

Hyde Park Corner Debate

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Hyde Park Corner Debate: Resolved: The Current System of Scholarly Publishing, Whereby Publishers Receive Content for Free and Then Sell It Back to Libraries at a High Price, Must Fundamentally Change

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The following is a transcription of a live presentation at the 2013 Charleston Conference combined with previously prepared statements for the debate. Slides and video are available online at <http://bit.ly/OTWA05>.

The debate was introduced and moderated by Elizabeth (Liz) Chapman of the London School of Economics and Political Science.

Jean-Claude Guédon:

The following is a statement submitted prior to the debate.

Parsing the Resolution

The resolution contains key elements that must be fleshed out:

1. The “current system of scholarly publishing” is still transitioning to an all-digital context; it is also metabolizing open access (OA) that digitization made possible.
2. Publishers appear indivisible and all alike. Both points are wrong: publishers are variable aggregates of skills; and there are many kinds of publishers.
3. “Content” really corresponds here to research results. These do not behave like novels or recipe books. Also, “Content” accommodates the notion of commodity too easily.
4. What kind of “free” are we talking about? Is it like “free beer,” or is it like “free speech”?
5. With words like “sell” and “price,” the resolution reflects a commodity world.

6. What is a “fundamental change”: for me, fundamental change means wrenching research results out of a commodity perspective and relocate them at the centre of the research communication process.

The Thesis

Commodifying research results has taken precedence over the needs of researchers. Worse, the logic of profit making has begun to interfere with the logic of knowledge creation.

The Commodification of Research Results

In the first instance, history shows that research results were never fated to be treated as a commodity. Galileo did not send his letters to Kepler with a COD rider. And if print did open up the possibility of considering research results as a commodity, the process took centuries. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Royal

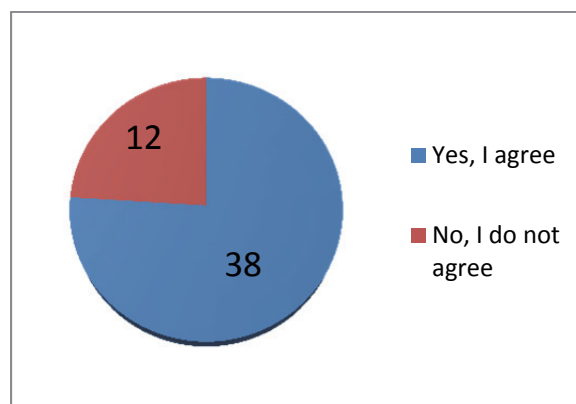


Figure 1. Hyde Park Debate Opening Poll. Resolved: The current system of scholarly publishing, whereby publishers receive content for free and then sell it back to libraries at a high price, must fundamentally change. Results: 38 in favor, 12 opposed.

Academy of Sciences in Paris subsidized its publications, and so did all the other academies of Europe. In the nineteenth century, scientific associations that were financed by membership fees published journals for their constituency and bartered the rest with other association journals to stock their libraries cheaply. When commercial publishers published journals, they did so mainly for prestige purposes while looking for possible authors of potential books. Knowledge as commodity remained a marginal element in the production of research publications until the twentieth century and even World War II.

After World War II, commercial publishers greatly strengthened their role as scholarly publishers by claiming ownership of journals on an unprecedented scale. To me, 1951, with the launch of Maxwell's Pergamon Press, emblematically signals the commodification of research results on a new and grand scale. Some 20 years later, by engineering an inelastic market, in part thanks to Garfield's notion of "core" journals, commercial publishers had launched the "serial pricing crisis" that put the commodity dimension of scientific publishing front and centre. It became difficult to think about scientific publishing except as a commodity. In fact, the phrasing of today's resolution reveals this blind spot. But let us remember that if it took nearly 300 years after the invention of the scientific periodical to see Pergamon emerge, it means that research results did not easily or spontaneously translate into commodities. Let us remember also that many various institutional sites harboured noncommercial, yet viable, forms of scholarly publishing.

