Visibility is currency in academia but it is scarcity in publishing. The push for open access shows that academic publishers can't serve two masters

It's a common view amongst academics that publicly funded research has to be made publicly available. It isn't necessary to condemn publishers but it is necessary to get them out of the way. The oddities of the market that allowed barrier-based publishers to cruise into this century are breaking down, writes Mike Taylor.

"No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other." – Matthew 6:24.

It's a truism among academics that until your work is published, it "doesn't count". The academic publishing system has been with us for hundreds of years, and changed very little throughout the 20th Century. It didn't need to, because authors of research papers were so dependent on the publishers. On the whole, relations between authors and publishers were cordial and even warm.

But that's changing fast. The Internet has thrown the stable relationship into disarray as authors realise how little they now need most of the services that publishers provide. And because the traditional publishing model requires authors to hand all rights over to publishers without recompense, that realisation has been accompanied by a burgeoning sense of outrage, seen most obviously in a growing boycott of Elsevier (the largest commercial publisher) that has accumulated 8600 signatures in less than eight weeks. We have a network that can send infinite perfect copies all over the world instantaneously. For authors, it's not just crazy when access is deliberately limited by paywalls – it's immoral.

Publishers' reactions to the boycott have been varied: bafflement, sadness, defensiveness, condescension. "Within my company I see individuals who are genuinely committed to serving the scientific community", protested Elsevier VP Liz Smith, somewhat plaintively, "Stop wasting time complaining about how evil we are." Without question there are many fine people working with the best intentions for the big commercial publishers. It must be truly disheartening to have gone into publishing with a desire to help researchers only to find yourself the target of their fury.

But the situation is beset by a fundamental paradox. "One of Elsevier's primary missions is to work towards providing universal access", proclaims a recent position statement. But you will find no mention whatsoever of access in the 900 words of the Chairman's statement in the annual report, nor in the 1600 words of the Chief Executive Officer's report. Both are entirely to do with financial performance.

And that's not surprising – or even, really, wrong. Because the simple fact of the matter is that Elsevier, like Springer, Wiley and the rest, is a for-profit corporation. And that means that their primary responsibility is to their shareholders. Directors are legally required to act in the interests of the corporation rather than those of customers or the broader academic world.

This of course is true of all for-profit corporations. But it's not usually a problem in most businesses because the interests of customers are aligned with, or at least not incompatible with, those of the company. When customers are served well, the corporation does well. Unfortunately, this isn't the case with academic publishing. Customers fall into two categories: the authors who write papers and the people who read them. The interests of these two groups are aligned: authors want their work to be distributed freely, to be as widely read as possible, because in academia visibility is

currency. So authors and readers both want open access. But traditional publishers are habituated to a revenue stream based on charging for access. It is a model based on scarcity. Scarcity was a very real problem twenty years ago, when each copy cost money to make and more to ship. The value of publishers was the help they offered in overcoming these problems. But now that the Internet has annihilated the problems of duplication and transmission, all that is left for subscription-based publishers is to *create* scarcity so that they can charge for resolving the problem that they cause. The business model now is to erect paywalls, then charge to lower them: a flagrant waste of time and resources in which effort is squandered on building clever ways to make the world worse.

So however much these publishers talk about universal access or about serving customers, the truth is that they are serving themselves. And authors, readers and society are paying for it.

And let's say it once more: for-profit publishers can't exactly be *blamed* for this. It's the nature of the beast. Remember, directors are required to act in the financial interests of the corporation. It has narrow, focussed concerns. I am reminded of Captain Quint's description of a shark in *Jaws*: "what we are dealing with here is a perfect engine… All this machine does is swim and eat and make little sharks." It does what it does; and it does it with perfect single-mindedness.

And that is why talk of such publishers being "evil" is really misplaced. They do what they do. It would be more accurate to call them "blind" or "unthinking". When they fight tooth and nail to prevent open access, they are no more being evil than a shark is when it attacks its prey; no more evil than a brick wall across a motorway.

But here's the thing. If a shark threatens people, then it has to be destroyed. A wall across a motorway has to be demolished. And publicly funded research has to be made publicly available. It isn't necessary that we morally condemn a publisher that gets in the way of that self-evidently just goal. But it *is* necessary to get it out of the way. To demolish it, if it won't move.

And that is exactly what's happening now. The oddities of the market that allowed the barrier-based publishers to cruise into the new century are breaking down. The monopoly effects of the top journals are less important than previously and becoming progressively less so. The rise of prestigious open-access journals is offering authors more choices. The 8600 researchers who have signed the boycott, together with an unknown number of others who have made the same decision without proclaiming it, are taking the motorway wall apart, brick by brick.

Note: This article gives the views of the author(s), and not the position of the Impact of Social Sciences blog, nor of the London School of Economics

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