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Revamping the Scholarly Publishing Landscape: A Case for Open Access

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Revamping the Scholarly Publishing Landscape: A Case for Open Access

Abstract

The for-profit publishing industry has taken over the reins of the scholarly publishing landscape which was primarily meant for the academicians and by the academicians. The developments in information communication and technology facilitated open publishing, open sharing and open access, the researchers, however, still prefer for closed access journals, which survive mostly on the metrics developed and promoted by the for-profit publishing industry for their reputation. Also, in the contemporary academe, the merit of the researchers is determined largely by the number of their publications and by the fact that these are published by the purportedly reputed publishers who predominantly publish overpriced and closed access journals. The reputation of the researcher is overshadowed by the reputation of the publishers. This paper attempts to highlight the strategies employed by the commercial publishers to maintain their oligopoly in the field. It also aims to understand and critically analyze the various publishing and subscription models such as Plan S and APCs which are being promoted as open access models and their relevance in an academic environment especially in the Indian context. The paper checks for the viability of One Nation One Subscription model. It also discusses the apathy of academicians in general towards Open Access and their continuing romanticism for high impact journals even if they and their institutions are unable to afford these journals.

The Strange Business of Scholarly Publishing

Scholarly publishing is the only business in which the crucial component i.e. the research, remains unpaid/underpaid till date. In scholarly publications such as articles, state-of-art reports, reviews published in subject journals, royalty is neither expected nor offered, the exception being books and monographs. Even in these cases, the terms and conditions of royalty are not disclosed. Only an educated guess can be attempted that the terms would vary for the best-selling authors in popular areas of research as compared to the other authors working in imminent *niche* areas. This affects further R & D in these areas of study though with a limited readership are as important and as essential as the other more popular areas of research. The reviewers in the editorial boards of commercial journals receive either nominal payments or discounts on other publications of the same publisher. Yet, the subscription fees are regularly increased by unrealistic margins in the name of covering the cost of peer-review, printing and publishing.

Henry Oldenberg, in 1965, established the Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society to create a public record of original contributions to knowledge, to ensure intellectual credit for the researcher and to reach out to the people/peers beyond the close acquaintances for a critical evaluation of a new idea or research [National Research Council (US) Committee on Responsibilities of Authorship in the Biological Sciences (2003)]. However, the academic publishing is now widely used as a symbolic capital by the scholarly community and its institutions [Merton, R. (1988); Blackmore, P. (2016); Desrochers, N. et al. (2018)] to check the suitability for academic appointments, promotion and for institutional and project funding [Clark, W. (2008); Harley D. et al. (2010); Chapman, C. A. et al. (2019)].

However, the journey which started as 'by the academicians for the academicians' was gradually taken over by the commercial publishing giants for profit making. In a study conducted by Ware, M. and Mabe, M. (2015) (pp. 45), it was reported that only 5 commercial publishing firms dominated the scenario by holding rights of nearly 35% of all the journals published. One of the reasons for publishers' monopoly on the scientific content of papers it publishes is the Ingelfinger law and has the rare impact of typical economic variables i.e. buyer and seller unlike other businesses [Larivière, V., Haustein, S. and Mongeon, P. (2015)] which allows them to have a complete control over the pricing of journals. Taking advantage of this monopolistic environment, the publishers raise the subscription cost every year; sometimes up to 6% per annum [Vogel G (March, 2014)] thereby outperforming the purchase capacity of the libraries. As reported in a study by Strieb, Karla L. and Blixrud, Julia C. (2012), the subscription cost for journals soared to 302% from 1986–2005 for the member libraries of the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) in the United States.

