



Log In

Join HuffPost

NEWS

POLITICS

ENTERTAINMENT

LIFE

PERSONAL

VOICES

SHOPPING

VIDEO

U.S. Edition

THE BLOG [EDUCATION](#) [ACADEMIC PUBLISHING](#) [NIH](#)

Academic Journals: The Most Profitable Obsolete Technology in History

The music business was killed by Napster; movie theaters were derailed by digital streaming; traditional magazines are in crisis mode--yet in this digital information wild west: academic journals and the publishers who own them are posting higher profits than nearly any sector of commerce.

By **Jason Schmitt**, Contributor

Writer and Associate Professor of Communication & Media at Clarkson University

Dec 23, 2014, 10:00 AM EST | Updated Feb 21, 2015

This post was published on the now-closed HuffPost Contributor platform. Contributors control their own work and posted freely to our site. If you need to flag this entry as abusive, [send us an email](#).

The music business was killed by Napster; movie theaters were derailed by digital streaming; traditional magazines are in crisis mode--yet in this digital information wild west: academic journals and the publishers who own them are posting higher profits than nearly any sector of commerce.

Academic publisher Elsevier, which owns a majority of the prestigious academic journals, has higher operating profits than Apple. In 2013, Elsevier posted [39 percent](#) profits, according to Heather Morrison, assistant professor at the University of Ottawa's School of Information Studies in contrast to the [37 percent](#) profit that Apple displayed.

This lucrative nature of academic publishing comes at a price--and that weight falls on the shoulders of the full higher education community which is already bearing the burden of significantly decreasing academic budgets. "A large research university will pay between \$3-3.5 million a year in academic subscription fees --the majority of which goes to for-profit academic publishers," says Sam Gershman, a postdoctoral fellow at MIT who assumes his post as an assistant professor at Harvard next year. In contrast to the exorbitant prices for access, the majority of academic journals are produced, reviewed, and edited on a volunteer basis by academics who take part in the tasks for tenure and promotion.

The Morning Email

Wake up to the day's most important news.

SIGN UP

By entering your email and clicking Sign Up, you're agreeing to let us send you customized marketing messages about us and our advertising partners. You are also agreeing to our [Terms of Service](#) and [Privacy Policy](#).

"Even the Harvard University Library, which is the richest university library in the world, sent out a letter to the faculty saying that they can no longer afford to pay for all the journal subscriptions," says Gershman. While this current publishing environment is hard on large research institutions, it is wreaking havoc on small colleges and universities because these institutions cannot afford access to current academic information. This is clearly creating a problematic situation.

Paul Millette, director of the Griswold Library at Green Mountain College, a small 650 student environmental liberal arts college in Vermont, talks of the enormous pressures access to academic journals have placed on his library budgets. "The cost-of-living has increased at 1.5 percent per year yet the journals we subscribe to have consistent increases of 6 to 8 percent every year." Millette says he cannot afford to keep up with the continual increases and the only way his library can afford access to journal content now is through bulk databases. Millette points out that database subscription seldom includes the most recent, current material and publishers purposefully have an embargo of one or two years to withhold the most current information so libraries still have a need to subscribe directly with the journals. "At a small college, that is what we just don't have the money to do. All of our journal content is coming from the aggregated database packages--like a clearing house so to speak of journal titles," says Millette.

"For Elsevier it is very hard to purchase specific journals--either you buy everything or you buy nothing," says Vincent Lariviere, a professor at Université de Montréal. Lariviere finds that his university uses 20 percent of the journals they subscribe to and 80 percent are never downloaded. "The pricing scheme is such that if you subscribe to only 20 percent of the journals individually, it will cost you more money than taking everything. So people are stuck."

Where To Go:

"Money should be taken out of academic publishing as much as possible. The money that is effectively being spent by universities and funding agencies on journal access could otherwise be spent on reducing tuition, supporting research, and all things that are more important than paying corporate publishers," says Gershman. John Bohannon, a biologist and *Science* contributing correspondent, is in agreement and says, "Certainly a huge portion of today's journals could and should be just free. There is no value added in going with the traditional model that was built on paper journals, with having people whose full time job was to deal with the journal, promote the journal and print the journal, and deal with librarians. All that can now be done essentially for free on the internet."

