Open Access Scholarly Publishing on the Competitive Market: University Management as Obstacle and Enabler

By Jenny Johannisson

Abstract

This article explores the relation between university management and open access scholarly publishing in Sweden. Open access is generally promoted in Swedish national research policy, referring to internationally adopted recommendations on free access to knowledge by researchers and citizens alike. In principle, the conditions for universities to not only promote but also actively contribute to open access by hosting open access scholarly journals could therefore be deemed adequate. In reality, however, many universities choose to adapt only to external systems of assessment and disregard internal demands from the research community. Since hosting open access scholarly journals is not favored by existing external systems of assessment, university management that does not also act on internal demands from the research community runs the risk of becoming an obstacle rather than an enabler of open access scholarly publishing.

Keywords: Scholarly publishing, open access, university management

Introduction

In late modern Western democracies, making university-based research public is, or rather should be, a major concern for researchers, policy-makers, and citizens alike. While traditions vary across different disciplinary domains, publishing research in the text-based format could be considered a fundamental aspect of scholarly communication. That scholarly publications contribute to promoting public knowledge can of course be questioned from several perspectives. One perspective concerns the restricted access to scholarly publications implied by the specific qualifications necessary to actually understand the content of scholarly communication in general. Scholarly communication usually involves a discussion amongst peers in a given disciplinary domain, which presupposes a high level of expertise that excludes not only the public but also the majority of researchers from other disciplinary domains than the one at hand. Another perspective concerns the channels through which scholarly texts are communicated, be it a journal article or a monograph. Since scholarly text-based communication is still primarily legitimized by being published by more or less formalized bodies external to the researcher – preferably in the shape of a commercial publishing house – access to scholarly publications is restricted by the fees or other conditions that these external bodies stipulate. Bringing these two perspectives together and taking us back to university-based research, public research policy tends to promote an increasingly selective view of which communication channels should be considered legitimate, while the legitimate communication channels demand increasingly specialized content. When scholarly publishing has thus more or less turned into an intellectual asset on a global, competitive market, open access is introduced as the savior that will bring scholarly publishing back to its true objective, that is, to make knowledge public.

In this article, I will provides some reflections on open access scholarly publishing in relation to university management, drawing mainly on three personal and quite different experiences: first, the instigation and establishment of *Nordisk Kulturpolitisk Tidskrift*, a Nordic peer-reviewed and open access journal in the cultural policy research field, second, the instigation and establishment of *Culture Unbound*, and, finally, my more current experience of acting as a deputy vice-chancellor for research at my university. While intended for publication in an open access scholarly journal, this article should be considered essayistic rather than scholarly, since it is not based on the systematic study of empirical material generated within a specified research design. The experience that I will allow to dominate the text is that of being deputy vice-chancellor. When speaking from that position, my text should be considered explicitly political in that it argues for a specific standpoint that is based on values rather than theory. But I am still also a researcher, and my article will of course also be research based. The research that I will refer to has mainly been generated by my own discipline, that is, Library and Information Sci-

ence (LIS). This is no coincidence; scholarly publishing is a very interesting research field that definitely deserves to be elaborated further, from many different disciplinary and theoretical perspectives, and the little research that has been done so far has to a large extent emanated from LIS.

My main concern is to reflect on how university management, in a Swedish context, deals with the issue of open access scholarly publishing. Open access scholarly publishing could of course include any kind of scholarly publication provided by any relevant agent in the open access format, but I will mainly refer to open access scholarly journals instigated and owned by a university. As a researcher, my interests primarily lie in public policy making, preferably in the cultural policy field. Drawing on a perspective generated by this interest, my article concerns the relation between public policy making in the field of research and higher education in Sweden of today, and the policies on open access scholarly publishing generated by university management. I am interested in exploring how university management aims at promoting as well as prohibiting specific forms of behavior concerning open access scholarly journals. This interest concerns a very fundamental aspect of our Western notion of scholarly research, namely what kind of behavior is promoted and prohibited when scholars communicate their research to others; the cultural politics of scholarly communication, so to speak. Is university management primarily an obstacle to open access scholarly journals or could (and should) it work as an enabler of such activities? In this article, university management includes all those functions at different levels within a university that have formal power over strategic decision-making and, perhaps most importantly, resource allocation. Administrators, researchers and teachers at a university have more or less access to (or interest in) processes led by university management. In some way or other, however, decisions made by university management have consequences for every employee. Management decisions thus provide one important framework for what is possible and impossible (or at least very difficult) to do within a university. Both university staff and university management also have to relate to decisions made by the Swedish national government, in particular, of course, in the policy field of research and higher education.