Digital Technology: Boon turned Bane by Commercial Players

Digital technology enabled quicker and cheaper publishing, and it was presumed that the excessive prices of scholarly publications of the print era would be a thing of the past. However that did turn out to be the case. The universities still are saddled with

the burden of the exorbitant pricing of scholarly journals and books. The gravity of the situation can be gauged from the fact that the Harvard University Library, one of the richest libraries in the world, also felt the burden of journal pricing and refused to yield to the commercial publishers and adopted open access quite successfully [Faculty Advisory Council, Harvard University (2012)]. This was the beginning of many such cases across the western part of the world where universities and institutions took a stand against the unreasonable prices levied on the scholarly publications by the commercial publishers. In the year 2017, more than seventy academic institutions in Germany unanimously boycotted Elsevier for the same reason [Kwon, Diana (July, 2017)]. In June 2020, MIT ended negotiations with Elsevier as the publishers did not agree to abide by the MIT Framework for Publisher Contracts which encourages open access to educational and research materials [MIT Libraries (Jun, 2020)].

Scholarly Publications Cost to Institutions: Paying Many Times Over

The situation for Indian universities is no different and is rather even more difficult than that of the developed nations. They are struggling to provide adequate scholarly resources to their library users due to the rising costs [Chakravarty, Rupak and Singh, Sukhwinder (2005)]. “Every year universities are forced to cancel/reduce subscriptions/acquisitions of scholarly materials due to ever-increasing prices. Publications acquired through consortia provide “bundled packages”, where high-impact factor publications are clubbed with low impact factor or many times irrelevant publications. It may not be long when even the well-funded and best research institutions and universities in India will be facing this kind of ‘Access crisis’ [Dimple Patel (2015)]. The access crisis has already intensified as evident from the fact that the E-ShodhSindhu, a national level consortia by University Grants Commission (UGC) for the procurement of e-resources for Indian Universities (<https://ess.inflibnet.ac.in/>) has stopped subscription to e-resources on behalf of the universities, though it negotiates the prices on behalf of the universities [George, Sarath Babu (2019, September 29)].

Buranyi, Stephen (2017, Jun 27) reports that while in the publishing of magazines the content writers are paid, the content creators, reviewers and editors in the academic publishing world are not. It is ironical that the ephemeral content published in magazines is valued more but is sold cheaper and the research content perceived as of high value remains undervalued and is sold at exorbitant costs. The exorbitant pricing of scholarly publications by commercial publishers is only one of the costs that is borne by the publicly funded institutions.. In reality, these institutions make huge payments. The cost to publicly funded institutions include (Figure 1):

1. Salaries / Fellowships of faculty, researchers and scientists.
2. Infrastructure support through funding/sponsoring of research.
3. Purchase of the research output of their employees published by commercial publishing firms which was originally funded by the institution.
4. The processing, physical preservation and management costs in case of print journals.
5. The processing, digital preservation and management costs, in case of e-journals.

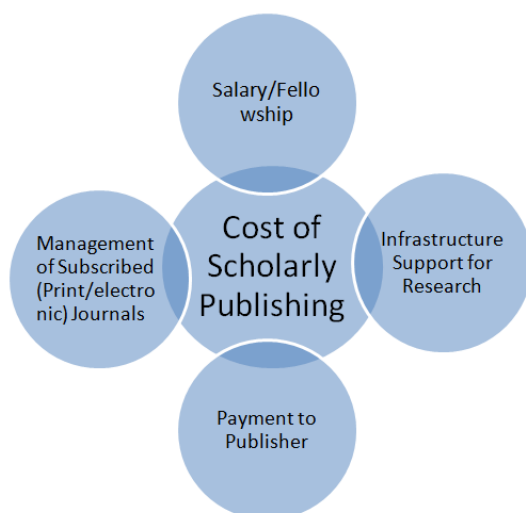


Figure 1: Total cost of acquisition of Scholarly Articles by Public Funded Institutions

