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Tear it down, build it up: the Research Output Team, or the library-as-publisher

Updated from a paper presented at the 35th UKSG Conference, Glasgow, March 2012

Academic publishing is in an unstable period of transition. There is a growing degree of anger, especially from early-career academics in a time of austerity, at perceived publisher extortion. The current models of open access do not address all these problems, especially with regard to library budgets. While some of this anger is misplaced, publishers must either self-discipline their practices or find themselves displaced by alternate models. Libraries, likewise, face a dangerous time in which the threat of third-party tender for their services brings extinction ever closer. This article begins to outline a system dubbed the 'Research Output Team' (ROT) that moves publishing in-house to institutional libraries, thereby safeguarding publishing jobs and expertise while defeating the problematic aspects of the existing set-up.

Background

The academic publishing landscape is rife with a form of conservative group-think that will, if allowed unchecked, create large financial and social problems in the foreseeable future. I do not, here, refer to the ability of the sector to innovate; clearly, new technologies, learning practices, modes of operation and business models have been, and will continue to be, suggested by forward-thinking individuals in the field. Instead, the danger lies in the growing animosity towards commercial academic publishers by early-career researchers and in the irrevocable damage that a mass exodus to amateur, in-house open access publishing will cause: firstly, to jobs in the publishing sector; secondly, to the hierarchical, publication-based hiring process in academia; thirdly, to a generation of those same early-career researchers; and finally, to the standards of published material.

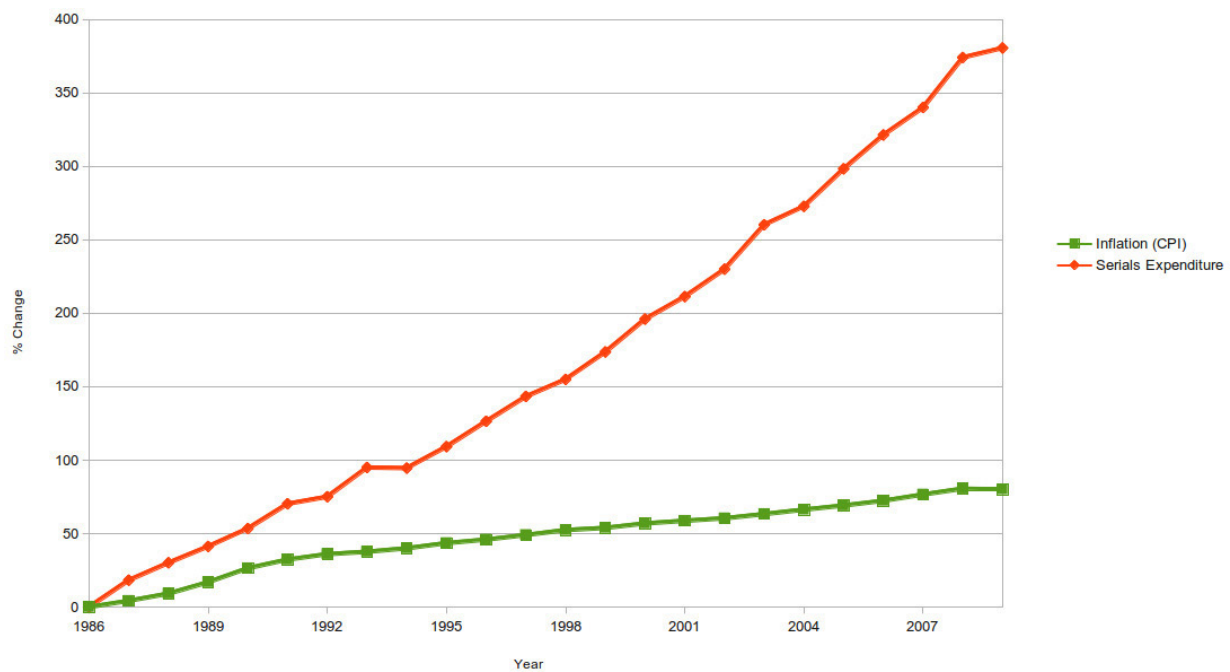
These are strong claims that require strong evidence, but it is not difficult to follow the argument. Early-careerists are angry as a result of a logic that is now so prominent that it is printed in *The Guardian* newspaper.¹ Taxpayers, in the UK at least, pay for academics to do their research. Once this has been done, the research is signed over to for-profit companies who then charge academic institutions again for access to that material. This cyclical logic is especially painful to the academy at a time of austerity and job losses because, as would be expected, a large brunt of the austerity is borne by early-career researchers; 2014 brings a 25% reduction in doctoral funding from the Arts & Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and a total cut in Masters-level funding. In fact, one only has to look at the scale of expenditure by publishers to appreciate the problem: if sponsors can get together around £30,000 for their own events, they should appreciate that, in the academy, we often struggle to get £100 for an event and must pay to attend even when speaking. This line of argument, then, can be summed up concisely in three points, supplemented by a well-known graph of inflation against university expenditure on serials (Figure 1):

- academic publisher profits seem extortionate
- the value added by academic publishers is not perspicuous
- we are not 'all in it together'.



