

Reflections: On Publishing

Socially just publishing: implications for geographers and their journals

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There have been a range of protests against the high journal subscription costs, and author processing charges (APCs) levied for publishing in the more prestigious and commercially run journals that are favoured by geographers. But open protests across the sector like the 'Academic Spring' of 2012, and challenges to commercial copyright agreements, have been fragmented and less than successful. I renew the argument for 'socially just' publishing in geography. For geographers this is not limited to choosing alternative publication venues. It also involves a considerable effort by senior faculty members that are assessing hiring and promotion cases, to read and assess scholarship independently of its place of publication, and to reward the efforts of colleagues that offer their work as a public good. Criteria other than the citation index and prestige of a journal need to be foregrounded. Geographers can also be publishers, and I offer my experience editing the free online *Journal of Political Ecology*.

Keywords: academic publishing, Open Access, geography journals, social justice, *Journal of Political Ecology*

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Introduction

Publishing articles in academic journals is a mainstay of scholarly activity. It is not done just to disseminate research findings, or to craft an elegant argument. It is strongly linked to the individual reputation of authors, their prestige and job and promotion prospects, and it also affects the reputations of departments and academic institutions that employ them.

In this article I argue that the ownership and production of geographical knowledge is long overdue for change. A few for-profit corporations have set the terms of mainstream academic publishing for many years. Today they are cleverly charging authors as well as libraries and readers, and they patrol their "ownership" of knowledge through legal threats (as in November 2017, with actions taken against ResearchGate and Academia.edu). It is extremely important to envision a different and socially just future for geographical publishing. We need to marshal the collective will to do so.

What should geographers do with their publications?

Confusion exists over academic journal publications. For some, it is perfectly acceptable to cede author copyright to companies that prepare and sell them, thereby losing ownership and management of that intellectual property. Others, myself included, believe their published work is a contribution to

public knowledge, and therefore a public good – this means access should be available to anybody. These two opposing views were debated even before the rollout of the internet in the early 1990s, which offered a great improvement in the archiving and dissemination of public knowledge. But argument has become more trenchant as the bulk of journal publications may now, in theory at least, be accessed in online form. Many commentators predicted that the dawn of the internet would bring about the end of corporate control of academic publishing, but this has not happened (Buranyi 2017). Vigorous debate about who can and should control access to articles, and the knowledge they contain, continues. For their part, academic publishers, in an astute move, are increasingly charging the authors through upfront ‘author processing charges’ (APCs) to publish Open Access (OA) articles, in exchange for losing their corporate copyright. There is, it seems, no free lunch. Academic geographers should be taking a stance on these debates, with vigorous and regular discussion. But remarkably, the majority are not (but see the authors in this *Reflection*, and Kallio 2017).

The gold standard for publishing long-form academic articles remains a small number of entirely Anglophone journals produced by the world's largest academic publishing houses, with some being commercial enterprises running a suite of scholarly journals (like *Geoforum* or *Political Geography*). Others work in partnership with companies but editorial control remains with professional societies, like the American Association of Geographers (*The Annals of the AAG*), and the Institute of British Geographers/RGS (*Transactions of the IBG*). Across the discipline, there also many specialist and regional journals, and other titles in which geographical scholarship is welcomed. But there are at least 65 reputable journals of geography, and many more in related fields like planning and the earth sciences, offering Open Access publishing at zero cost to readers, as well as zero to moderate fees to authors.¹ Currently, according to citation and impact metrics, almost all of them have less ‘prestige’, which means a diminished presence in the eyes of junior and senior geographers. Many of the latter were, like me, acculturated into a system in which the existence of the hierarchy of journals, and the ownership of the knowledge therein, was scarcely questioned. This affects their perception of scholarly reputation, as I discuss below. For people with online library access through a university or other institution, it is still easy to access and read online copies of almost any article, and so the claims made by Open Access enthusiasts supporting public scholarly knowledge, can seem rather irrelevant to many of them.

The problem

There are at least five reasons to challenge this state of affairs.