Profit Seeking Versus the Quest for Knowledge

Treating scientific publishing as a commercial activity effectively dislodged the publishing phase of research from the rest of the research process. At this juncture, the search for profit began to interact with the quest for knowledge.

It is well known that the competition among journals is largely organized around the "impact factor." A myth had gradually developed and had stuck among research administrators: a high impact factor came to mean high quality even

though we know that a high impact factor really means high visibility in various knowledge circles. Then, the competition between journals was extended to individuals: for promotions and grants, where researchers published became more important than what they published. Unsurprisingly, researchers did just about anything possible to publish in high impact-factor journals. While that evaluation context bolstered the credibility of the "core" category of journals, it also reinforced the inelasticity of the journal market. This is a point many university administrators seem to miss: on the one hand, they pursue empty mantras of excellence as a way to justify evaluation procedures based on impact factors; on the other hand, in a schizophrenic mode, they complain that library acquisition budgets are growing too fast. They do not seem to understand that the two relate and that it is conditioned by the peculiar competition rules that commercial publishers have promoted.

The splitting of scholarly publishing from the life cycle of research has also led to a strange pas-de-deux between publishers and librarians, and it has relegated researchers to the boundaries of what might be described as a mating ritual. Incidentally, the Charleston meetings reflect this situation perfectly. I quote the web site: "The Charleston Conference is an informal annual gathering of librarians, publishers, electronic resource managers, consultants, and vendors...." Where are the researchers in this, except for token individuals like myself? Dear audience, am I your fig leaf?

Lessons Drawn from the Digital Context

Without the digital revolution, much of what precedes would have been more difficult to express. For example, the new skills required to do web publishing revealed that publishers did not know more about e-publishing than individual scholars such as Jim O'Donnell or Stevan Harnad who explored "sky writing" as early as 1989. Scholars actually took the lead in those early years.

Elsevier's Tulip experiment, which started in 1991, clearly showed what Elsevier had (licensing) and what they had not (disseminating and control).

But moving to licensing access rather than selling journal issues also demonstrated that the commodity dimension of scientific articles was an artificial construct.

OA, although it is a direct consequence of digitization, was resisted by publishers not because it threatened scientific communication—actually it aims at improving it—but because it challenged their business plan.

When the “author pay” model was invented by Vitek Tracz with Biomed Central in 1998, the objective was to keep the scientific article as a commodity, but it was also to improve the scholarly communication system. In this regard, Tracz showed himself far more creative as a capitalist than many of his competitors.

The new business plan rapidly spread to whole platforms or portals of journals, including nonprofit projects such as the Public Library of Science (PLoS), another project led by researchers. Soon, this trend would easily morph into megajournals with the creation of PLoS One in December 2006. In short, digitization and the Internet showed that everything concerning scholarly publishing was on the table, including the very identity of journals.

For some people, such upheavals have created paralysis; for many others, it has opened up new vistas: no longer mesmerized by print-based business plans, a great deal of thinking went into focusing again on the basic functions of scholarly communication which is to support, enrich and enhance the grand conversation of the Republic of science.

Thanks to these efforts, we can now sketch out an alternative to the present system of scholarly publication.

1. Restore the publishing phase as an integral part of the research life cycle. Scientific research has never been sustainable anyway; it has always been heavily subsidized; therefore, subsidize the publishing phase as well. It costs no more than 2% of the cost of research. Put everything gratis for authors and free—

libre—for readers; (The speaker ran out of time at this point, and was stopped by the moderator.)

2. Move away from the idea that articles are a mere commodity;
3. Aggregate the needed publishing skills within networks of research centres;
4. Add the data, also in OA;
5. Base evaluation at the article level, and not at the journal level. Article-level metrics are fundamental in this regard;
6. Move away from ranking systems and replace them by levels of quality. Think restaurant guides and their forks-and-knives symbols, rather than Olympic Games and gold medals.
7. Relocate all of this squarely within research sites.

