



Film

The business of academic publishing: “a catastrophe”



PaywallTheMovie.com

Paywall: The Business of Scholarship
A film by Jason Schmitt
<https://paywallthemovie.com/>

Available for streaming and download from [PaywallTheMovie.com](https://paywallthemovie.com/) and from Vimeo and other sites with a CC BY 4.0 designation

As I watched *Paywall: The Business of Scholarship*, I was taken back 30 years to when I thought for the first time about the business aspects of academic publishing. I was an assistant editor at the *BMJ*, and the editor asked me to join a meeting with a group of rheumatologists who wanted a share in the *Annals of Rheumatic Diseases*, a journal we owned. “We do the research published in the journal”, said one of the rheumatologists. “We do the peer review, we edit the journal, we read it, and we store it in our libraries. What do you do?” “Tell them what we do”, said the editor to me. I was at a complete loss.

Paywall makes the same point through an almost bewildering succession of talking heads, most of them academics. Publishers are consistently making profit margins of 30–40%, higher than almost any other business, because they are given their valuable content, the academic research, for free. When in polemical mode, I say that scientific journals are like oil companies that are given oil for free. *Paywall* is a polemic about the US\$25.2 billion market of academic publishing. There are a few, usually sweaty, people who speak hesitantly in

broad favour of commercial publishers, but most of the nearly 70 people who are interviewed in this film think that academic publishing is badly broken and needs reform. Elsevier, which owns *The Lancet*, is the chief villain of the film, and at the end of the film, a

“More openness in science, the talking heads make clear, means better scholarship, more innovation, higher quality, more equality, and a better chance of solving fundamental problems like climate change, poverty, and the pushing back of disease.”

written statement makes clear that Elsevier was invited multiple times to contribute to the film but declined.

Directed and produced by Jason Schmitt, a professor at Clarkson University in New York, *Paywall* is a film in the tradition of documentaries made by Michael Moore, films that attack powerful institutions such as General Motors, the US health-care industry, and the gun lobby. Unlike Moore’s films, *Paywall* is not funny, and the surfeit of talking heads makes it dull. I can’t see it working well with the general

public, which is a shame as the failures of science publishing directly affect the public in that they pay for the research and suffer from it being locked up.

The film could, however, have an impact on academics, many of whom still do not understand how profitable publishers are and how academic institutions could—if they worked together—make science available to all and retrieve the profits for more research.

More openness in science, the talking heads make clear, means better scholarship, more innovation, higher quality, more equality, and a better chance of solving fundamental problems like climate change, poverty, and the pushing back of disease. That publishers are making huge profits from restricting access to research is not a marginal problem, says István Rév, a professor of history and political science from Budapest, it’s holding back the solution to fundamental problems. Indeed, he adds, the profits of publishers are one of the causes of rapidly rising tuition fees. Some colleges are having to close in part because of the continuing high cost of journals. “It’s a catastrophe”, says Peter Suber, director of the Harvard Office for Scholarly Communication and director of the Harvard Open Access Project.

A man explains how he searched for information that would help his desperately sick wife but kept hitting paywalls. Brian Nosek, a professor of psychology from the University of Virginia, describes how he was shocked to discover that young psychology academics in Serbia were all working on implicit cognition because that’s the only research they could access for free. Roshan Kumar Karn, a Nepalese doctor, explains how he has almost no access to research. Helena Asamoah-Hassan, Executive Director of the African Library Association, asked what she thinks of



PaywallTheMovie.com

Helena Asamoah-Hassan

Elsevier, says it is “a pain in the neck for us in Africa”. (There was no mention of HINARI, a WHO scheme that does allow institutions in low-income countries to access journals for free.)

Academics think that they are reaching everybody by publishing in high-impact journals, says one academic, but in fact they are reaching only a limited audience. 40% of the articles published in *The New England Journal of Medicine* are written by authors who live within 115 miles of the editorial offices in Boston, says John Adler, a Stanford professor of neurosurgery. “Publishing is an insiders’ game”, he says.

