



08 March 2012

Open, moral and pragmatic

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In response to Timothy Gowers ("[Occupy publishing](#)", 16 February) (<http://thecostofknowledge.com>), Elsevier's David Clark argues that "there is little merit in throwing away a system that works" ("If it ain't broke, don't bin it", Letters, 1 March). But the current system does not work.

According to Elsevier's [annual report for 2010](#), it publishes about "200,000 new science & technology research articles each year". The same report reveals revenues for 2010 of £2.026 billion. This works out as £10,130 per article, each made available only to the tiny proportion of the world's population that has access to a subscribing library.

By contrast, PLoS ONE (the world's largest academic journal) makes all its articles freely available as open access, covering its costs by charging authors for publication. The current publication fee is \$1,350 per article - about £850.

(No-questions-asked fee waivers are given to authors without funds, so the average fee is somewhat lower, but we will use the £850 figure for simplicity's sake.)

Each article that Elsevier publishes behind a paywall therefore costs the academic world about 12 times as much as the same article would cost if published freely to the world by a representative open-access publisher. (In fact, [a study](#) of 100,697 open-access articles published in 1,370 journals in 2010 found the average publication fee to be only \$906 - about £570 - but I used the higher PLoS ONE fee in these calculations because it is a well-known and respected journal with a successful economic model that is known to run at a modest operating profit.)

Suppose that all Elsevier's revenue could be redirected to paying publication fees for open-access journals. If this were done, £2.026 billion would fund 2.38 million articles per year - going on for double the 1.35 million articles estimated as the world's [total annual scholarly output in 2006](#). In short, the revenue of Elsevier alone would comfortably pay for *all* the world's research to be published openly. Leaving aside the moral argument for open access - that it is wrong to allow corporations to benefit by withholding access to research that would otherwise save lives - the pragmatic economic case for the approach is unanswerable. At times of diminished funding, a shift to the open-access model is more urgent than ever. We simply cannot afford to keep giving public money to profit-oriented publishers.

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Readers' comments

- **Mike Taylor** 8 March, 2012

I am the author of this letter. Understandable space constraints meant that I couldn't say all I would have wished, but I want to add one more point in this comment.

Elsevier's annual reports show that they consistently make profits in the range of 30-35% of revenue. The upshot is that the profits that they take out of academia, taken alone, would suffice to fund open publication of 788,000 articles per year in a respected and established venue. So well over half of all scholarly output. Just from *profits*.

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