Open access and public policy making

When writing this article, I started with searching for some kind of general mapping of Swedish university policies towards open access scholarly journals, and, more specifically, analyses of tendencies in such policies. I could find neither, which, to my mind, again points to the need for more research on scholarly publishing. Instead, I have to turn to the more general tendencies in public policy making relevant to both universities and the format of open access.

In Sweden, as in most Western countries, the general tendency in public policy making directed at academic research could be summarized in the following guiding principles: first, universities are considered agents on the competitive market and thus universities are rewarded with public funding when they deliver specific achievements; second, concerning scholarly publishing, these achievements are mainly delimited to articles in international peer reviewed journals in English, preferably included in Web of Science; and, finally, when auditing the specific achievements of specific universities, quantitative rather than qualitative indicators are applied, using the amount of articles and, in particular, the amount of citations of articles as the basis for developing the indicators. The underlying rationale referred to when public policy makers – and university managers – argue in favor of these guiding principles is that they are the best available in a system that positions external quality assurance as a necessary condition for high academic quality at any individual university or in any individual piece of research. This rationale is not least evident in the recent bills on research and innovation that the Swedish government has provided. From 2010 and onwards, a specified part (as of today, 10 percent[1]) of national research funding is allocated according to bibliometric indicators. University policies on internal resource allocation have more or less adopted the same model, as Gustaf Nelhans and Pieta Eklund (2015) show in a report on bibliometrics as a tool in university management. Also at my own university, the local resource allocation model mirrors the national model. And hey, we all want quality, don't we?

The consequences of the aforementioned guiding principles are well known in a Swedish university context. Only certain research fields, such as medicine, deliver in a way that is considered satisfactory by the system. The humanities and large parts of the social sciences are financially punished for applying different guiding principles when publishing research, for example by publishing a monograph rather than an article, or in Swedish rather than in English. Drawing on personal experience with establishing a Nordic scholarly journal on cultural policy research, that publishes articles in English but primarily articles in the Scandinavian languages, such a journal was possible to instigate in 1995 but would be extremely difficult to instigate today. I am happy to say, though, that the journal is still published, due to the contributions of four Nordic universities of which my own university is one.

The definition and use of quantitative indicators when measuring academic quality and using the results as one component in the allocation of national research funding has fuelled intense and well-known debate and critique from researchers, universities and national research funding bodies. The Swedish Research Council (2015b) has recently presented a model for evaluating quality in research at Swedish universities that relies more on peer review of actual research content than on bibliometrics as a tool for quality assessment. Having said this, however, I would argue that one basic problem remains: public policy makers and university manage-

ment still primarily aim at adapting to a system that is considered external to themselves, rather than at transforming the system by relying more heavily on internally generated guiding principles for defining and achieving high academic quality. In his doctoral thesis, Gustaf Nelhans (2013) promotes an understanding of citation practices that emanates from STS, Science and Technology Studies, which considers citation practices as created, upheld and transformed in interaction between the researcher, the article and the citation index, rather than an understanding of such practices as the mere application of objective quality criteria for when choosing who to cite or not. Transferred to a more general context of scholarly publishing, I would argue that policy makers, university managers and researchers tend to forget that they contribute to reproducing the existing system by not challenging its absolute and putatively objective character. I would also argue that when a university decides to instigate and own an open access scholarly journal it can be an important way of recognizing the transformative power that university management potentially can exercise; an act of resistance, so to speak, against the general trend amongst universities to merely adapt to external demands.

Digitization and public knowledge

A force that has greatly contributed to enabling the existing system of governance in Swedish and Western public research policy is digitization. In order for bibliometrics to be used as a tool for quality assessment on any greater scale, digital tools are a prerequisite for enabling the aggregation and analysis of the "big data" on publishing. Digitization has of course also been a prerequisite for the massive expansion of scholarly publishing at a general level, that is, a prerequisite for there being any big data available at all. But simultaneously, digitization has also provided us with new tools to access a much greater amount of scholarly publications than previously. The open access movement could be considered an initiative taken to counteract the negative effects of the centralization of power over academic content to commercial publishing houses. Following the Berlin Declaration adopted in 2005, several universities have now integrated open access as an important criterion in their own strategies on scholarly publication. It has helped, of course, that the major national research funding bodies, as well as the European Union, have since 2010 and onwards introduced this as a prerequisite for acquiring public funding (see Francke 2013).