Firstly, the top Anglophone geography journals are all published by corporations. Their publishing models include some profit-sharing arrangements with universities and departments (like *Economic Geography*, run from Clark University since 1925 but now published by Taylor & Francis). Some societies, like the American Anthropological Association, use profitable ‘flagship’ journals to support loss-making ones, while others use commercial licensing agreements (Esposito 2017). These arrangements need scrutiny because they have become expensive – for geography journals, a quantitative study showed “commercial presses charged 50 percent more for journals published on behalf of universities and societies than those published by universities or learned societies themselves” (Coomes *et al.* 2017, 259). There is a growing literature, and campaigns following the “Academic Spring” of 2012, signalling a discontent with the prices charged for commercial journals (examples include Coomes *et al.* 2017 and a new British venture, Radical Open Access². Scholars point out that academic publishing has for some time been a lucrative business with a largely captive market – first exploited by businesspeople like Robert Maxwell, who ran Pergamon Press as a highly profitable publisher until it was sold to Elsevier in 1991. Little has changed – company profits, particularly in the STEM disciplines, are large and corporate executives command salaries in the millions. For example Elsevier’s margin³ exceeded 35% in 2010, over 40% in 2012 and 2013, and 37% in 2016. Smaller companies are constantly being purchased by the five largest ones (Buranyi 2017). For example Pion, publishers of the *Environment and Planning* journals, was bought by Sage in 2015, and bepress, which provides useful OA services to universities by subscription, by Elsevier in mid-2017. The five large publishers (RELX Group including Elsevier, Wiley-Blackwell, Springer, Taylor &

Francis and Sage) published an extraordinary 70% of social science articles and 20% in the humanities in 2015, using Web of Science data (Larivière *et al.* 2015).

While many universities struggle to maintain access to their commercial subscription journals, publishers are clearly making a lot of money. Specifically, Coomes and colleagues show the large inequalities in geography journal pricing – “Commercial presses charge substantially more than society and university presses for their products – their journals are 2.3 times as expensive, articles are twice the price, and the price per citation is four times greater” (Coomes *et al.* 2017, 259). The latter statement is something most professional geographers will find unjust – our ‘recognition’ could surely come cheaper, without this degree of multinational corporate domination.

Horizontal corporate acquisition is worsening inequalities, contributing to “accumulation by dispossession” (Harvey 2004). In its worst form, authors of scholarly articles are dispossessed of them by a publisher who copyrights them or takes a large fee to publish, and then sells the journals it still has copyright for back to the same institution to accumulate profit, frequently bundled in a ‘big deal’ with many other journals. These subscriptions ‘deals’ are non-transparent, but often costing over \$1.3m/ €1.13m/£1m per institution per publisher (Harvie *et al.* 2013; Bergstrom 2014; Gowers 2016, the latter two studies based on Freedom of Information requests).

Secondly, for countries and universities without the financial means to purchase key journals needed by their staff and students, article access to ‘paywalled’ journals is not easy. Without an institutional subscription, doing a literature search requires a web trawl, perhaps a subscription to online repositories like ResearchGate and academia.edu or the contentious Sci-Hub, emailing the author, or asking someone with university access for a copy. Requests for copies of human geography articles appear almost daily on the crit-geog-forum listserv, for example, often from academics in countries where they lack access to the full gamut of subscription-only journals.

Thirdly, large academic publishers are not always fantastic employers. Profits may be accrued, but not necessarily by the lowly members of the workforce doing fantastic work, in stark contrast to the executive salary payouts. Operations vary, but many operations are globalised away from European or North American headquarters, to lower-cost countries; proofreading is done there at unknown wage rates, or by sub-contractors. Low costs are not always passed on in journal subscription pricing. Admittedly, some scholars are paid to be chief academic editors of commercial journals and some handling editors are also paid (up to \$40,000/€34,000/£30,000 and \$8,200/€7,000/£6,200 for these two tasks per year), sometimes with an administrative assistant, but my data for geography journals is anecdotal and the figures can be higher and lower than these. Functions that article authors would really like, like a small post-hoc edit to a published online article, or a longer article length, are usually refused as too costly. Of course not all publishers act the same, and there are great staff and some decent initiatives. These include the *Antipode* Foundation International Workshop Award and grants paid out by *Geoforum*, both obtained under previous pressure from their Boards.

Fourthly, the true democratising spirit of the Open Access movement, which dates back to the beginnings of the Web in 1992–1993, is weakly embraced. Globally, efforts to make material universally free to read by anybody with an internet connection – which seems a reasonable goal for publishing in our social conscious discipline – have advanced over 25 years, evidenced by initiatives like Research4Life offering free access in developing countries. But recouping costs through APCs is not so democratic, and often run to \$3,000/€2,600/£2,300 per article or more. It is doubtful that actually processing an article expediently (refereeing, laying up, sometimes editing mildly, archiving and dissemination) really costs this much, and new corporate OA journals are indeed starting to charge less. APCs may be a ‘last gasp’ from the conventional publishers to maintain their stranglehold in an era of almost universal internet access, but they are currently sticking to their guns.