Although the prior clearly sounds like the path toward the future, Bohannon says from his vantage point the prior is not one-size-fits-all: "The most important journals will always look pretty much like they do today because it is actually a really hard job." Bohannon finds that

the more broad journals such as *Science*, *Nature*, and *Proceeding of the National Academy of Science* (PNAS) will always need privatized funding to complete the broad publication tasks.

Another Option?

"A better approach to academic publishing is to cut out the whole notion of publishing. We don't really need journals as traditionally conceived. The primary role of traditional journals is to provide peer review and for that you don't need a physical journal—you just need an editorial board and an editorial process," says Gershman.

Gershman lays out his vision for the future of academic publishing and says that a very different sort of publishing system would be that everybody could post papers to a pre-print server similar to the currently existing arXiv.org. After posting research, then the creator selects to submit it to a journal, which is essentially sending them the links to your paper on the pre-print server. The journal editorial board do the same editorial process that exists now—if your paper is accepted to their journal they can put their imprimatur on your paper saying it was accepted to this journal—but there is no actual journal—it is just a stamp of approval.

What Gershman's concept does is remove most of the costs from the equation. The cost for running this pre-print server would be a shared cost for all universities and funding agencies and could clearly infuse millions upwards of billions back into the broad higher education system should an overarching system be implemented and respected.

Bohannon is not convinced the prior is an easy sell. "We would need a real revolution. By revolution I mean a cultural revolution among academics. They would have to totally change the way they do business and, despite having the reputation of being revolutionary, academics are pretty conservative. As a culture, academia moves pretty slow." Nathan Hall, professor at McGill University, follows Bohannon's reasoning and says, "I think there is a sense of security in maintaining a set of agreements with known publishers with reputations like Wiley or Elsevier. I think universities aren't quite aware of the benefits and logistics of a new system and they are comfortable maintaining existing relationships despite some questionability for what the publishers are providing."

Open Access for the Future?

"The phrase 'open access' can mean several things," says Lariviere. Open access on a broad scale refers to unrestricted online access for peer-reviewed research. Lariviere details how publishers have co-opted this terminology and in doing so perhaps increased profit further. "Elsevier says you can publish in open access, but in reality it means paying twice for the papers. They will ask me 'do you want to publish your paper open access' which means paying between \$500 and \$5,000 additional for that specific paper to be freely available to everyone. At the same time, they will not reduce the subscription cost to the overall journal, which means they are making twice the money on that specific paper. If you ask me if this type of open access is the way to go, the answer is no."

Luckily large granting bodies have begun using their clout to push toward true open access. The National Institute of Health (NIH) has been a longstanding champion for creating open access. Since 2008, the NIH has had a mandate for all research funded by that body to be published open access. Recently, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation brought their clout into the open access conversation. Starting in January 2015 all work funded through the Gates Foundation will be open access and the foundation says: "We have adopted an Open Access policy that enables the unrestricted access and reuse of all peer-reviewed published research funded, in whole or in part, by the foundation, including any underlying data sets."

As higher education is redefined to meet the needs and affordability required of the 21st century certainly the most basic functions of sharing academic research need to be retooled. There is no reason an academic publisher should have such a significantly different economic picture from standard publishers. The stark contrast is troubling as it tells just how far from reality our higher education system has traversed. Correspondingly, there is no reason universities should pay \$3.5 million to have access to peer-reviewed data. This academic conversation is society's conversation--and it is time that the digital revolution level one last playing field: because we, the people, deserve access.