Researchers as Barriers to Access to Knowledge

According to Gannon F. (2004), editor of EMBO reports, only a small percentage of authors make an additional effort to do the self-archiving of their pre-prints/post-prints articles even though more than 85% journals in the life sciences authorize authors to do so. Frazier, Kenneth (2005) also noted that his article [Frazier, Kenneth (2001)] which talked about the perils of 'Big Deals' was "widely read by the librarians and the advice was nearly universally ignored." As students, researchers, faculty members we directly experience the acute lack of scholarly materials due to the artificially inflated prices. Yet the researchers are the fuel that keeps the fires of Big Publisher, Big Science, Big Pharma, Big Data, Big Software and everything Big burning by signing away their patents and copyrights of their inventions, research publications, research data, personal data to 'Big' people for the perceived academic reputation associated with them or for promotions all the while castigating the Big Publishers. However the academic community should focus on the examining and analysing the following:

- the factors that prevent the community from supporting and contributing to Open Science, Open Access, Open Data, Open Source Software, Open Hardware, Open Standards.
- the reasons for not having open review, open evaluation and transparency in scholarly publications.
- the motives behind not transferring back academic reputation from the Big Publisher to the Researcher who actually deserves it.
- the factors which prevent the public research funding organizations to mandate Open Access to the research output funded by them. The fact these institutions are headed by academic administrators should facilitate such decisions.

- the reasons behind the inability or unwillingness of the academic regulatory bodies from linking recruitments and promotions to contributions to Open Access.

Academic Freedom vs. Academic Responsibility?

Many researchers have several misapprehensions about Open Access [Bohannon, John (2013, October 4); Eriksson, S., & Helgesson, G. (2017); Manca A, et.al. (2017); Teixeira da Silva, JA, Dobránszki, J. (2015)]. These range from some genuine concerns like the disrepute associated with OA journals due to the predatory nature of these journals to the conspiracy theories that OA is a dubious plan of the Western world to steal the indigenous knowledge of developing countries like India. The latter is based on a true incident experienced by one of the authors when her colleagues shared these views in an academic event on Open Educational Resources (OERs). Most researchers, even those working in publicly funded institutions opine that they should have the academic freedom to publish wherever they wish to as long as it is their idea and research. But the question is whether academic freedom can be enjoyed at the cost of academic responsibility. The false reputation of publishers (which is actually due to the researchers' contributions to their journals) has compelled the whole academic community to accede to the pressure of the commercial publisher.

It is ironical that on the one hand many researchers in India are vehemently against SciHub and LibGen being banned [Trivedi, Divya (2021, February 12)], on the other hand, with the exception of a few [Raman, T. R. Shankar (2021, April 04)], these researchers, surprisingly, are reluctant to contribute to Open Access journals. . This behaviour, of desiring a commercial resource for free, while contributing to the very same commercial and closed access journals which they complain about constantly appears quite baffling. One of the reasons contributing to this behaviour is probably because the academic regulatory body for Indian Universities the UGC mandates Academic Research Score (ARS) based on where the research is published. In the last few years the UGC has come up with a UGC CARE List (<https://ugccare.unipune.ac.in/apps1/home/index>) and mandates that only those articles which are published in the journals included in this list are to be considered for recruitments and promotions in the Indian Universities [University Grants Commission (2019)]. The current list has two categories, and in category II, all journals indexed by commercial databases have an unconditional approval. Moreover, these lists are dynamic i.e. the UGC may remove any journal(s) from these lists if the criteria set out by the UGC are not satisfied by these journals on a regular basis.

Myths surrounding Open Access (OA)

Many LIS professionals, researchers and academicians are yet to realize the importance of Open Access. These professionals are influenced by the marketing strategies of the commercial publishers against Open Access. One of the ploys is to brand all Open Access material as predatory in nature, which is not always true. It is important for every librarian, academician, teacher, student, researcher, scientist,

and user to be aware of some facts about Open Access resources. :