Fifthly, incommensurability and guilt. For scholars with critical or radical intent, or professional pride and strong personal ethics, an ethical publication strategy should be essential (Batterbury 2015). Geographers apply these criteria in other stages of the research process, so releasing a final product into the commercial Badlands should seem like a climbdown. Operationalising ‘just’ publishing could be based on considerations of where the profit from any sale of work goes, who can read it, and who owns it. On these criteria alone, a journal article sitting behind a paywall, with a copyright signed away to a publisher that owns and sells it or to whom you just paid a large fee, would seem less desirable

than an article that is publicly available, and over which the author retains control. Incommensurability between professional aspirations and publication actions is haunting among critical and radical scholars, and should have resulted in a wholesale shift away from the prevailing model long ago. Unfortunately it has not, because publishers have 'fought back' through offering OA publishing at medium to high cost, by making small concessions to editorial boards, and because of worries among scholars about conforming to publishing norms.

Solutions

The *first* solution to bringing about a wholesale migration away from commercial journal publishers (if they cannot be reformed) is changing the mentality of senior academics. They have, by and large, not abandoned the publishing culture they were embedded in at earlier career stages. To do this, they must define scholarly excellence through quality of work and visibility, not place of publication. This will assist job applicants and promotion cases. While we may assume an article in a top journal is a good one, authors should be able to choose to publish elsewhere, to reach a particular audience, in a language other than English, or to be 'socially just'. They should not be penalised for this or looked down on, if the quality of their work is excellent. Their work in a progressive OA or society journal should also be read and appraised fairly. Failing to do this is a major reason the status quo of journal impact factors and hierarchies of outlets remains in place, largely in control of the "big five" companies, and with a huge influence on jobs and promotions. This also behooves senior academics, especially those reared on the hierarchy of journals from past decades, to keep up to date with other developments in publishing as well – as the importance of social media posting, film, visual materials, and policy briefs has increased.

Secondly, embrace Open Access as the standard approach to publishing. OA in itself does not equate with social justice. As I have explained, many major publishers are guilty of exploiting the OA model to charge high APCs to authors. The new breed of OA geography journals like *Geo: Geography and Environment* are certainly not cheap (RGS/IBG and Wiley, \$1,800/£1,150/€1,480 APC per article, before any discounting). These are big numbers for many human geographers or those without grant or institutional support. But more positively, any scholarly work published OA is instantly available to anybody and in most cases, with authorial control retained. By any measure, this is better than paywalled content, or breaching copyright (Leonelli *et al.* 2015). Free-to-publish OA journals are already the norm in the Spanish and Portuguese-speaking world where departments and societies assemble and publish them, and in Eastern Europe, and they have strong representation in France and Scandinavia¹. OA publication seems to attract more citations too (although the evidence for this is not watertight). So why have the AAG or the RGS/IBG not offered a free OA journal? The AAA has – *Cultural Anthropology* has been free and OA since 2014, with a tiny charge to non-members of \$23. Of course, as critics protest, there are also many low quality, moneymaking OA journals that publish almost anything for a fee. Today, intelligent geographers can assume that journals that spam our email inboxes should just be ignored.

Thirdly, reward and practice socially just publishing, rather than penalise it. Scholars can, particularly at and early career stage, be rewarded for careful consideration of the ethics of their publishing choices with journals like *Human Geography* (Finn *et al.* 2017) and *ACME* (Springer *et al.* 2017). Their choices do vary, but should not be driven by the rankings and impact factors that plague universities and make or break academic careers. Evidence suggests that at present, early career researchers support non-commercial publishing, but cannot pursue it to the degree they wish (Nicholas *et al.* 2017). Steinberg (2015) is incorrect when he says that publication in non-commercial OA scholarly society geography journals is difficult – there are still plenty of those, as I have shown through my own survey.

