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# Publishing for Public Knowledge

By Johan Fornäs, Martin Fredriksson, Eva Hemmungs Wirtén & Naomi Stead

Academic publishing is a strange business. One might hope and expect that most scholars, regardless of discipline, would see it as one of their major academic duties to share their findings, and to interact with their peers and the general populace, via literal public-ation – the making-public of new knowledge. But even with such lofty ideals, the *realpolitik* of where, when, and how academics publish their scholarly work – based on the contemporary pressures and tensions of funding environments, the quantification and metricisation of scholarly work, and mechanisms for recognition and career reward – can lead to some curious and even perverse effects.

Academics seem to operate according to an inverted economy in comparison to the rest of the publishing industry: while most professional or semi-professional writers expect to be paid for their publications, academics are not only happy to give their texts away for free, they are often also prepared to pay to have them published. This does not mean that academics go unrewarded: if the average academic's annual income is compared with her annual production of text the result would probably be that academics are paid more per published page than most other authors. The difference is that while most professional writers live from selling their texts, academics are not paid to produce text but to produce knowledge. Finding an output for that knowledge is a secondary concern in the sense that the texts will be produced regardless of whether there is a (commercial) demand for them or not – and that is as it should be. And yet the academic author still has to publish – supposedly both high a quality and quantity of texts – in order to satisfy the financiers and ensure future funding. This is what makes many academics willing to sign any publishing contract placed before them, regardless of the economic conditions, as long as it ensures them publication in a journal with high impact factor. Academic authors thus work according to the logic of 'Publishing for public knowledge' in the regard that the value of the text depends not on direct economic compensation but on how widely spread and quoted it is. But while this is partly motivated by the honourable wish to contribute to the public good, the public domain, and to advance the stock of human knowledge per se, academic attitudes to publishing are also framed and conditioned by other, less 'disinterested' and more instrumental aims.

However, most commercial publishers act according to a proprietary logic where the value of the text as a commodity depends on the publisher's capacity to sell it at the highest possible price to the largest possible audience. In effect, this

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means withholding it from broad, free public dissemination and reserving it for an exclusive circle of paying customers. The logic that drives this economy nevertheless relies on the inverted economy of the academic author, as it essentially involves proprietizing and commodifying the products of free labour: labour undertaken not only by the authors who write the articles but also by reviewers who evaluate them and guest editors who compile them. This is of course a bargain for commercial publishers who can package the final product and sell it to university libraries at a profit. '[t]he average U.S. research library now spends more than 65 per cent of its annual budget on subscriptions to the content of electronic materials and databases, a cost which has increased 402 per cent since 1986', according to Jafaar Aksikas and Sean Johnson Andrews (2014: 742). The (profitable) business model of academic publishers thus relies on a logic of selling access to research back to the same academic institutions that funded it in the first place.

The effect of all this has been that members of the general public, those who do not have access to an academic library with bulk journal subscriptions, can only access the research on an individual dowload basis, where the cost of downloading a single article can be shockingly high. Likewise, scholars and academics in less well-resourced academic contexts, where libraries can not afford journal subscriptions, are also unable to access it. The audience for such publications is thus doubly truncated: not just solely academics, but solely academics with institutional positions in wealthy, well resourced, usually developed countries. This hardly equates to any known definition of a 'public'.

Given that academic research is most often funded, directly or indirectly, by government funding, that is *public* money, the ironies and disparities of the model are clear. The political importance of access to new knowledge, and the power disparities underlined by the current system, are particularly acute in the case of medical research. In the case of Australia, for example, much medical research is funded by the National Health and Medical Research Council – a public agency. But while this research, with its cutting edge new knowledge on the causes and treatment of illness, can be accessed by doctors and medical researchers, it can largely not be accessed by the ordinary people who are sick – and seeking to inform themselves of the nature of their illness and their options for dealing with it. Clearly, in such cases, knowledge is power. While people might once have believed in a paternal and infallible medical profession to look after them, the public that funds such research often has a powerful, even life-or-death justification for accessing its results.

All this is of course old news to most academics. Recently the rather perverse model of academic publishing described above has been challenged not only by individual scholars but also by universities, funding institutions and policy makers. There is currently an increasingly mainstream trend towards Open Access publishing: a movement, and a critical position, that *Culture Unbound* was relatively early to adopt. It is still very much an open question what shape Open Ac-

cess will take as it continues to evolve, and how it will be financed. Many journals, such as *Culture Unbound*, are available free of charge, which of course requires other sources of funding. In the case of *Culture Unbound* that funding comes from Linköping University and the Swedish Research Council. Some might criticize such initiatives for contributing to an increased drain on the public purse. This position, however, reflects a rather naïve understanding of academic publication – which has never been able to carry its own costs on a free and private market, but has always relied on subscription fees from libraries that are in most cases publicly financed anyway. In that regard a *direct* public funding of academic journals might very well be more cost efficient than an indirect reallocation of public funds though a semi-commercial market.

