



## Editorial: Open Access Economics

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Like most humanists I spend my free time browsing the pages of economic journals, and it was with particular interest that I read a recent issue of *Economic Analysis & Policy* which featured articles focusing on the economics of open access (OA) publishing. JMMS is happy to have been publishing on an OA basis for three years now, so I am always on the lookout for further developments. I firmly believe in the ideal of OA: of making scholarly communication as widely accessible as possible and bypassing the rapacious profiteering of some of the large commercial journal publishers. That said, I have an unusual insight into this debate because while I am an advocate for OA (as JMMS attests), I also spend a good deal of my working week managing other academic journals which operate on a subscriber or toll access (TA) model. As a result, I've come to see the weaknesses that sometimes occur in the OA position. Reading the recent issue of *Economic Analysis & Policy* highlighted some of these weaknesses.

John P. Conley and Myrna Wooders' (2009) article, *But what have you done for me lately? Commercial Publishing, Scholarly Communication, and Open-Access* is a classic example of the ideal of OA being somewhat at odds with the reality of journal publishing. The article describes the authors' experiences establishing *Journal of Public Economic Theory* with a commercial publisher and, later, *Economics Bulletin* on an OA basis, from which they conclude that commercial publishers provide little of value and that OA is the obvious choice: "we have come to the view that commercial publishers as they currently operate, whether papyrocentric or electronic, do more to hinder than facilitate the process of scholarly communication" (p. 74). I agree with some of their arguments about predatory pricing, but they, along with a number of OA advocates, underplay the key value of the publishing process: editorial.

Conley and Wooders suggest that the publishers' value-add of typesetting is essentially redundant, that "almost all economists are able to produce their own very high quality manuscripts" and that "there may be a minor advantage in having all papers formatted similarly but this is largely an aesthetic one" (p. 74). Coupling editing with typesetting as another publishers' service that can be bypassed, they note "moreover, there are on-line professional editing services" (p. 74) if, presumably, needs be. Maybe economists are special cases, but hardly ever does a paper cross my desk that is publishable without a thorough copyedit of the text and/or referencing. I am left assuming one of two possibilities from their statement: either I am very unlucky with the manuscripts that are submitted to me or, more likely, we are reading of a lack of understanding and devaluing of the editorial process. I believe most academics would soon get tired of reading journal articles

with a hodge-podge of typographical errors, inconsistent formatting and incomplete citation and referencing. Some academics are capable of good copyediting (of their own and others' work), but most are not. It is one of the key problems with OA journals (specifically those which run on no/low revenue business models): being able to publish your own material is one thing, but the editorial standard of that material is quite another. An OA journal is going to struggle with editorial standards unless it has a budget to pay for a copyeditor, or is lucky enough to have an academic onboard who has both editorial skills and the willingness to volunteer them. And here is the second significant problem with OA journals: the economics of volunteering.

Conley and Wooders state, "the basic idea is that it is somehow very expensive to publish a journal. We argue this is a misconception" (p. 82). Certainly it is true that it is not as expensive to publish a journal as some of the commercial journal pricing strategies suggest. However, the volunteer labor on which many OA journals (such as JMMS) are based hides the true cost of doing business. One would expect an economist to make more of this analysis, but the fact that \$0 is spent on editing an OA journal does not result in zero cost. Costs come in many shapes and forms: that hour of volunteer copyediting from our editorially skilled and willing academic comes at the cost of their employer, or family, or an hour of leisure activity. Those hours and in-kind costs soon build up, and if you were to map them over to a copyeditor who has bills and a mortgage to pay (think \$50 per hour for every 1000 words), and then the typesetter, the editorial management, the technical upkeep... Soon the actual dollar costs of publishing a journal are quite sizable. Also, running an OA journal largely with volunteer labor leaves a journal's future rather uncertain. This point is made well in the same issue of *Economic Analysis & Policy* by Cavaleri, Keren, Ramello and Valli (2009) who write of their experience running a journal on a shoestring budget. Cavaleri et al. conclude that because of their lack of funds and organizational backing, their journal "depends on the labor of four individuals" and "the long-term existence of the journal cannot be assured" (p. 100). Certainly, the long-term existence of any journal cannot be assured, but having the funds not to have to rely on volunteer labor and having organizational support beyond the main editors (whether an association or a publisher) is certainly beneficial.

Furthermore, there's something about all this volunteer labor that strikes me as slightly questionable. As an old Leftist I tend to view things with a healthy dose of paranoia. And as a neo-Deleuzian (i.e. someone who has only read a little bit of Deleuze) I can't help but think of the debate in terms of smooth and striated space, where OA is smooth and TA striated. Deleuze tells us that "one of the fundamental tasks of the State is to striate the space over which it reigns, or to utilize smooth spaces as a means of communication in the service of striated space" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 385). What does this mean? Many OA advocates (myself included), will often frame OA as an almost Socialist ideal: free information for the masses, or at least for those free thinkers who wish to consume it. But we cannot forget that we operate within an academy that has an unnerving habit of co-opting labor in a rather unsavory fashion, as seen in Mark Bousquet's (2008) blistering *How the University Works*. There is a danger that the ideals of OA can be utilized by a corporate ideology which seeks to further co-opt unpaid academic labor, as well as

making professional editing redundant (in much the same way as teaching by tenured PhDs is replaced by the contingent labor of graduate students). Mandated requirements for OA by universities and government agencies certainly have the potential to unbind scholarly communication from the economically privileged. However, when such mandates rely on unpaid labor, they also have the potential to erase the skills of academics and publishing professionals who may otherwise reasonably demand an honest day's pay for an honest day's work. With this in mind, it is rather dishonest to frame publishers' TA arguments about the real costs of production as simply a corporate apologetic: indeed, the glossing over of economic realities does no service to OA's moral high-ground, rather it echoes a certain bourgeois embarrassment in the face of real labor and the privilege of those who can afford the time to volunteer.

Of course, I say this as provocateur, but it is always prudent to examine the economic motivation behind all modes of production and to acknowledge that in the OA debate, like all things, there is no black and white, rather many shades of grey.

### *References*

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