- ALL OA journals are not predatory in nature.
- There ARE predatory practices even among the commercial and closed access journals. A few studies have revealed the increasingly disturbing trend of journal editors and reviewers pressurizing authors, especially beginners in research to cite from their journals or articles to inflate their Journal Impact Factors [Van Noorden, R (2012); Chawla, Dalmeet Singh (2019, Sept. 10)]. However since these journals have closed access, the studies are rare on these. Also if these reports are published in closed access journals, their dissemination is limited to the researchers who have access these journals.
- Fraudulent and badly executed research is published even in closed access journals. However, in closed access journals, the dissemination of such research is very limited due to the prohibitive subscription costs of such journals. Hence, such fraudulent research may come to light many years after its publication. When detected though, such articles are retracted by the journals, but by then it is too late, and the wrongful findings of such articles are consumed and probably cited by other researchers in their publications. In a study conducted by Bordino, M., Ravizzotti, E. & Vercelli, S. (2020) to identify the characteristics of retracted papers in the field rehabilitation, it was reported that two-thirds of all the retracted publications were published in closed access journals, and many of the retractions seem to be in renowned, well-known journals; however the authors of this paper gave more credit to the editors and the expert reviewers in identifying the problems that lead to retraction and went on to question the competency and commitment of the editors of open access journals. There have also been reports where such journals have been informed of plagiarism or fraudulent research publications but the publishers had not retracted them. [Oransky, Ivan (2020, April 22)].
- OA makes evaluation of the research by peers even after publication transparent, open to a wide audience and most importantly immediate action can be taken against such research and journals to limit its spread in the research community.
- Researchers today cannot claim ignorance about the existence of predatory journals. Over the past few years, the issue of predatory journals has been discussed not only in academic events but has been publicized widely in the media outlets such as newspapers. The University Grants Commission (UGC) notified regulations on Academic Integrity in the year 2018 and all the Indian research institutions have come up with their respective institutional policies on Academic Integrity. So if researchers have contributed to such journal(s), it can be safely presumed that in all probability they have done it with full awareness.
- The problem of predatory journals is certainly not without solutions. So the continued existence and increase in numbers of these predatory journals is a reflection on the research and academic communities. Without the contribution, participation and involvement of researchers and academics, such journals will cease to exist or at the least there will be significant reduction in numbers.

It is vital that the research and academic community shift the discourse from the reputation of a journal to the reputation of an individual researcher. Good or bad research should decide the merit of the individual, not the publication in which his/her research is published. A researcher should gain reputation for his/her research and not the publisher. In the contemporary skewered academic publishing world, unworthy researchers gain reputation simply by associating themselves with good researchers as co-authors and publishing in self-proclaimed “reputed journal”. And conversely sometimes good research published in lesser known journals gets ignored by the research community at large. Only Open Access can bring the glory and reputation back to the researcher.

Open Access: A Prophylactic for Plagiarism and Fake Research

The linking of selection for university jobs and promotions with research publications has had a disastrous effect on the quality of research. In order to fulfill the research criteria as per UGC regulations, most researchers and faculty members resort to unfair means like plagiarism and faking research data and output. In spite of the claims of commercial publishers of stringent editorial policies there is equal scope for plagiarized work and fake research output being published in their journals. There have been numerous reports in the past reporting such publications being retracted by publishers after discovery. Many such cases of retraction of articles from journals can be found on Retraction Watch (<https://retractionwatch.com>) and Pubpeer (<https://pubpeer.com>) websites. But such discovery may come too late in the day and by then such publications are quoted extensively by other researchers. While the publication itself can be withdrawn, tracing and removing citations to such publications is a humongous and impossible task. In contrast, the open access publications are available to the whole world and may be accessed immediately with no embargo periods and by a larger audience as compared to the closed access publications. Hence, plagiarism and fake research can be detected quickly and their spread could be curtailed at the earliest.

