

Sustaining Scholarship: The Case for Open Access Academic Literature

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1. Context

Everyone says that the ownership and control of information is one of the most important forms of power in contemporary society. ... Yet, right now, we have no politics of intellectual property in the way that we have a politics of the environment...

James Boyle, professor of law, Duke University



2. Sustainability in the information society

A society in which the intellectual property regime transforms knowledge into a scarce resource is not a sustainable society. ... A knowledge society is sustainable when access to knowledge and information provides all peoples of the world with the opportunity for self-determined development...

Charter of Civil Rights for a Sustainable Knowledge Society

3. Academic journal literature

Academic journal literature consists primarily of articles written by scholars to disseminate their research findings.

Authors are not remunerated for their publications. Rather, they publish to improve their academic standing, as publications are a key factor in faculty hiring, tenure decisions, etc. Instead, writing expenses are covered by research grants and faculty salaries.

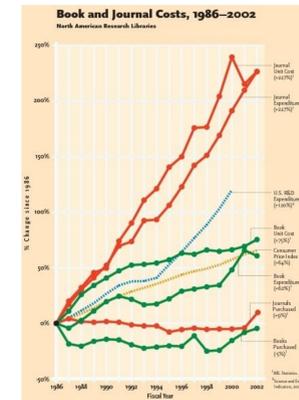
Once published, this literature is traditionally distributed on a subscription basis, and only paid subscribers have access.

4. Subscription model is unsustainable

Economic sustainability: Publishers have unreasonable pricing power due to monopoly (copyright), low substitutability (one article is not the same as another), and the “collector” nature of the good (consumers want access to all the literature in their field, and will keep buying basically until they run out of money).

The economics of [subscription-based] scholarly journal publishing are *incontrovertibly unsustainable*

University of California Academic Senate Chair and University Librarians of UC campuses (emphasis added)



Social sustainability: By excluding potential users, the subscription model suffers a tragedy of the anticommons, the under-utilization of the resource. Limited access to the literature retards the progress of science (e.g. missed connections, duplication of effort) and impoverishes education. Exclusive access also reinforces socioeconomic inequalities, to the detriment of researchers at less-wealthy institutions, and limits access to the general public.

5. Open access: management as a commons

Alternatively, the literature could be managed as a commons, by providing free online access to the articles. Whereas in toll access treats the resource as a club good (non-rivalrous but excludable), with open access the resource is a public good (non-rivalrous and non-excludable).

Commons problems are unlikely due to the good's characteristics. Internet distribution has near-zero marginal cost, so the resource is non-exhaustible, and congestion is unlikely. Production does not depend on remuneration, so there will not be a free rider problem.

6. Reinventing the journal system

Quality control is the most important function of the journal system (e.g. peer review). Unlike articles, quality control services are provided for payment. However, quality control can be separated from distribution: managing distribution as a commons does not require managing quality control similarly.

Indeed, nearly half of open access journals charge author-side processing fees. This arrangement is more economically sustainable than reader-side fees because pricing power is less imbalanced: to the author, journals are more substitutable and are not a collector good. Concerns for social sustainability (i.e. that less-wealthy authors will be disadvantaged in publishing) can be assuaged by offering discounts or fee waivers, the current practice of reputable fee-based open access publishers.

However, open access to quality control may not actually result in under-production. Because the core group of consumers (academia) is small, there are good conditions for collective action. In addition, the consumers of a journal may be a privileged group, wherein one consumer is willing to pay the full cost of production even if no others contribute, such as a journal subsidized by a university or scholarly society.

7. Praxis

Academics don't have to wait for the journal system to change. Authors can provide open access to their own work by posting their peer-reviewed manuscripts online (self-archiving).

Academics and universities should consider it part of their mission to provide the widest possible dissemination of their research, and should work for immediate and long-term solutions.

8. References

Available at www.gavinbaker.com/presentations