

OPEN ACCESS TOPICS, SCHOLARLY PUBLISHING

Who pays, and what are we paying for?

🕒 JUNE 4, 2015 📍 PAOLO MANGIAFICO

[*guest post by Paolo Mangiafico*]

I wasn't at the [Society for Scholarly Publishing's annual meeting in Virginia last week](#), but was able to follow some of the presentations and discussions via the #SSP2015 hashtag on Twitter and some followup blog posts. Something that caught my eye yesterday was a post on Medium by @CollabraOA titled "[What exactly am I paying for?](#)" that summarized a panel discussion at SSP on the topic of "[How Much Does it Cost? versus What are you Getting for/doing with the Money? An Overview and Discussion of the Open Access Journal Business Model, \(lack of\) Transparency, and What is Important for the Various Stakeholders.](#)"

The [post](#) has summaries (and links to slides) of the presentations by panelists Dan Morgan (University of California Press), Rebecca Kennison (K|N Consultants), Peter Binfield (PeerJ), and Robert Kiley (The Wellcome Trust), as well as links to other readings on the topic, such as [this article](#) from a couple of years ago titled "Open access: The true cost of science publishing" by Richard Van Noorden in *Nature*.

A few things from the summary of the panel discussion that stood out to me (excerpted or paraphrased here):

- From Robert Kiley's discussion of the Wellcome Trust's experience with paying article processing charges (APCs) on behalf of their funded authors: *the average APC levied by hybrid journals (which publish both subscription and OA [open access] articles) is 64% higher than the average APC charged by wholly OA, or "born OA", journals. Despite these higher prices, some of the problems the Trust have encountered, such as articles not being deposited to Europe PubMed Central, incorrect or contradictory licenses appearing on articles, and confusion as to whether the APC has been paid, were almost exclusively related to articles in hybrid journals. Robert asked: "Are we getting what we pay for?"*
- From Rebecca Kennison's discussion on transparency of publishing costs, and how the initial APC for PLOS Biology was set when it was launched: *it was based on the average price paid by authors publishing in that era's top science journals, for page and color charges, etc. The thinking was that if biology authors are used to paying around \$3000 USD to get published in a subscription journal, they will be able to transfer this to pay the APC for PLOS Biology instead. She noted how much of a role this \$3000 price point has played in OA price-setting since the early 2000s. This is fascinating when you consider that it was a "What the Market Will Bear" price point, and not based on publishing costs. / The desire for transparency is not so much to make publishers reveal all costs, or push publishers to offer services "at cost", but to ensure that librarians and funders, or anyone paying an OA charge, are simply more aware, and sure, of what they are paying for, and whether it is the best use of funds. It is not a matter of caveat emptor, but emptor informari.*
- From Pete Binfield's discussion of the relationship between cost and prestige: *despite the fact that "born OA" publishers can be much more efficient, authors still seem to be willing to pay for things like "prestige" and "the best venue for discoverability," where more traditional publishers are still perceived to have an advantage because of established "brands."*

This discussion resonated with a different one that has been playing out among anthropologists in the past few weeks, regarding whether and when to transition the long established journals of the American Anthropological Association (AAA) to open access, a process that has already begun with the high profile [Cultural Anthropology journal](#).

In an [editorial in the February 2015 issue of American Anthropologist](#), the editor, Michael Chibnik, argued that while he "cannot disagree with the rhetoric of those advocating open access for *American Anthropologist*" he also could not see how to make the finances work without continuing to rely on the existing subscription model via a publisher like Wiley Blackwell. While admitting "I do not know all the details of the financial arrangements between AAA and WB" (see discussion about the lack of transparency explored in the panel mentioned above) he briefly outlines why several alternative funding models he has heard about are unlikely to work, concluding "The obstacles to *AA* becoming open access in the near future may be difficult to overcome."

This elicited several responses, [from Martin Eve, who challenged many of the assertions in the piece, one by one](#); from the Board of the Society for Cultural Anthropology, who argued in a commentary titled "Open Access: A Collective Ecology for AAA Publishing in the Digital Age" that open access was the right thing to do despite the difficulties; and from Alex Golub, who wrote a blog post titled "Open access: What Cultural Anthropology gets right, and American Anthropologist gets wrong."

The Society for Cultural Anthropology commentary points out that research libraries are key stakeholders in the emerging OA landscape, and potential partners with scholarly societies for new models of scholarly publishing. Both SCA and Golub reference some new projects like [Collabra](#), [Open Library of the Humanities](#), [Knowledge Unlatched](#), and [SciELO](#), that, in Golub's words, "blur the distinction between journal, platform, and community the same way Duke Ellington blurred the boundary between composer, performer, and conductor" and are examples of "experiments to move beyond cold war publishing institutions."

It's not clear yet what financial models will ultimately prove successful and sustainable for scholarly publishing and scholarly societies going forward, but simply maintaining the status quo with its hidden and inflated costs and frequently vestigial practices is almost certainly not the answer. As Alex Golub concludes in [his post](#):

The AAA wasn't always structured the way it is today, and it may not be structured this way in the future. The question now is whether the AAA can change quickly enough to be relevant, or whether institutions like the SCA are the true future of our discipline. These are issues tied up with a lot more than just publishing: The shrinking of academe, the growing role of nonacademic stakeholders in academic practices, and much besides. Does Cultural Anthropology face a lot of issues down the road? Absolutely. Is complete and total failure on the menu? Yes. But I reckon that in ten years when I sit down to reblog this post, we will look back on this debate and say: The people who did the right thing and took a leap of faith fared far better than the ones who clung to a broken solution. Cultural Anthropology acted like Netflix, while American Anthropologist acted like Blockbuster. Except, of course, no one will remember what Blockbuster was.

PREVIOUS POST

[A distinction without a difference](#)

NEXT POST

[This is a solution?](#)

SEARCH THE SCHOLARLY COMMUNICATIONS BLOG

RECENT COMMENTS

[Older] Who owns the law?
<https://blogs.library.duke.edu/scholcomm/>
| Dr. Roy Schestowitz (罗伊) on Who owns the law?

Copyright News and Articles -
Copyrightlaws.com: Copyright courses and education in plain English on Who owns the law?

Jeff Kosokoff on Enough is Enough: UC Leadership and the Transformation of Scholarly Publishing

Robert Healy on Enough is Enough: UC Leadership and the Transformation of Scholarly Publishing

Supporting the Transition: Revisiting organic food and scholarly communication – IO: In The Open on Enough is Enough: UC Leadership and the Transformation of Scholarly Publishing

CATEGORIES

Authors' Rights
Copyright in the Classroom
Copyright Information Notes
Copyright Issues and Legislation
Data
Digital Rights Management
Fair Use
international IP
Libraries
Licensing
Open Access and Institutional Repositories
Open Access topics
Orphan works
Public Domain
Scholarly Communication Institute
Scholarly Publishing
Technologies
Traditional Knowledge
Uncategorized
User Generated Content

ARCHIVES

POLICY ON ELECTRONIC COURSE CONTENT

For help deciding whether course content in Blackboard or some other digital form is fair use or requires copyright permission, consult this [policy document](#) adopted by the Academic Council in February 2008.

LINKS

ScholarWorks @ Duke
Duke Learning Innovation
Duke University Libraries
Scholarly Communications Office