In many ways, Open Access scholarly publishing is subject to the same tensions facing all online publishing – in the digitial environment everyone wants content but no one wants to pay. Nevertheless, as many have realized, Open Access publishing has new forms of commercial potential due to the possibility of charging the authors instead of the readers. There has recently been a rise of mega journals: huge depositories publishing texts. The articles are peer reviewed but the process is much quicker and less selective than used to be the case with traditional journals, which formerly staked their credibility on high rejection rates and exclusivity. In 2014, fourteen of the largest mega journals together published more than 33 000 articles, and the biggest, PLOS ONE, alone published 30 000 articles (Björk 2015). Despite the distaste with which such practices might be viewed in some academic circles, they are not illegal, nor even unethical, and clearly cater to a desperate need for publications. Another more shady example of how it is possible to profit from academics' need to publish are the 'literary agents' who have sometimes contacted the editors of *Culture Unbound* with offers to pay for publishing opportunities:

> Sir many […] authors wish and ask me publish their papers at foreign journals so we decided start Literary agency, sir I am making list of foreign journals for publishing papers, if I send paper as per Your guidelines will you publish it, I will edit as per your requirement and send you processing fee. I will take my charge from authors, Sir

It is difficult to determine exactly what is being offered here – is it freelance editorial services, funded at the expense of the author, or is it a straight up bribe, a payment for publication in a journal which (importantly) is known to be selective, and not pay-per-publication? In any case, the rise and apparent viability of such rent-seeking 'middle men' bespeaks a rampaging market for facilitators, and vehicles, of academic publication. This bears upon wider geo-political boundaries as would-be scholars in the 'global South' seek the publication credentials necessary for access to the PhD scholarships, academic jobs, and funding available in research institutions in developed countries.

## Between the Publishing Industry and University Economics

The desperate need to publish that haunts many academics also drives both the old publishing industry and the new models for Open Access publishing. This grows out of new expectations that scholars meet within the internal economics of the academy, which are changing just as fast as those of the publishing industry. On the one hand, neo-liberal efforts to commercialise and privatise universities have intensified. In Sweden, for instance, strong protests have temporarily halted a government reform that would open the door to sell out higher education and research to private foundations, but despite such strong resistance many still point to the UK as a deterring example in deregulating universities. *Public universities* cannot any longer be taken for granted, but need to be argued and fought for. Many feel a growing need to engage in the struggle for open, public universities against the insidious effects of privatisation and commercialisation. The *public* in this sense should not be reduced to consumers of commodities, nor be confined within national boundaries – instead publicness must allow for multiplicity and mobility along all possible dimensions, crossing intersecting identity orders such as nationality, ethnicity, class, gender or age as well as research areas (disciplines and themes) and academic levels (from students to senior faculty).

The kind of work prioritised by cultural researchers aims to produce *public knowledge*, open for sharing by any interested member of the general and global public, thus making 'unbound' what would otherwise be monopolised by closed elites. In the current situation, new threats but also new tools for such critical knowledge have appeared. On the other hand, the spread of new, social and digital media have also paved the way for new ways of making research public through Open Access and other forms of publishing. Publications such as academic journals are not just neutral tools for sharing results, but also core elements of the ambition to construct a universal but diverse intellectual sphere of knowledge. There is a need to acknowledge the new opportunities and threats facing academic publishing today, not least for those engaged in Open Access journals.

That is what we tried to do when we made 'Publishing for Public Knowledge' the theme of a workshop celebrating *Culture Unbound's* fifth anniversary, which was held in Norrköping in November 2014. This special issue is an output from that event, where we have invited the speakers from the workshop to develop their presentations into articles dealing with problems facing academia and academic publishing today.

## The Contributions

In 'How Green is this Paper' Toby Miller, somewhat provocatively, asks if all these publications are really needed; and if digital publishing is more environmentally sound than printed publication. Academia certainly seems to be suffering

from a publication glut that has been spurred on by the cult of digital publishing, which is often portrayed as virtually free of costs, both economically and environmentally. Miller discards this as a myth and concludes that digital publishing also has significant environmental impact. This calls for more concern with what is published and why.

