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## **It's time to stand up to the academic publishing industry - And here's how we can do it**

By Adriane MacDonald and Nicole Eva

Academia is unique in that professionals with highly specialized expertise, who are paid by public institutions, write articles and provide peer reviews to corporations who profit greatly without giving back to the research enterprise. In any other industry, such experts would charge up to \$1,500/hour for their services; in academia, this expertise is given away to for-profit companies. Why are we willing to gift our review services and intellectual property to businesses, who then turn around and charge our institutions again for the products of our own research? Why are universities, governments and taxpayers OK paying for the labour costs of a massive multi-billion-dollar industry? Why aren't publishers expected to pay for the production of the products that they profit greatly from? What if academics started charging publishers for their expert peer reviews? And what if the funds raised were used to help subsidize the costs of research and of building an open access system – run not by for-profit companies, but by our postsecondary institutions?

Publishers are dependent on the quality of their peer-review process; if their articles are found to have poor or non-existent peer review, the credibility of their journals is called into question and won't attract high-quality research papers for publication. Yet, as dependent as publishers are on a rigorous process, they would cease to exist without the free labour of scholars writing and reviewing the articles. Some might counter that reviewing is *part* of the academic's job; that it all comes as part of their (often not insubstantial) salary. This may be true, but the benefit of academic expertise largely goes to private, not public, parties. In addition, much of the time spent reviewing is over and above the teaching, research and service that academics spend the bulk of their work-week doing. It may be giving back to the profession, but at what toll on the researchers, our public institutions, and the academy?

Research is *not* free. It is paid for with taxpayer dollars through both academics' salaries and government research grants; it is paid for a third time through outrageous subscription fees paid by university libraries. Depending on the institution, academic libraries pay [\\$350,000 to \\$9-million annually in subscription fees](#). It is also paid for by academics, who spend their lives honing these skills at a [great cost both financially and personally](#).

Lack of access to research is a moral issue, creating an inequitable system of knowledge distribution. Scholars at institutions both locally and globally that can't afford these fees are impoverished in more ways than one, not to mention the taxpayers who don't have access to the research they've helped fund. That publishers are making huge profits using the free labour of scholars, while libraries struggle to fund the subscriptions essential to scholars' research activities, is absurd.

## Concentration of power

The problems inherent in the scholarly publishing industry are well known. [A 2015 paper](#) showed that five academic publishers published over half of all scholarly papers in 2013. This concentration of power in the publishing industry allows the publishers control over subscription fees. Scholarly publishers' [profit margins rival that of Google or Apple](#). According to the [RELX Group Annual Report](#), Elsevier's reported revenues for 2016 were £2.32 billion (\$4.12 billion CAD). Routinely we hear of how Elsevier has bought yet another piece of the academic pie: [Bepress](#) in August 2017, [Plum Analytics](#) in February 2017, [Hivebench](#) in June 2016, [SSRN](#) in May 2016; the list goes on. [A case study analyzing Elsevier's strategic acquisitions](#) in order to consolidate their power and ensure academics' reliance on them demonstrates their growing influence in the industry. The story is similar for the other top publishers. In no way can we justify having the scholarly communication system co-opted by these profit-making ventures.

Open access has been an idealistic goal since the advent of the internet. And, in some disciplines such as physics, preprint servers such as [ArXiv](#) have realized this goal; other recent entrants in the past few years include [SocArXiv](#), [AgriXiv](#) and [engrXiv](#). Change has been incremental, but a wholesale change has yet to happen. Publishers hold the power with their monopoly on publishing some of the most prestigious journals, in which academics strive to have their research published and which they require their libraries to subscribe to, so there is no incentive to stop charging exorbitant subscription prices. In fact, the [transition to online publications has made this problem worse](#); the ability to avoid printing costs and to bundle electronic journals into "big deal" packages has allowed publishers to put more of the subscription fees they charge directly into their pockets.

An ironic twist to the open-access movement is that it has actually made the publishers richer. They've jumped on the bandwagon by offering authors the option of paying article processing charges (APCs) in order to make their articles open access, while continuing to increase subscription charges to libraries at the institutions where those authors work. So, in many cases, the publishers are being paid twice for the same content – [often charging APCs higher than purely open access journals](#).

One roadblock to the full support of open access is the myth that equates open access journals with predatory practices, such as charging unfair APCs and/or not performing adequate (or any) peer reviews before publication. This is not true. There are many reputable open access journals which still engage in rigorous peer review processes and only charge cost-recovery APCs; some are absolutely free to publish in if they are supported by a scholarly society or university press (for example, [The Canadian Journal of Sociology](#)). Academics could direct their peer review and editorial duties towards these non-profit entities, and grad students could be hired to run the day-to-day operations for a fraction of the cost of publishers' subscription fees. Ideally, libraries could redirect funds they are paying for high-cost corporate journals to support university- and scholarly society-run journals, for a fraction of the cost.

## **A call to action: what can we do?**

One small step towards improving the system would be for academics to start charging publishers for their peer reviews. A flat fee per review – say \$500 – could then be put back into the researcher's own research fund, administered by the universities they work for. A percentage of the fee could be held back to compensate those reviewing for non-profit, reputable open access journals. Payment is likely to incentivize reviewers to do a good job, hoping for repeat requests. Others who have experimented with paying reviewers have [been particularly impressed by the quality of reviews and reviewer engagement](#). So, in fact, as the value of peer review is increasingly questioned, paying for it may drive up the quality.

Paying for peer review may also even out [the skewed distribution of those performing peer review versus those writing articles](#), as more would be incentivized to do it. Publishers might try to increase subscription fees to cover the cost, but governments could put a freeze on raising subscription prices; price regulations have been imposed in other similarly [monopolistic industries](#). Putting the money back into a research fund also allows the money to remain tax-free and alleviates any concerns that well-paid university employees are further lining their pockets.

Governments can be part of the solution. In Canada, provincial governments contribute approximately 30 percent of the funds to postsecondary institutions. They have the power to insist universities comply with an open access policy which would require reviewers to be paid and researchers to avoid publishing in predatory outlets. The Tri-Agency of the major Canadian granting agencies has an [open access policy on publications](#) which requires funded researchers to ensure their research is freely accessible within 12 months of publication. This policy is a good start, but could go further by requiring all authors – funded or not – to retain their copyrights and make available their research in an OA outlet immediately, thereby forcing publishers to comply with these regulations.

Universities have a big part in making this work as well. They need to adopt policies requiring faculty to charge for peer reviews and to make their publications open access. They would also need to set up systems to administer the peer-review fees paid by publishers. While some might see any level of monetization as negative, it will at least be necessary in the short term to get the system off the ground. For example, part of the funds researchers receive from reviews could go toward supporting open access start-ups run by universities.

This will only work as a concerted effort – every researcher, worldwide, must demand compensation for peer reviews. Without this co-operation, publishers will find those still willing to do researchers' work for free, thus undermining the whole system. It is time for academics, postsecondary institutions, governments and civil society to stand up to legacy publishers. Individually, we can take a stand by invoicing publishers for our expert peer reviews and by participating in the preprint movement. Collectively, we can work inside our universities to write policies that support individuals with payment requests and develop systems to collect and distribute these funds internally. At the societal level, we can empower students and civil society by informing them of their right to have free access to research paid for by taxpayer dollars. With our collective efforts, a critical mass can be reached which will make it possible to take back what rightfully belongs to everyone.

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