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" ... danger lies in the growing animosity towards commercial academic publishers by early-career researchers ... "



Sources: ARL Statistics 2008–2009, Association of Research Libraries, Washington, DC. Jim O'Donoghue, Louise Goulding, and Grahame Allen, "Consumer Price Inflation Since 1750", *Economic Trends*, 604, pp. 38–64, Office for National Statistics, RPI figures. <<http://www.ons.gov.uk>>

Figure 1. UK CPI index plotted against serials expenditure % change since 1986

Many will feel that this critique is unfair, for this utopian vision fails to account for the differing spheres, or domains, in which academic publishing operates. Exterior to the researcher, the purpose of publication is to share ideas, to disseminate information that will better humankind. For the researcher, though, it is a truth universally acknowledged that publication is a means to appease the metrics of hiring, firing and funding committees such as the UK Research Excellence Framework (REF). Indeed, as McGuigan and Russell put it, the motives for publication are split twofold across 'the norms of the profession' that 'encourage faculty members to participate in the generation and dissemination of new knowledge based on research' and 'the academic process of promotion and tenure and the role of credentialism in determining faculty advancement'.² From these two spheres, one of the fundamental disconnects between researchers and publisher PR-speak can be deduced in the notion of the 'best' publication outlet. Publishers declare that their mission is to achieve maximal dissemination, while researchers place more value on how well the journal will fare in credentialist research assessment exercises to which they are enslaved. Concurrently, though, many early-career researchers, who have not yet been served well by this credentialist system, envisage a system that would eradicate the for-profit, external publisher.

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If the self-damage that results from publishers accruing a negative reputation in the eyes of researchers is clear, there is a second site of autosubversion that must be considered. While publishers are dependent upon libraries as their customers, they simultaneously stretch the resources of these institutions to their breaking point. This is a dangerous, short-term strategy. Although not a neutral observer, the University and College Union (UCU) accurately summed this up as far back as 2010: 'A recent survey of university leaders revealed that nine out of ten expect an institution to close due to financial pressures and last year the business secretary, Vince Cable, correctly warned that many universities are essentially bankrupt'.³ Publishers must realize that, if institutions go under, this will not mean, in the UK at least, increased funding for those that remain. Instead, they will have a narrowed customer base, increasing competition in an already tight field, with fewer resources to spare.

Libraries are also at risk from practices that can work against their own interests. In pushing for open access solutions without first fully formulating the role that the library plays in a collection-less world, two dangers are exposed. Firstly, the library is, intra-institutionally, removed from the equation as a financial power-source. As we all know, money is power and, with a total loss of purchasing budget, the library no longer wields any value as a decentralizing structure. Secondly, the library becomes vulnerable to third-party competition. It will not be long before key aspects of UK university infrastructure are offered to outside tender. If librarians believe that there is merit, as I do, in remaining an in-house structure, then they must be able to make the arguments for this before the market intervenes.

To complete the self-destructive triad, angry early-career researchers who believe in the wholesale ditching of the current system tread the road less safe. It is possible that, in creating a new system from scratch, they will build the Eden from which publishers are expelled, but the cataclysmic destruction of this Creation, this Big Bang, will also prove problematic for their own career goals. Furthermore, although they may be successful in the long term, it will no doubt be a painful learning experience. The expertise that the commercial academic publishing industry has built up is, unsurprisingly, kept insular; a trade secret. This new publishing regime would have to learn these techniques from scratch and would not benefit from the wealth of experience of best practice on which traditional publishers are the authority. In short: a generation of scholarly material would be disseminated, but in the form of a regression from the advanced systems and practices that currently form the field.

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The concept of the Research Output Team

The solution that I propose to this growing crisis for all three stakeholders in the world of scholarly publishing lies in the concept of the Research Output Team (ROT), a fusion of the library and the publisher.⁴ In many ways this is a return to the idea of the university press; an in-house facility for publishing work. However, in the new open access environment, the overheads of printing and warehousing can be avoided, making the enterprise financially sound. This mode averts the financial problems in a way that the current pay-to-publish model cannot. Allow me to paint an initial picture of how this would work, including its fiscal viability and transition strategy. It must be stressed that this is not a complete model. It is a regulative concept designed to show an emergent feasibility that will either be developed, or be rendered unnecessary through auto-disciplinary publisher practices. Of course, the resultant outcome is a choice, or a gamble, for the industry itself to make.