How is it that publishers can continue to make profits of 30–40%? How can Elsevier get away with charging, as described in the film, \$10702 for an annual subscription to *Biomaterials*? It’s partly that if you are a major research university you need access to all journals not just some of them, says Richard Price of Academia.edu, a platform for academics to share research papers. It’s a question of moral hazard, explains Stuart Shieber, a Harvard professor of computer science: the consumers of the research, the academics, are not the people who have to pay. It’s the libraries who pay, and the academics remain insensitive to price. (The same phenomenon drives the extreme costs of the US health-care system.)

In addition, publishers sell bundles of journals. It’s like cable television, you get a few things you do want along with a lot you don’t, explains one librarian. But unlike cable television you don’t know what others are paying—because publishers do secret deals with libraries. The publishers work out how rich you are and then charge you accordingly. By failing to be transparent, libraries are making short-term economic gain but losing in the long term, says Charles Watkinson, Director of University of Michigan Press. Libraries could decline to sign non-disclosure agreements that stop them saying how much they paid.

Forbes magazine predicted in 1995 that scientific journals would be the first victim of the internet, but in fact scientific publishers have made steadily increasing profits. *Paywall* didn’t make the point, but open access has so far increased publisher profits because journals “double dip” by charging for both subscriptions and open access. Nor did *Paywall* discuss predatory open-access publishers that are nothing more than a financial scam and will publish any content submitted to them so long as a fee is paid.

Why does such an exploitative system persist? Partly, said two of those interviewed, because academics are the most conservative people in the world, but more because the academic reward system depends on how much and where you publish. The system encourages “gaming and fraud”; and the impact factor with its three decimal places has a “faux scientific nature”, argues David Prosser, Executive Director of RLUK (Research Libraries UK). The San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA), which many institutions have signed, is an attempt to move away from assessment based on publications, but finding other ways is hard.

Paywall didn’t run through all the many attempts to break the hold of commercial publishers (nor did it make clear that many society publishers also make and depend on substantial profits), but it did mention green open access, whereby academics are allowed to post a version of their paper on an institutional repository. This was, however, dismissed as “half a loaf” by Michael W Carroll, director of the Program on Information Justice and Intellectual Property at the American University. One success was *Lingua* (Latin for tongue), a linguistics journal owned by Elsevier that transformed into the open access *Glossa* (Greek for tongue). Johan Rooryck, editor of *Lingua* from 1999 to 2015, led the rebellion and describes in the film that it needed 2 years of secret planning to make sure that all the editors and

editorial board were with him. There are few other examples of such coups.

Paywall gave a lot of attention to Sci-Hub, “the Napster of academic publishing”, which made about 70 million articles available for free. Elsevier took legal action against the site for copyright infringement and Sci-Hub was closed down after a court order, but as with Napster it resurfaces with a different domain name. The smiling founder Alexandra Elbakyan features in *Paywall* and describes how Elsevier papers were the most popular and how she feels she is promoting the publisher. Kim Barrett, a professor at the University of California San Diego and editor of *The Journal of Physiology*, condemned Sci-Hub as “illegal” and “totally criminal”, but many academics appreciated it and saw it, as one said in the film, as justified “civil disobedience”. John Wilbanks of Sage Bionetworks, the son of a Nobel Laureate, described how he had downloaded all his father’s papers from Sci-Hub and put them into a book for his son. He could never have afforded it otherwise.

Paywall made no mention of Plan S—the requirement of European public funders of research that all research resulting from research funded by public grants provided by participating national and European research councils and funding bodies be open access from the start of 2020—or preprints, both of which have the potential to seriously disrupt publishers’ business models. But the film is another step on the road to achieving open access. I doubt that it will affect Elsevier’s share price, although I see that it fell by 13% between Aug 28 and Sept 19, 2018. That’s probably caused by Plan S rather than the film.

Richard Smith

richardswsmith@yahoo.co.uk

I have consulted for F1000Research and have received fees for chairing OpenPharma. I edited the *BMJ* and was chief executive of the *BMJ* Publishing Group from 1991 to 2004.