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How PeerJ Is Changing Everything In Academic Publishing

from the *moving-prestige-to-open-access* dept

Predictions
by **Mike Taylor**
Tue, Feb 12th 2013
1:51pm

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Filed Under:
**journals, new
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Has there ever been a business more ripe for disruption than academic publishing? For anyone who's not been following along, the business model of academic publishers, built on solving 18th century distribution problems, incarnates **the Shirky Principle**: that "Institutions will try to preserve the problem to which they are the solution." Far from making research public, as the name "publisher" suggests, their business now works by accepting researchers' donations of manuscripts, refining them by other researchers' donations of editorial services and peer review, assuming copyright, and locking up the results -- work that they neither wrote, edited, reviewed or paid for -- behind paywalls. By artificially causing a scarcity problem, they're able to sell solutions to that problem: subscriptions.

But publishers are monopoly suppliers of the journals they publish, and, like so many monopolists, have been unable to resist gouging their customers. Between 1996 and 2010, journal subscription prices **rose at four times the rate of inflation**. The result is that each published paper now costs the academic world **more than $5000**. Prices are so extreme that even Harvard, the wealthiest university in the world, recently declared that **it can't afford to keep paying all its subscriptions**. Not only can the public which funded the work not access it: often, neither can the researchers who need it as a basis for new work. It's insane. Academic publishers have made themselves **the enemies of science**.

The solution to the ludicrous status quo is open-access publishing. Researchers (or more realistically their funders or institutions) pay publishers an up-front fee for their services, and the resulting papers are then freely available to anyone in the world. Everyone outside of profiteering publishers agrees that this is a much better approach, but lots of researchers balk at the prices of article processing charges (APCs). For example, Elsevier, the biggest of the established academic publishers, **asks authors for $3000**. Newer open-access-only publishers, such as the non-profit Public Library of Science (PLOS) charge a less shocking **$1350** for publication in their main journal, PLOS ONE, and offer a **no-questions-asked waiver** for authors without funding for this charge. But there is still a feeling that $1350 is a lot of money to charge for Internet publication, especially when peer-review is done by volunteers.

Against that backdrop, Pete Binfield, the managing editor of PLOS ONE, left what had become **the world's largest journal** to launch a new publishing startup with Jason Hoyt, late of social reference manager Mendeley. High on the list of their goals was to bring down the price of open-access publishing.

I think a lot of people would have been impressed had PeerJ managed to bring the APC down below the $1000 mark, or certainly had they managed to hit $500. Instead, they've gone for the jugular on pricing: as **the web-site** says, "If we can set a goal to sequence the human genome for $99, when why not $99 for scholarly publishing"?

PeerJ's pricing system is different from the approach other publishers have taken, focusing on membership. Your $99 buys you lifetime membership, which gives you the right to publish one paper a year with them at no further charge. (All co-authors on multi-authored papers need to be members.) Alternatively, $299 buys an all-you-can-eat membership: publish as many papers as you want, whenever you want, **for life**.

The audacity of this pricing model is rather a shock. I have to admit that I was skeptical that it could work -- that PeerJ could take enough money to survive on this model. What swayed me was learning that the seed capital had been **put up by Tim O'Reilly**, who probably knows and understands more about the commercial realities of publishing in the 21st century than anyone alive. Throw in Pete Binfield, whose experience in editing mega-journals is literally second to none, and you have a true dream-team.

But what impresses me most is that PeerJ's low APC is not what most excites its founders -- in fact, it doesn't even make the top four. In **an interview published a few days ago**, Binfield and Hoyt answered the question "what do you think makes PeerJ an attractive publishing target for scholars?" in an unexpected way:

> First of all, we intend to make rapid first decisions, and publish articles as promptly and effectively as possible... Secondly, we will be integrating a pre-print server into our offering ... Thirdly, we believe that the act of submitting a paper should be as pain-free as possible ... Fourthly, we are encouraging reviewers to provide their names when reviewing, and we are encouraging authors to publicly reproduce their peer review history on the published paper ... Fifthly we are significantly cheaper than a 'typical' OA journal.

It's not enough for PeerJ to drop prices by an order of magnitude. They're also out to speed up the

famously slow publication process, make in-review manuscripts visible, smooth authors' path through the whole process and, most crucially, open up the opaque and mysterious process of peer-review. The importance of this last goal can hardly be overstated. At most journals, the acceptance or rejection of articles is done behind closed doors by referees whose reviews are never seen except by a select few, whose identities are often hidden, and who are insulated from the consequences -- positive or negative -- of their contribution. That has to change, and it's great that PeerJ is taking it on.