Who should do it? To my mind, it should be a coalition of university presses, libraries, and funding agencies.

How should it be done? On an international basis, of course, to avoid in-breeding and mediocrity.

Is this utopia? Commercial publishers, intent as they are on preserving their status and profit levels, will claim so. But, at home and abroad, you will see systems like this developing. In the United States, the Coalition for Library Publishing is clearly moving in this direction (and the University of Utah is involved in it). Universities such as Stanford and Michigan have relocated their libraries and presses under a single roof. Outside the United States, think about SciELO and Redalyc in Latin America.

Scholarly publishing will obviously go on, but with players quite different from those of the print age, and its financing will also change deeply with far less room left to commercial interests. Thank you.

Rick Anderson:

The following is a statement submitted prior to the debate.

There are two things wrong with the resolution before us today. The first is the premise with which it opens, which is false; the second is the assertion with which it ends, which is questionable at best. I will address these in turn.

First, as to the resolution's false premise:

As things stand now, the process that culminates in a formal scholarly publication can be divided into four stages.

In the first stage, a scholar or scientist comes up with a question or an idea. This may take the form of a scientific hypothesis, a literary theory, a philosophical argument, or any number of other scholarly conceits.

In the second stage, the idea is tested and developed by means of research, thought, and writing. This stage of the process can be very expensive and is usually underwritten by some combination of tax dollars, private foundations, and the academic institutions that employ scholars and researchers. This stage generally results in some kind of document, which is then submitted to a publisher for consideration.

In the third stage, the publisher subjects the document to various tests, refinements, and enhancements. This may result in the document being rejected immediately, or reviewed and then rejected, or reviewed and sent back to the author for revision. A document that makes it through this filtering process is then edited further, refined in terms of format and presentation, and prepared for sale in the marketplace.

In the fourth stage, the refined and enhanced document is presented for sale to interested buyers—including the institutions and taxpayers who underwrote the second stage in the process.

The resolution under debate today states that under the current system, publishers receive content for free and then sell it back to libraries at a high price. This formulation addresses the first and second stages of the scholarly process (the creation of content by authors) and the fourth stage (the selling of content to libraries and the public), but ignores the third stage: the process of turning raw author manuscripts into publishable

articles. That stage is both real and costly. The UK's Research Information Network estimates that it costs roughly \$3,800 to prepare an existing manuscript for formal publication. Now, it is important to acknowledge that some of that cost is borne by universities, whose faculty members are often the ones providing peer review and editorial services. So for the sake of argument, let us say that the cost to the publisher of preparing and publishing a typical manuscript is really only \$500—a figure that I hope we can all agree errs on the side of conservatism.

That \$500 represents the publisher's attempt to add value to the author's raw manuscript, and the purchase price of a journal represents the publisher's attempt to recoup that investment, sometimes (but not always) with a profit margin added on top. Clearly, authors believe that these refinements do add value—that is why they submit their articles to publishers rather than simply distributing their work to readers at no charge via the Internet. So there does not seem to be much question that publishers add value for authors; questions remain, however, about whether the prices they charge fairly represent the value they add for readers.

We will address the question of pricing in a moment. For now, the important thing to point out is that the value-added services that publishers provide cannot be provided at zero cost. The cost of doing so will either be absorbed by publishers or covered by some other entity in the system; otherwise, the services will not be provided.

All of this means that a more accurate description of the current system might read as follows: Under the current system of scholarly publishing, publishers receive manuscripts from authors, which they evaluate, reject, accept, edit, format, and then sell back to the scholarly community.

This brings us to the second part of the resolution under debate today: the highly questionable assertion that the current system itself "must change." The word "must" implies one of two things here: either that the existing system cannot go on because it is structurally unsustainable and, therefore, will change sooner or later regardless

of how we feel about it, or that we believe it should not be allowed to go on because it is morally or ethically wrong at a fundamental level and, therefore, requires the action of good people to change it.