Open Access via Article Processing Charges (APC): A False Positive

Open Access is being encouraged by many commercial publishers by charging APC, including and unfortunately by many OA initiatives like the Plan ‘S’ of Coalition S [Schiltz, Marc (2018)] which generated many concerns among researchers [Rabesandratana, Tania (2019, Jan 3); Kowaltowski, Alicia J., Oliveira, Marcus F. (2019, Feb); Mukunth, Vasudevan (2019, Feb 14)]. Open Access via APC is when the author pays Article Processing Charges (APC) to the publisher. The publisher in turn makes the article available in Open Access to the readers. A deeper analysis reveals that nothing has actually changed in the dysfunctional relationship between the author and the commercial publishers. The cost is, in fact, simply transferred from the libraries / readers to the authors. Plan ‘S’ allows for Gold OA, if APC is covered by research funding bodies. But, the question is why publicly funded funding bodies should pay to the commercial publishers for making research funded by them OA. It is a paradox. Either way whether the library bears the cost of the commercial

publications or the author pays the charges for publishing her/his publication in Open Access through a commercial publisher, it the beneficiary is only one stakeholder, i.e. the commercial publisher. The same issue prevails with the “one nation, one subscription” plan of the Indian government.

One Nation, One Subscription: A Valid Solution?

India decided to opt out of Plan S and decided to develop its own Open Access framework [Mukunth, Vasudevan (2019, Oct 26)]. Later the government of India came up with the One Nation, One Subscription policy instead. The policy aims to provide information access to all based on “one centrally negotiated payment”. This policy cannot be considered as a move towards Open Access framework in the true sense of the phrase, as it does not address the core issues in scholarly publishing:

1. the unethical business practice of commercial publishers of taking the research output in a ready-to-use format from content creators,
2. getting the time-consuming and intellectual process of editing and reviewing done by editors and reviewers without remuneration and
3. selling back the same content to the very same content creators, editors and reviewers at exorbitant costs.

Also the following issues need to be examined :

- Whether the publishers will accept and adopt the “One Nation One Subscription” policy.
- If yes, then whether the publishers will provide the relevant journals required by the institutions and universities or provide “bundled packages” (which in the past were acquired via “consortia” have proven to consist of only a few relevant journals and the rest are not of much use to the researchers).
- Whether the institutions would be provided access to the journals which are not included in the one nation, one subscription plan.
- Whether the legal and technical barriers of access can be solved [Sinha, Anubha (2020, Oct 23)]

ONOS plan is not entirely a new concept. In fact until recently, the Information and Library Network (INFLIBNET) used to procure e-resources at negotiated prices on behalf of Indian Universities under the E-ShodhSindhu consortia and provide access to these resources to all the universities free of cost. However, it was abruptly stopped and instead INFLIBNET now only negotiates the price of the e-resources with the publishers and universities are left to their own financial resources to procure them individually. The INFLIBNET suddenly pulling out of this scheme has left many researchers of cash-crunched universities in the lurch and left especially the state universities to fend for themselves and form consortia at state level instead (Krishnakumar, G (2020, January 30). It is also important to bear in mind whether the same can happen to ONOS in near future. And if it does, then once again the researchers will be left with no or minimal scholarly resources.

It is ironical that at one end of the spectrum the Indian government is trying to provide information access to all through their One nation One subscription policy whereas on the other hand a not-for-profit SciHub with same ideologies has been

blocked in India following a case at Delhi High Court [Trivedi, Divya (2021, February 12)]. Of course, it cannot be denied that Sci-Hub and LibGen do infringe upon the copyrights of the publishers to whom it has been transferred by the author(s). [Pai, Yogesh (2021)]. It is a matter of grave concern that researchers are signing away their copyright to the publishers of closed access journals. Few researchers stop to think about the long term consequences of their actions. Convenience and academic growth trump the need to explore the dysfunctional scholarly publishing model and dissociate with it. However, there are a few researchers, who now and then actively participate in dissociating themselves from this exploitative environment [Raman, T. R. Shankar (2021, April 04)]. But such instances are too few and too far in between to have had any substantial impact on changing the scholarly publishing scenario. The researchers are more prone to blame their government and / or parent institutions for not funding the procurement of journals required by them, rather than contemplate, question and participate in changing the *status quo*. They fail to realize the fact that by raising and agitating against cut in the journal pricing, they are actually echoing the interests of for-profit publishers.