PeerJ **launched in June 2012** and **opened for submissions in December**. Today, **the first batch of articles** is published. I submitted a paper, co-written with Matt Wedel, on the day PeerJ opened, and I am pleased to say that **it made it** into the initial batch. We're delighted that our work is now available to the world; but also privileged to have had a preview of the PeerJ process.

Because if we thought that the low price meant corner-cutting, we were dead wrong. **As others have noted**, the submission process is a joy in comparison to hacking through the late-1990s-themed submission systems of most journals. Our paper was handled by an academic editor of the highest reputation, efficiently and fairly. It was reviewed swiftly by two referees, one of whom gave particularly detailed and helpful feedback. When we got the proof PDF we were taken aback by how good it looks compared with the printed-page facsimiles most journals produce. And when we sent the proof back with numerous changes, they got a second proof out to us within days. In fact, the whole process from submission through to publication has taken only ten weeks -- unheard of in academic publishing.

So where next for PeerJ, now that its up and running? It's perfectly obvious that it's a much better choice than traditional journals in every rational respect. But so much depends on that slipperiest of beasts, prestige. While young researchers are certain to flock to PeerJ, some more senior academics are likely to look down their nose at the new kid on the block, not quite trusting it and preferring to stick to the venues they've become used to.

If we're going to sort out the absurd mess that academic publishing has got itself into, much depends on the reputation of innovative open-access journals like PeerJ. PLOS ONE has won itself some standing, but it took several years to reach this point after a launch that was met with **a lot of skepticism**. Hopefully PLOS ONE's success will have opened up a trail for PeerJ to follow, and its intrinsic quality will be recognized more quickly. Certainly PeerJ has the necessary names behind it: not just Binfield and O'Reilly, but **an academic advisory board** with five Nobel laureates and **a huge editorial board** packed with respected researchers.

Harvard's memo about being unable to pay subscriptions included a list of nine things its staff, students and librarians could do to change the current publishing system. The second is key: "submit articles to open-access journals ... move prestige to open access". PeerJ, along with PLOS ONE and other new open-access initiatives such as **eLIFE** and **The Open Library of Humanities** offer top-quality options for publishing research. Now it's up to researchers to use them.

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1. 　Anonymous Coward, *Feb 12th, 2013 @ 2:09pm*　　　　insightful | funny | report

   nothing and no one is more important than money. with money comes fame and power. the more money, the more power. and the best of it is, so many people suffer as a result of this abuse but no one cares or bothers to get things changed because they themselves would lose money and therefore power. vicious circle

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2. 　Baldaur Regis (profile), *Feb 12th, 2013 @ 2:23pm*　　　　insightful | funny | report

   But so much depends on that slipperiest of beasts, prestige. While young researchers are certain to flock to PeerJ, some more senior academics are likely to look down their nose at the new kid on the block...

   You've answered your own concern - young researchers become senior researchers, senior researchers become indexed sources; the world moves on.

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3. 　jackn, *Feb 12th, 2013 @ 2:29pm*　　　　insightful | funny | report

Wait, you pay them to publish your work?

Dude, I could publish for you and I cheaper than either.

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4. **Mike Taylor** (profile), *Feb 12th, 2013 @ 2:42pm*   insightful | funny | report

Re: I could publish for your cheaper than either

I very much doubt that you could. This was a substantial and very technical paper, which comes out at 41 pages in the PDF version, which went through peer-review by two scientists and expert editorial handling before going to typesetters -- a misnomer since their job is actually to mark the manuscript up semantically so it can be expressed in NLM-format XML -- after which there were two rounds of proofing. It's quite an undertaking, and requires specialist skills.

And remember, to undercut PeerJ's $99, you'd need to do one of these for me every year until I die, for no further payment.

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5. **Jay** (profile), *Feb 12th, 2013 @ 2:50pm*   insightful | funny | report

Re: Re: I could publish for your cheaper than either

Forgive me, but what's the incentive for long term storage and publication here?

I'm not sure if there are acceptable terms for the public to discuss and share articles over the needs of the academics.

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6. **Pete Binfield**, *Feb 12th, 2013 @ 2:55pm*   insightful | funny | report

Re: Re: Re: I could publish for your cheaper than either

@Mike - correct, there are a LOT of intricacies in publishing this content to the right standards. None of it is cheap or easy, and all of it is expected by academia who want their work appropriately vetted, archived, presented, published etc

@Jay - we long term archive with a variety of industry standard solutions. See:
http://blog.peerj.com/post/40018981867/archiving-and-peerj

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7. **Anonymous Coward**, *Feb 12th, 2013 @ 2:58pm*   insightful | funny | report

Re:

But would you get an apporpriate review process rolling? Would you get the setup correct (Believe me. Science is full of professors having a 5 page definition of how the things they recieve have to be setup before they bother to read it!)