Fourthly, help build socially just publishing. Most of the journals on my list of reputable, free or low cost open access journals are run by "community economies" of unpaid academics, university libraries or departments, or scholarly societies¹. This goes for most of the 65 geography journals on that list, and they deserve more submissions, and more attention. Geographers and other scholars have demonstrated that they can 'take back' publishing effectively, by running journals with or without

subsidies or financial support, and as a smaller first step, by choosing who to referee articles for (Kallio 2017, Springer *et al.* 2017).

An example

Other commentators in this Reflection speak to their own experiences with journal publishing and academic labour. I have edited the *Journal of Political Ecology* since 2003, when I first became aware of the debates over learned publishing⁴. *JPE* began in 1994 as one of the first free Open Access journals in the social sciences, with a small grant from the University of Arizona to Jim Greenberg and Tad Park. Others began to emerge in the mid-1990s as online alternatives to the mainstream commercial print journals of the era. Still run by two academics and with an international editorial board, *JPE* is part of the "DIY sector" for journal publishing. We (Casey Walsh and myself) use part of our week to edit and manage journal production. We publish from 30–60 articles a year (with no word count or graphics restrictions), which is a manageable number. We choose to be indexed in Scopus and the Web of Science Emerging Sources Index – perhaps this may change if indexing (actually a useful corporate function) attracts a charge.

This publishing model does not require any operating budget – just time, expertise, goodwill and a laptop (and file storage and occasional help at Arizona's library, where we are currently doing site upgrades to the OJS freeware). No money changes hands. Authors, now including some of the world's top social scientists, hold CC-BY copyright. We do close editing of articles when required, reading and if necessary editing every word and reference. This level of service is not often free in the commercial world, but it is a professional responsibility, particularly to 'non-English as a first language' authors. With the reorganisation of the *Environment and Planning* suite of journals in 2017, we now have a commercial competitor – but we are not really in 'competition' at all, since no jobs are on the line. We have rejected several offers to buy or publish the journal, or to place content in other commercial information services.

Scholarly publishers are persistently dismissive of the "DIY" journal sector. Commentators repeatedly suggest someone has to pay hard cash to run any journal, and I have even been told by publishers I should stop editing in order to concentrate more on my 'real job', research and teaching! And yet, Park and Greenberg have sustained involvement for over 20 years; myself for 15, all with full teaching and research loads. In sum, this small example shows academics *can* edit and publish outside the commercial sector, and without charging authors or readers, if they are so-minded. The task is to gain recognition for this work in their own institutions; to raise the profile of alternative journals; and to treat authors that publish in them with fairness, no matter what stage they are at in their careers (Finn *et al.* 2017).

Conclusion

It is frustrating that the bold aspirations accompanying open access journal publishing dating from the early 1990s, where articles began to be seen as a public good, have been overtaken by accelerating corporate activity, and through charging high APCs. The stranglehold that major publishers have over scholarly journals has actually worsened, through corporate takeovers.

Geography is not a large and lucrative academic discipline, but it is directly affected. Takeovers, for example of Blackwell and Pion, have created ever tighter ownership of key geography journals by five companies. These continue to charge our libraries, occasional readers, and now authors, a lot of money, while arguing that they are providing value for money, a statement for which there is little evidence (Coomes *et al.* 2017). Resistance to horizontal acquisition and price increases has been patchy and surprisingly muted in the discipline. While Steinberg (2015) argues "it is likely that few academics will have the stomach (or time) to launch organized insurgent movements", we could still surprise ourselves. They need to be supported from above, by senior gatekeepers. Commercial journal boards are resigning and 'flipping' to establish socially just alternatives, and resistance to price gouging is continual, by national research bodies, libraries, and individual scholars. And yet, we *can* move inexorably towards better access to scholarly articles, at low or no cost, in journals run by

academics and not-for-profit organisations and societies. We have leverage because ultimately, without us on board, there is no 'product' and no 'market'. "DIY" and non-commercial geography journals may need greater recognition, but the hard work they involve is straightforward, convivial, and already practiced by thousands of scholars. I call on readers to support their efforts, and to adopt an ethical strategy in the publication their own work. I fear, however, that if we really begin to compete with the large corporate publishers, there will be tough times ahead.

Notes

¹ See the Geography section of my curated directory, <https://simonbatterbury.wordpress.com/2015/10/25/list-of-open-access-journals>, which also lists which journals are recognised by Scopus and Web of Science indexing services.

² <http://radicaloa.disruptivemedia.org.uk>

³ <https://www.relx.com/investors/annual-reports/2016>, p17

⁴ <http://jpe.library.arizona.edu>

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