The sustainability argument is basically a structural one. In order to look at the structural sustainability of the current scholarly publishing system in a rigorous way, we have to separate the system itself from the issue of pricing, which is only a variable input to the system. So here is a thought experiment: suppose every scholarly journal had an annual subscription price of \$15, and that each journal's price rose at an annual rate of 1% (or 15 cents). In that case, would we say that the current system was sustainable or unsustainable? If we would judge it unsustainable, we would have to say why, bearing in mind that many centuries of experience to the contrary (in a system featuring much higher journal prices) would weigh against that judgment. If we would judge it sustainable under those pricing conditions, then that suggests that what makes the system seem unsustainable is the pricing dynamic, not the system itself.

The moral argument is more value laden and, therefore, harder to deal with rigorously, but the same thought experiment might be helpful: if all scholarly journals had an annual subscription price of \$15, and the price increased by 15 cents per year, would we believe that the system was immoral and "must change"?

It is with this question that I suspect the opinions in this room would start seriously to diverge. Some would say "no, as long as the prices are fair and sustainable, there is nothing fundamentally wrong with the current system." Others would say that the whole system is fundamentally ill conceived—that, first of all, when the public has underwritten the research resulting in a scholarly document, the public should not have to pay any price at all for access to that document, and that, second of all, even where the public did not underwrite all or most of the research, the public benefit of unrestricted access outweighs the public benefit of letting a publisher make money by selling access to it. For those who feel this way, neither price nor structural sustainability is the

issue. The issue is one of right and wrong, and it is wrong to restrict access to scholarship. Scholarship should be treated as a public good, not as a commodity; thus, any access price at all is the wrong price.

Those who believe that charging for access is fundamentally and morally wrong are likely to agree with the resolution's assertion that the current system must change.

There is a problem, though: if you are not careful (or even if you are), you can change the system in ways that end up undermining rather than enhancing the public good. I believe this is a serious risk with both the Gold and the Green OA models, which are the most commonly invoked alternatives to the existing scholarly publishing system.

The problem with Gold OA is that it tends to redirect research funding away from research and toward dissemination. In the case of Gold OA, the question we should be asking is: "Which does more good in the world: less access to more research or more access to less research?" I would suggest that this question is urgently important, and that the correct answer is not obvious.

In the case of Green OA, the danger is that it will reduce the ability of publishers to sustain their operations by forcing them to put free versions of their content out in the marketplace where they are simultaneously trying to sell access to it. Most of us in this room can probably think of one or two publishers that we would love to see harmed in this way. Some of us might like to see all for-profit, toll-access publishers harmed in this way. Unfortunately, though, Green OA mandates undermine the ability of all affected publishers to sell their products—including the nonprofit society publishers that make up a large part of the scholarly publishing community, many of which not only rely on journal revenues to support their various activities but also consider publishing to be part of their core mission. Are their publishing activities morally suspect? Are they bad actors who need to be pushed out of business?

There is at least one other option, and it is one that is becoming increasingly popular—at least as

a topic of discussion. That is the prospect of libraries or other academic units becoming the publishers, internalizing all publishing processes and costs, and then making scholarly products available for free to the public. Under this model, obviously, the costs would not disappear; they would be subsumed into the academic budget.

Could this be done? I suspect it could. Libraries are publishing OA journals on many campuses at the moment. The question here is not about theoretical feasibility, but about desirability: does the academic community want to take the processes of manuscript solicitation and management, peer review, editing, layout, design, and dissemination back from publishers? If so, then what is academia willing to stop doing in order to make room for those tasks in its budgets—and how will academia ensure that the things it stops doing are not actually more beneficial to the world than bringing publishing functions in-house would be? And if, at some point in the future, one or two or 50 libraries get tired of doing those things and decide to outsource that work to an entity outside of academia (thus reinventing the traditional journal publishing system) who will stop them, and by what authority?