Responsibilities of academic regulatory and funding bodies

Open Access to educational and research materials, is and has always been important, but in post-COVID-19 pandemic situation, it is ESSENTIAL. It should be the “new normal”. And also, it is important to think beyond simply digital access. It is necessary to include all educational and research materials irrespective of the format and the media in which they are available, in the definition of Open Access. An open access framework at national level is essential to control the unprecedented and unjustified increase in the prices of scholarly materials provided by the commercial players.

The higher education bodies like the University Grants Commission (UGC) and the Ministry of Education (MoE) and research funding bodies are entrusted with the responsibility of improving the quality of research output of the nation. Hence, these entities carry out their responsibility by framing regulations and mandates which require several criteria to be satisfied on the part of the researcher as well as the institutions. However, it is important for these bodies to understand that in order for researchers and institutions to satisfy these criteria in a given time frame and without compromising on the quality of research, they need support not only in terms of financial requirements, but also scholarly resources. In order to do so, these regulatory bodies need to:

1. Mandate Open Access for educational and research materials.
2. Motivate faculty by linking contributions in open access publications to Recruitment and Career Advancement Scheme (CAS).
3. Support universities in developing open access institutional repositories, so that authors can reuse and share their research with the public seamlessly [Mujoo Munshi, U. (2008)].
4. Encourage faculty to enter into non-exclusive intellectual property rights rather than transfer the copyright completely to commercial publishers.

5. Negotiate with commercial publishers to allow self-archiving on the author website or institutional repository of peer-reviewed preprint copy of the work.

Conclusion

Scholarship is a field where the content creators are also the consumers of the content. Hence, it is both surprising as well as unfortunate that the reins of scholarly publishing are completely in the hands of commercial players. It is also paradoxical that the commercial publishers have gained reputation as “academic” and “scholarly” publishers based on the work of researchers who publish in their journals. Whereas, researchers and scientists are judged based on “where” they publish rather than “what” they publish and the quality of their publications. The motive behind the slogan “publish or perish” is well harnessed by the publishers. Most of the Institutions evaluate academicians based on the number of their publications in reputed journals. As rightly stated by Chatterjee, Anindya (2019) “a publication which was, initially, an incidental consequence of the research has become a goal in itself”.

Across the Western world, academia and libraries have joined forces and are refusing to kowtow to the publishers. They also refused to fall into the trap of the “Big Deals” offered by the publishers. [Jha, Alok (2012, April 9); Mckenzie, Lindsay (2018, May 8)]. The Harvard University not only boycotted the publishers, but also used this as an opportunity to motivate and encourage its academic community to adopt and implement Open Access []. Frazier, Kenneth (2005) comments, which may sound bitter, but rightly so that it is the librarians who have to take the decision whether to pander to the publishers’ ever-rising costs or not, as they are the ones who know the working of the publishing world better than other professionals. However, the librarians alone cannot be blamed as they are trained in the library schools that finding the right information, for the right user and at the right time has to be the motto of their service. Moreover, the academia may in general be quick to blame the librarians for not providing them with required information resources than to ponder over the unreasonable costs levied by the publishers. However, such collective action has been absent in the Indian academic and library communities. This complacent attitude of academia and libraries in India to address the scholarly publishing issues and challenges in spite of the fact that most academic libraries in India suffer from a lack of scholarly resources due to the burgeoning costs of publications is an interesting topic where further research is required.

In conclusion, it appears that Plan S, ONOS, E-ShodhSindhu are more of ill-conceived reactionary “solutions” which are at the least temporary if not unviable, much like Alice in an attempt to get out of one rabbit hole descends right into another one. The need of the day is serious, well-thought out long-term solution(s) to deal with the core issues in scholarly publishing and transform its landscape which will allow a free flow of knowledge and facilitate research and development rather than restrict dissemination of knowledge under the guise of intellectual property rights and facilitate purely commercial players. Until then a paradigm shift in scholarly publication may not materialize.

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