Publishing seems easy, but in reality it is not as easy as it sounds. 99 $ for a single article is a bargain and will likely make research grants a lot more effective (you pay for publishing through the grant-money, thus it is part of the "administration" budget).

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8. **Anonymous Coward**, *Feb 12th, 2013 @ 3:00pm*   insightful | funny | report

it doesn't solve the problem

While this is a step in the right direction, it doesn't solve the fundamental problem. The problem is that the journal article itself is an outdated and antiquated unit of progress. In what should be a nuturing, collaborative environment, the journal article promotes secrecy and zero-sum competition. It leads to the over-metricisation of papers (hence worry about prestige, which comes from a journal's name)

What we need is a system that allows for scientific contribution in small, chunks as people come up with them, rather than taking years to write a paper, dot i's, cross t's etc. Only to find that someone submitted a paper 2 days before you. And peer review is a little outdated, given that all papers effectively get reviewed again and again through the citation process (a joke in itself, but one for another day)

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9. **Mike Taylor** (profile), *Feb 12th, 2013 @ 3:06pm*   insightful | funny | report

Re: it doesn't solve the problem

I agree that all these things are important. But what I also see is that PeerJ facilitates them all! For example, it works against the secrecy that you mention by publishing the full submission, review and revision history of articles -- here is mine. The rapid turnaround (ten weeks in this case for a pretty monstrous paper) means that quick communications are possible. And the pay-once-publish-all-you-want buffet means that once I've upgraded to the $299 plan, there will be nothing stopping me from submitting all the micro-papers I want.

So I would say the PeerJ is about half a dozen steps in the right direction.

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10.   **Pete Binfield**, *Feb 12th, 2013 @ 3:08pm*   insightful | funny | report

Re: it doesn't solve the problem

We have that too! PeerJ PrePrints (which launches in a few weeks) does exactly what you ask for. Then, when you have enough to make into a 'version of record' article, you can swap over to the PeerJ journal.

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11.   **Anonymous Coward**, *Feb 12th, 2013 @ 3:16pm*   insightful | funny | report

Re: Re: I could publish for your cheaper than either

I am very certain that PeerJ looked hard at how things are published.

# of researchers per year + average of research published by one person in a lifetime and other considerations.

Is rare to see the same guy publishing papers for more than ten years and most of the papers appears to be from new people, and most of the new people will drop out early on in the game.

This is why I don't think it is so absurd, but did they take the fourth dimension into account. I mean did they look at how it low it was before today to see how the ups and downs unfold in the publishing circle of papers? That is the only thing I can think of that could come back to bite them if it was overlooked.

Aside from that it seems possible, since most of the money will come from the new people that engage in research every year, that is a considerable amount of money even at $99 and if all the lifers don't try to publish at once this could be profitable too.

I mean they appear to be doing what insurance companies, ISP and even airlines have been doing for a long time and that is selling over capacity knowing that it will not be used, if it is they face logistical problems.

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12.   **alan woodward**, *Feb 12th, 2013 @ 3:17pm*   insightful | funny | report

DOAJ - Directory of Open Access Journals

http://www.doaj.org/

The aim of the Directory of Open Access Journals is to increase the visibility and ease of use of open access scientific and scholarly journals

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13.   **dzrlib** (profile), *Feb 12th, 2013 @ 4:16pm*   insightful | funny | report

Open Access euphoria

One wonders how long the current speed of review/publication can continue? I found it disappointing that no distinction was made between commercial publishers (Wiley, Elsevier, etc.) and responsible society publishers (APS, ACS, RSC, etc.)

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14.   **Mike Taylor** (profile), *Feb 12th, 2013 @ 4:51pm*   insightful | funny | report

Re: Open Access euphoria

There are responsible scientific societies, yes. But the ACS certainly is not one of them, as this librarian explains.

I don't feel an exploitative publishing operation should get an easy ride just for being owned by a scholarly society rather than a commercial concern. The bottom line for me is that if a publisher actually publishes -- that is, makes public -- then it's a Good Guy, whether it's for-profit like BMC, non-profit like PLOS, or an enlightened society. But if it puts research behind paywalls, then I am just not interested in hearing any excuses. That is *wrong*, whatever use the profits are put to.

[**reply to this** | **link to this** | **view in thread**]

15.   **dzrlib** (profile), *Feb 12th, 2013 @ 5:10pm*   insightful | funny | report

There is much more to the 'Potsdam' story than presented by 'Walking away'. Society publishers, while they produce a small profit for societal activities, are not the problem.
Commercial publishers who raise prices year over year, while publishing fewer and fewer articles are the real problem.