My opposition to the resolution under debate here today does not arise from my love of the current system, or from any opposition to changing it in ways that make sense. It arises from the faulty premise on which the resolution is based and from its ill-advised use of the word “must.” Our current system has good and bad aspects, just as any system would, but I see nothing intrinsically, morally, or structurally wrong with the current system itself. It is true that the current pricing dynamic is unsustainable. As one of my colleagues has pointed out, the inevitable conclusion of the current pricing trend is that eventually, every library will pay its entire collections budget to a single publisher for access to that publisher’s Big Deal package. Clearly, something will change before that logical conclusion is reached—but “must” that change entail a radical restructuring of the scholarly publishing system? By no means is the answer to

that question obviously or uncontroversially yes, and, therefore, I must oppose the resolution.

Three-Minute Response

Jean-Claude Guédon: From a logical standpoint, my honorable opponent’s position is untenable. He sets the resolution in the logical form: if the resolution is P, then Q. He then proceeds to assert that P is false. The problem, to anyone who is familiar with truth tables knows, is that if P is false, the whole statement is always true independently of Q. Conclusion, my honorable opponent just shot himself in the foot. However, the shoe is more important than just a logical game. The third, or editorial stage of producing research publications, as identified by my honorable opponent, is indeed the crucial one. The editorial stage, it is claimed, adds value to the text. Well, what kind of value?

Let me give a personal example. Once, I wrote a chapter in a book published by IOS Press. In my text, I used the Latin phrase *annus mirabilis*. IOS Press, in its wisdom, decided that *annus* deserved only one “n.” Was value added? Actually, yes, but certainly not through refinement, only through laboring or logo effect. IOS Press may look good for grant application, but it was not good for scholarly writing. And this is the problem: the logic of profit seeking is mixed up with the logic of scholarly exchange. When both imperatives diverge, the former trumps the later. In terms of knowledge degradation, the cost can be enormous.

And this leads us to the necessity of change. Let us focus on the structural argument. The problem is that we cannot separate the current system itself from the pricing, as my honorable opponent argues. We cannot do so because the system exists ONLY because there are suitable forms of pricing to generate profits. The system would not exist otherwise. The required change is precisely to separate the system of scholarly communication from pricing by removing profit seeking from it. Such a move would realign scholarly publishing with the rest of the research cycle properly where it belongs.

Let me address the risk associated with change, and I will skip over the Machiavelli well-known quotation to that effect and continue. This is exactly what the last part of my opponent's paper argues, thus revealing that its conservatism is not even innovative. Finally, let me zero in about OA. Gold OA, unless equated to an author pay model, which is wrong, does not redirect money from research. This thesis assumes competition between research budgets and the financing of publishing.

So we will have in the end, and I am summarizing because I sense time pressing on my shoulders... (timer rings indicating the end of the response period).

Rick Anderson: The logical structure of my worthy opponent's proposal for an alternative to the present system of scholarly publication will be familiar to anyone who has tried to feed broccoli to an unwilling child. The child will likely cut the broccoli into small pieces, move it around on the plate, try to hide some of the pieces under a lettuce leaf or behind a carrot, and then hope that you will not notice there is just as much broccoli left on the plate at the end of the meal as there was at the beginning.

His proposal is based on rhetorical sleight of hand, as expressed in the assertion that we should, "restore the publishing phase as an integral part of the research life cycle." Simply asserting that publishing is (or used to be back in the good old days before Robert Maxwell), an "integral part" of the research process does nothing to change the fact that publishing entails costs subsequent to, and separate from, those entailed by scientific experimentation and study. If you get a \$100,000 grant and use it to conduct \$100,000 worth of research, the money required to prepare your results for publication, and then to distribute them by formal channels, will have to come from somewhere else. Now, there is another option and that is to conduct \$98,000 of research and use the remaining \$2,000 to cover the cost of formal publication. This number reflects my worthy opponent's proposal that 2% of research funds would be sufficient to cover those costs. The upside of this approach is free access. The downside is less research.