In Sweden, where the longstanding although not unquestioned guiding principle in research policy is that universities should primarily be a concern for public policy, the open access movement resonates well with the more general principle in public policy making: that publically funded activities should all aim at strengthening democracy, which in the case of universities implies that every citizen (not only every researcher) should have access to relevant information and knowledge generated by those bodies. Or put in more crude terms: when the tax payers pick up the

bill, they should also have access to what they are paying for. Certainly, what could (for the lack of a better term) be called the research community, has an equally longstanding tradition of arguing that the autonomy of both the individual researcher and of the research practice is crucial if wanting to achieve high academic quality, which has also contributed to the official view on scholarly publishing. In the Swedish Higher Education Act (Swedish Code of Statutes (SFS) No. 1992:1434), it is stated in the sixth paragraph of the first chapter that the general principles for research at universities should be that the research problem as well as research methods should be chosen freely, and that research results should be published freely.

In what could be considered a prolongation of the open access movement, Swedish government and Swedish national funding bodies are now increasingly demanding not only publication of research results in the open access format,[2] but also that the research data that underlie the publications are stored in a way that make them accessible, not perhaps to the public but to other researchers. In addition to expanding the body of research data accessible to the research community, such a development could potentially make the research process more transparent, thereby discouraging research misconduct. Within the academic profession, several researchers already use (and more voices are heard in the favor of using) the institutional digital archive that each university upholds, not only as a tool for keeping track of the universities' publications as well as a tool for parallel publishing, but also as a pre-print archive. The pre-print archive and new tools for communicating research that, for example, social media provide, increasingly strengthens the possibility for researchers to receive and give response to scholarly work that has not even been submitted for publication. Thus it would seem that taken together, the new and different tools that digitization provides researchers and university management with, could potentially both strengthen and transform our production, dissemination and use of scholarly publications.

The need to work both with and against conformity

As always, however, other forces are simultaneously at work. One of them, again, is partly generated by the research community itself. In her report on the approach of university libraries to issues of publication, Helena Francke (2013) shows not only that the way in which open access is actually practiced varies greatly between different research fields, she also reminds us of the results in her doctoral thesis on open access scholarly journals, namely that the new medium has not transformed the genre of scholarly journal articles in itself (Francke 2008). The sometimes expressed fear that digitization and open access contributes to watering down quality criteria established by the research community thus seems somewhat unfounded. Concerning the role of the university as instigator and owner of scholarly open access journals, Francke (2013) also provides some support for my initial expectation,

that is, that university management tends to consider this an activity that often interferes with the general strategy of promoting publication in high-ranked scholarly journals that always seem to be published by "someone else", that is, by a body external to the university. Several researchers have instigated open access scholarly journals at Swedish universities, but few of them persist over time. As I know from experience, it takes a lot of hard work to keep a journal like *Culture Unbound* going. University management is sometimes reluctant to let members of staff give priority to such work, since it seemingly interferes with the task of doing research and achieving points granted by external systems of assessment. When taking such a position, university management becomes an obstacle to open access scholarly publishing.

To conclude, I would recommend that any university manager should resist such simplistic conclusions, drawn against the backdrop of a simplistic view of university management. Any university that wants to make a claim on high academic quality has to not only deliver according to criteria set by the research policy system, but also according to criteria set by the research community. If a gap or blind spot is discovered, where existing research has no outlet or where a new outlet would promote research further, I would encourage any university manager to enable an attempt at using the university as a host of such an outlet in the open access format. I think that *Culture Unbound* is an example that proves my point.

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Notes

[1] An additional 10 percent are allocated according to the indicator of external research funding. A total of 20 percent of national research funding is thus allocated according to specific achievements by the universities (Proposition 2012/13:30, *Forskning och innovation*).

[2] Again, Swedish research policy follows EU recommendations. In February 2015, the Swedish Research Council delivered suggested guidelines for open access to both research data and scholarly publications. The guidelines promote open access to research data generated from publically funded research as soon as possible, while full open access to scholarly publications based on such research should should be achieved by 2025 (Swedish Research Council 2015a).

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