofcalifornia.edu/press-room/uc-terminates-subscriptions-worlds-largest-scientific-publisher-push-open-access-publicly?fbclid=IwAR0r9ps7qv1tBP8WEaXJ2o_PDeqnyX-VOCUTBAE2NRHB0tUZFrxLXmhwk); accessed 4/3/2019.

<sup>12</sup> See <http://thecostofknowledge.com>; accessed 26/10/2018.

<sup>13</sup> <https://zenodo.org/record/1472045#.W98Zxy2cZQL>; accessed 26/10/2018.

This editorial led to a renegotiation of Elsevier support for the journal, with agreements to return a portion of journal proceeds to the intellectual commons by funding, among various initiatives, an annual lecture at the American Association of Geographers (AAG) meetings; an annual student paper competition linked to a conference travel bursary; and a bi-annual scholarly workshop. Yet some of this support was subsequently withdrawn or diminished in marked contrast to the ever growing Elsevier profit margin. This caused discontent to grow again and eventually prompted two Board Members to publish another editorial highlighting these actions as illustrative of problems within the academic publishing industry more generally (Wainwright and Büscher 2017). Following this, a larger group of Board Members delivered another letter to Elsevier in February 2018 calling again for increased funding commensurate with journal earnings. This initiated another series of negotiations between the current editors and Elsevier representatives. The aim of these discussions was to respond, to the extent possible given the inherent constraints of a for-profit publishing system, to the various concerns raised in the OA debate. Most specifically they sought an agreement able to:

1. Reduce the public subsidy by calling on publishers to actually pay for the labour time editors devote to their work;
2. Distribute some of the surplus value back to the intellectual commons by expanding fair (diamond) open access to journal material, particularly for scholars in low-income countries where APCs are often prohibitively expensive;
3. Value reviewers' (usually invisible and thankless) labour by returning some of this value to the commons in the form of increased support for scholarly activities;

We consider this last point particularly important as *Geoforum*, like most other journals, have encountered growing difficulty in finding reviewers for our submissions (see Springer et al. 2017). Feedback from declining reviewers suggests that this is due to a number of factors, including discontent with Elsevier specifically, more widespread frustration that reviewers' free labour supports publishers' profits, as well as the general overwork to which we are all increasingly subject. Yet, independent peer review is the foundation of scholarly publishing (Kallio 2017). Hence, we feel it important to show reviewers that their work is indeed contributing to a collective cause, as well as to encourage them to prioritise this important work among their many commitments (without directly commodifying this work by paying for it individually).

The new arrangement we have reached addresses these concerns to a significant degree. Editor stipends have increased substantially to cover at least part of our labour. Increased open access to journal content has been expanded in various ways. And Elsevier has agreed to an augmented fund to support intellectual activities that is directly linked to - and will increase yearly proportional to - the number of assessments our reviewers complete. This fund will be used to support the ongoing activities previously mentioned as well as new ones, including a scholarship for early career researchers (ECRS) from low-income countries. This will allow such scholars to present papers at pertinent conferences intended for subsequent publication in the journal. The funds will also cover the hiring of an editorial assistant dedicated specifically to assisting authors of 'not quite ready' papers to develop these up to publishable quality.

## **Looking Forward**

While these developments are encouraging and help to transfer a greater portion of the surplus value generated by our collective labour back into the commons from which it originates, there remains much work to be done in addressing all of the important concerns the OA discussion has raised. It is clear, moreover, that this discussion will continue to evolve quickly as new initiatives like 'Plan S' take effect and further transform the publishing landscape by promoting the movement away from journals charging for access to content. Indeed, we have found ourselves at the forefront of the significant changes occurring in academic publishing in the latest round of negotiations, as Elsevier seeks to increase the ratio of OA papers it publishes through the creation of what are termed 'mirror' journals. These will share the same editors group and Board as regular journals but will only publish gold OA papers.<sup>14</sup> As such, whilst they allow Elsevier to associate themselves with the provision of fully open access journals, profound questions remain concerning who has the ability to pay to publish in such outlets and the potential for such journals to meet wider OA mandates such as the 'Plan S' currently in formulation.<sup>15</sup> These are questions with which we continue to wrestle.

The scope and speed of changes in relation to OA and wider publishing business models requires that we all keep ourselves informed about the latest debates. At *Geoforum*, we remain committed to taking action in support of the pursuit of the knowledge, fairness and common gain that are the hallmarks of academia when it functions at its best. This editorial is intended as our initial contribution to an important discussion that must be carried forward, with urgency, in the near future.

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<sup>14</sup> See Elsevier's explanation of the mirror journal format here: <https://www.elsevier.com/about/open-science/open-access/faqs-open-access-mirror-journals>.

<sup>15</sup> See e.g. [https://www.coalition-s.org/wp-content/uploads/271118\\_cOAlitionS\\_Guidance.pdf](https://www.coalition-s.org/wp-content/uploads/271118_cOAlitionS_Guidance.pdf); [https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/sites/default/files/British\\_Academy\\_paper\\_on\\_Science\\_Europe\\_Plan\\_S.pdf](https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/sites/default/files/British_Academy_paper_on_Science_Europe_Plan_S.pdf).

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