Another option is for authors to forego the services provided by traditional formal publication and distribute their work freely and in manuscript form online. Again, the upside to this is free access. The downside is the loss of the services that those publishers provide—services that both authors and readers seem to value, in light of authors' willingness to contribute content and readers' willingness to either pay subscription fees or pressure their libraries to do so. Both of these are real options, and both have real costs and real benefits. What is not a real option, however, is to make \$100,000 cover both \$100,000 worth of research and \$2,000 in publishing services. Chanting the magic phrase, "Publication is an integral part of the research life cycle," will not make that \$2,000 appear. You can try to hide the broccoli of cost behind the lettuce leaf of rhetoric, but it is still there.

What all of this means for the resolution before us today is that the costs entailed by publishing services under the currently prevailing system will either be covered or the services will not be provided. In other words, a fundamental restructuring of the current system will mean either that the services go away or that someone else will pay for them. Either of those options is available to us. But to be taken seriously, an argument in favor of one or the other of them will have to demonstrate why either of those options is either morally better or structurally more sustainable than the current one. Such an argument will have to have more substance to it than to say that our current system commodifies knowledge, and that is a bad thing.

Final Statements (Following Audience Q&A, Comments, etc.)

Jean-Claude Guédon: Ok, I will respond to that last statement by saying, of course I have thought about that, but this is exactly what you can build if the system is open. Some of it could be built publicly and some of it privately, but at least the basic infrastructural nature of the communication would be respected and open. The point of this whole thing is really to keep in mind what is at stake. What is at stake is optimizing, making as good as possible, the process of producing knowledge. Knowledge is maybe the place where

we feel most human. Where this is probably the most noble thing human beings can do: producing knowledge. Anything that can help that, that can open the discussion between all of us, those of us who can do it, who want to do it, is good, inherently good. I will never shy away from saying that. It may be naïve, it may be utopian, but I believe in that. And anything that is putting barriers against that, for whatever reason, even practical reasons, cannot be seen as anything but, at best, a regrettable problem. I rest my case.

Rick Anderson: Jean-Claude’s final sentence summarizes what I think is wrong with this resolution. We will all agree, of course, that creating knowledge is good. But to then follow that statement by saying “... and therefore anything that creates barriers between knowledge and people is bad”—well, that is easy to agree with in principle, except for the fact that the barriers exist organically; they exist regardless of what we think or do about them. They exist because producing, adding value to, and distributing knowledge cannot be done without cost. I can have a conversation with somebody and that is a very low-cost way of getting my knowledge to one person. I could speak to 100 people; that is a relatively low-cost of getting my

knowledge out to 100 people. But if I want to my thoughts to be reviewed and certified by reputable scholars and then communicated to 1,000 or to 50,000 people, then we start talking about serious barriers that cannot be overcome at no cost. The question at that point is not whether it would be wonderful if there were no cost; obviously, it would. The question is what is the best, most effective way to overcome that cost? No matter what we do, information will never be free. And the higher its quality, the more research it is based on, the more review and oversight it has gotten before public release, the more robustly it is made available—the more expensive it is likely to be.

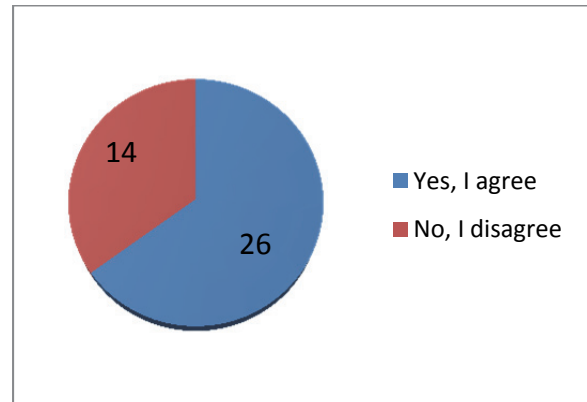


Figure 2. Closing Poll