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16.   **aidian**, *Feb 12th, 2013 @ 8:50pm*   insightful | funny | report

Think you got your ages mixed up....

While young researchers are certain to flock to PeerJ, some more senior academics are likely to look down their nose

at the new kid on the block, not quite trusting it and preferring to stick to the venues they've become used to.

I dunno... it's been my (very limited) experience that senior academics are more willing to embrace these new operations because they've got the freedom (read: tenure) to consider the larger problem, while the young guys are worried more about building their own rep (read: winning tenure) so want the perceived prestige of the old-school nameplate.

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17.   **Anonymous Coward**, *Feb 12th, 2013 @ 11:08pm*   insightful | funny | report

Re: Re: Open Access euphoria

As long as it is a win, few people will be opposed to it, whatever it is.

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18.   **Anonymous Coward**, *Feb 12th, 2013 @ 11:08pm*   insightful | funny | report

Re: Re: Open Access euphoria

oops! As long as it is a win-win.

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19.   **Mike Taylor** (profile), *Feb 13th, 2013 @ 3:38am*   insightful | funny | report

Re: Think you got your ages mixed up....

Actually, my experience has generally been that very young researchers (Masters and Ph.D students and new postdocs) *and* very established researchers are quite keen on shifting the world to open-access. It's those in between -- several postdocs in, tenure-track and recently tenured -- who tend to cling to the old and familiar.

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20.   **Anonymous Coward**, *Feb 13th, 2013 @ 4:17am*   insightful | funny | report

Re: Re: Think you got your ages mixed up....

I don't think it is a case of cling to the old and familiar. If I got the chance, I would publish in peer-reviewed press-release journals I generally detest, like Science and Nature purely because doing so boosts my chances of getting grants, and hence getting a promotion, and hence supporting my kids.

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21.   **Anonymous Coward**, *Feb 13th, 2013 @ 8:45am*   insightful | funny | report

Re: Re: it doesn't solve the problem

Can i suggest this is perpetuating the Journal model, with a reduction in cost to the Academics. A more distributed approach, with academic institutes providing the necessary storage and servers would eliminate the external third party control. Currently in most fields, the academics are providing all the services apart from server and storage management. Bring that in house and it eliminates the potential for a third party to hold academia to ransom to maintain access to papers.
While a publisher was required to deal with th logistics of printing and distribution for paper based journals, this logistic need can be eliminated in a peer to peer networks. Further this could eliminate the concept of journals, for topic orientated notification of approval of a paper by experts.

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22.   **Ninja** (profile), *Feb 13th, 2013 @ 8:55am*   insightful | funny | report

Crowdsourcing the review process sounds like an amazing idea after all the original author will always go through the review suggestions before publishing it. There could be some sort of academics "ebay" where you post your article for review and/or proper editing with a price tag and interested parties can grab the offer..

In any case I hope this type of cheap, open access initiative become the norm.

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23.   **Pete Binfield**, *Feb 13th, 2013 @ 9:17am*   insightful | funny | report

Re: Think you got your ages mixed up....

This is a very insightful point - that is exactly what PLOS ONE saw.

The whole system is warped by younger researchers worrying about getting published in a 'top' venue to get tenure. We need to fix that...

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24.   **snow man**, *Feb 13th, 2013 @ 9:29am*   insightful | funny | report

Re: Re: it doesn't solve the problem

1. It's great that you're hear to answer that question, Mr. Binfield.

2. How can us lay folk read these papers? I want to know why a giraffe's neck is as long as it is (and not that long, dinosaurly speaking).

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25.   Pete Binfield, *Feb 13th, 2013 @ 9:46am*   insightful   funny   report

Re: Re: Re: it doesn't solve the problem

Well - anyone can read and resuse the articles for free (https://peerj.com/articles/36/). The problem, of course, is that they are still written in technical language.

However, because anyone can re-use them, there is the opportunity for people (3rd parties) to take these articles and write more digestible summaries of them. We encourage people to do this.

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26.   Mike Taylor (profile), *Feb 13th, 2013 @ 9:53am*   insightful   funny   report

Re: Re: Re: it doesn't solve the problem

The paper is right there on the web-site, peerj.com, prominently linked from the front page. Enjoy it -- we enjoyed writing it!

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27.   commenter8 (profile), *Feb 13th, 2013 @ 3:29pm*   insightful   funny   report

Well conceived & executed :-)

Not many papers yet, but with a larger population of papers and a site search capability - this really has very strong potential. Congratulations to Pete Binfield for a much-needed job very well done! :-)

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