The ‘ROT’, as I conceive it, is an in-house facility combining the library’s technical infrastructure and publisher expertise. In this system, staff liaise with researchers to ascertain the ideal means, unit size and format for dissemination of research work. The concept of the ‘journal’ is gone. Instead, outputs are affiliated to institution, thereby promoting the university brand rather than the journal, thus avoiding the grim relocation-hiring and publication-poaching that happens each RAE/REF cycle. This also encourages a less disciplinary-driven mode of production as works are not affiliated to serials with pre-set agendas, but are rather more free-floating, perhaps pre- and post- publication tagged, so that researchers decide the terminology that classifies their work. For scholars unaffiliated with an institution, a decoupled central Research Library Output Team could be the solution.

“The concept of the ‘journal’ is gone. Instead, outputs are affiliated to institution, thereby promoting the university brand rather than the journal ...”

When the research is done and a format has been decided for a piece of work, these teams would then organize pre-review by co-ordinating with the ROT at other institutions. This process would, initially, be blind, but the reviewers names could be revealed, if desired, post-publication. In this way, the current system of pre-filtering is maintained while also opening up scope for post-review. There are also advantages, in such a centralized set-up,

161 for discovery and archiving. With a set number of known, validated output destinations, cataloguing becomes far less onerous.

So far, so utopian; how could this work financially, though? The SCONUL annual library statistics for 2009–2010 indicate an expenditure of over £155,000,000 on serials subscriptions alone. To put these UK-only statistics in perspective, this is the equivalent of the salaries of 4,428 lecturers. Hypothetically assuming that this money could be spent on library staffing costs for this new publishing enterprise, and that these members of staff with publishing expertise would and should be paid the same as a university lecturer, this is a substantial workforce that would be entirely adequate, indeed superfluous to requirements, for handling the outputs of UK academic research institutions.

Of course, this model cannot be implemented overnight because serials subscriptions will not vanish. Indeed, there will be opposition to these changes from those who lose out: shareholders in for-profit publishing. It could be, though, that their days are numbered anyway given the set of co-incident conditions outlined at the start of this piece. For those who wish to begin this, though, transitional measures must begin to be implemented. Libraries must begin to form inter-institutional consortia and begin prototyping both the technical and social process involved. This must commence on a small scale, with staff allocation kept reasonable, before a fully-formed system can be proposed to the Research Councils UK (RCUK); the eventual goal being, of course, to achieve a mandate. As subscription costs gradually decline, and the ROT reaches its tipping point, the staff expenditure can find its true level. Potentially valuable partners for this would be the Public Knowledge Project, who produce Open Journal Systems, national libraries and the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). Libraries will also need to hire expertise in promotion, an aspect currently missing from the equation. Much as it would be nice to think that good research emerges triumphant of its own accord, the reality is that a certain degree of marketing remains crucial.

This transition need not be necessarily international. The UK is a significant contributor to the global knowledge ecosystem⁵ and, were publication mandated in this form, its currency would quickly be established at the global scale for both intra- and extra-academy purposes. In fact, sending such a clear worldwide signal of transparency and openness would be extremely forward-thinking in countering the unethical suggestions that open access research should be made open only on a national scale.⁶

“Much as it would be nice to think that good research emerges triumphant of its own accord, the reality is that a certain degree of marketing remains crucial.”

Conclusion

This system would plug the problematic institutional funding situation for serials expenditure and pre-empt the burst of the academic publishing bubble. It would ensure that publishing expertise remains at the heart of the system, while cutting the rot of extortionate profit in favour of the ROT within the institutions themselves. It would cut the gap between researchers and publishers and provide scope for direct communication of researchers' communication needs, in lieu of hollow PR statements issued from on-high. It would cement the future role of the library as a bi-directional service provider that can easily demonstrate its institutional value. In short: although there are many details to be filled in here, I believe that this system would allow us all to achieve the result we need and avert the disaster that seems to be brewing. A strong system for scholarly communications, a strong intra-institutional library structure and a strong foundation for the continued employment of publishing professionals. As we come to this fork, libraries, publishers and researchers/scholars must together decide on the way forward. In line with a well-known thinker, who will remain nameless but quoted, I have outlined a sketch of a system in the hope that it spurs the choice of path. 'The philosophers have only interpreted the world [...]; the point is to change it'.

References and notes

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6. Unethical because, particularly in the case of medical research, it is co-operation that benefits humankind, not competition.

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