In her article 'Swedish Publications in a Global World' Jenny Björkman discusses how new demands from funding bodies – who now increasingly require 'international impact' in addition to other traditional measures of quality – works to change the landscape of academic publishing. While the monograph traditionally has been the norm for publishing within the humanities and parts of the social sciences, there has recently been a shift towards publishing research results in articles in academic journals. If Miller discussed how this leads to a growing number of publications, Björkman argues that it also fosters a growing specialization in academic publishing where academics are becoming more focused on narrow issues and problems and increasingly loses the capacity to engage with social and cultural concerns on the more general level that is necessary to engage in public debate. The generalist public intellectual risks giving way to the highly specialised, but also narrow, disciplinary expert.

The flipside of this drive towards internationalization is that it tends to create an increasingly monolinguistic publication environment where the highest ranked publication channels only publish texts in English. Roman Horak discusses this dilemma in a Cultural Studies context in his contribution 'Translation, Cultural Translation and the Hegemonic English'. The hegemony of English is indeed very predominant in Cultural Studies, with its strong foundations in British academia. Horak's article engages with the issue of translation, both as a linguistic practice but also as a cultural transformation that may challenge not only the hegemony of the English language but also the perspectives on knowledge inherent in established academic traditions. Hopefully a proliferation of academic journals, English speaking as well as others, might contribute to such a development.

Eva Hemmungs Wirtén gives another perspective on the appropriation of knowledge. Her article 'The Patent and the Paper: A Few Thoughts on Late Modern Science and Intellectual Property' takes Marie Curie's choice not to patent her discovery of Radium as an example to discuss knowledge as a property or a public good. The decision not to patent radium and the processes of its extraction, is one of the most famous of all decisions in the history of science and is often seen as a prime example of the scientific ethos of openness. At the same time some of Curie's contemporaries also criticised that decision for enabling various misuses of Radium, which quickly became an ingredient in cosmetics and various kinds of 'miraculous' health cure. Just as with 'mega journals', this raises the question of whether making all knowledge free and public necessarily promotes the public good, or if it may in some cases corrupt or endanger that knowledge.

Geoff Stahl's contribution 'Performance Anxiety: Audit Culture and the Neoliberal New Zealand University' is a concrete example of how university economics affect publishing strrategies. He gives a detailed, empirical account of how the bibliometrical urge plays out in a research environment, in this case in academia in New Zealand. In 2002 New Zealand introduced the Performance Based Research Fund (PBRF): a new auditing regime that made research output, and not education as had previously been the case, the most important source for evaluating researchers and allocating funds. This is a clear empirical example of how mechanisms for resource-allocation within the universities contribute to an increase in publications. The question is of course whether that really ensures more and better research, or if it simply increases quantity.

If the universities and funding agencies require growing numbers of publications, preferably in Open Access, it should also lie in their interest to promote a growing number of OA journals. Jenny Johannisson addresses the role of the universities when she discusses 'Open Access Scholarly Publishing on the Competitive Market'. She looks at the drive towards OA academic publishing from a university management perspective, drawing on her own experience as a journal editor and deputy vice chancellor at a Swedish university. Johannisson argues that the universities have an important role to play in funding and in other ways enabling researchers to develop journals as part of their everyday academic tasks.

It is one of the more pressing tasks ahead for academics and universities to address what our future infrastructures of information and knowledge should look like. But to look to the future it is necessary to see the past: many of the highly topical questions addressed in this special issue of *Culture Unbound* are not new. Academic publishing in its present form rests on a tradition going back many hundreds of years. It is possible to learn from that history, even though the present comes with its own challenges. *Culture Unbound* is committed to uphold such a 'split-vision' of past and future, and to continue to encourage a creative and proactive discussion on how public knowledge comes about and how we might continue to defend its value. We do so with a largely new editorial team. With the five year anniversary workshop 'Publishing for Public Knowledge' in 2014 *Culture Unbound* welcomed Eva Hemmungs Wirtén as new Editor in Chief, following Johan Fornäs who founded the journal in 2009. Also in 2015, Johanna Dahlin succeeded Martin Fredriksson as Executive Editor, a role Martin had carried off brilliantly from the very beginning of the journal's existence. And finally, after a three-year tenure, Naomi Stead is about to take her leave as *Culture Unbound's* Associate Editor with this last 2015 issue. We will miss her generous input of ideas and astut readings of texts, but we welcome Stead and Fornäs to the editorial board. We are also convinced that our new associate editor and latest addition to the editorial team, James Meeese from Unversity of Technology in Sydney, will make a new and creative contribution to the new editorial troika that will make its distinctive mark on *Culture Unbound* for the years to come.

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