RELATED

[EDUCATION](#) [ACADEMIC PUBLISHING](#) [NIH](#) [BILL AND MELINDA GATES FOUNDATION](#)

[← GO TO HOMEPAGE](#)

BEFORE YOU GO



Jason Schmitt, Contributor 

Writer and Associate Professor of Communication & Media at Clarkson University

[Suggest a correction](#)

POPULAR IN THE COMMUNITY

YOU MAY LIKE

Expert du côlon: "J'implore tous les Français de rincer leur côlon avec cette astuce"

Nutrivia | Sponsored

Trous de mémoire ? Cerveau au ralenti ? Faites ce geste 1 fois par jour

Science Actualité | Sponsored

Voici pourquoi il ne faut pas acheter de pompe à chaleur en 2023

Pompes à chaleur | Sponsored

C'est voté: Ne payez pas votre pompe à chaleur si vous êtes propriétaire dans ces 5 régions

Aides et subventions | Sponsored

Remède anti-inflation : investir 15,000€ dans un parking rapporte jusqu'à 14 %

Actualité des placements | Sponsored

La vérité sur les subventions solaires : évitez les arnaques

Aide Solaire 2023 | Sponsored

Classement des meilleures mutuelles senior

Lecomparateurassurance.com | Sponsored

L'État paye intégralement votre pompe à chaleur réversible (chauffage et climatisation)

Solution Écologique | Sponsored

Voici l'astuce pour profiter de l'installation de panneaux solaires à 100% financés !

Droits en Ligne | Sponsored

Et si les États-Unis n'étaient pas entrés dans la WW2 ? Ce jeu simule une histoire alternative

Le jeu Call of War simule histoire alternative . Jouez les moments importants du 20e siècle !

Jeu de Stratégie Historique | Sponsored

Lauren Boebert Tried To Throw Shade At Rachel Maddow And Got A Stark Reminder

HuffPost

Gavin Newsom Offers Theory On What Happened To His Ex-Wife, Kimberly Guilfoyle

MORE IN EDUCATION



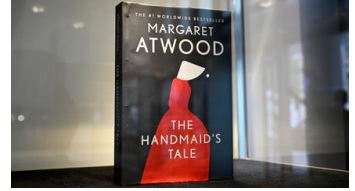
Marjorie Taylor Greene Shares Unhinged Details Of Her 'National Divorce' Idea



Ron DeSantis Reportedly Took Advantage Of AP Classes He Now Wants To Deny Florida Kids



Biden Slams Gov. Ron DeSantis' Relentless Push To Dumb Down Florida Education



Republicans Are Testing An Unpopular Strategy In A Tiny, Rural Community



College Board Rips Florida Over 'Slander' Of AP African American Studies Course



College Students In Boston Studying How To Dance Like A Rockette



Tennessee House Speaker Mulls Rejecting US Education Money



What To Do When Your Kid Says They Hate School



Will Smith Makes Private Appearance At Mississippi College To Meet Students



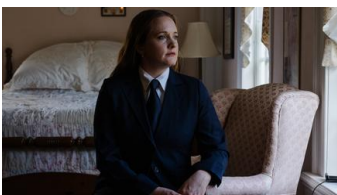
College Board Upends AP African American Studies Course After Attack By DeSantis



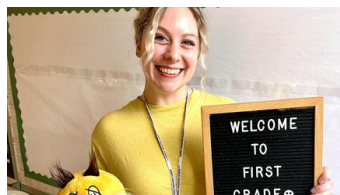
These School Employees Are Crucial — But They Don't Qualify For Family Leave



Ron DeSantis Plans To Defund Diversity Programs In Florida Universities



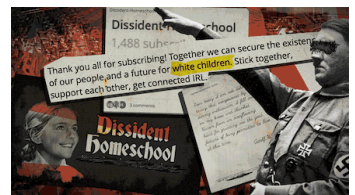
This Pilot Quit Her Job. Her Employer Billed Her \$20,000.



Virginia School Where 6-Year-Old Boy Shot Teacher Reopens With Greater Security



Megyn Kelly Mocked For Having A Meltdown Over Jill Biden's Title



Inside The Online Community Where Home-Schoolers Learn How To Turn Their Kids Into 'Wonderful Nazis'



Trump Calls For 'Certifying' Patriotic Teachers, Election Of Principals By School Parents



Ron DeSantis Threatened With Legal Action Over AP African American Studies Ban



School Staff Warned 6-Year-Old Had A Gun 3 Times Before He Shot Teacher, Lawyer Says



Ron DeSantis' 'Anti-Woke' Education Agenda Just Got A Big Boost



Texas Middle School Parts Ways With Teacher Who Assigned Racial Slur Worksheets



Parents Of 6-Year-Old Who Shot Teacher Speak Out For First Time



Florida Bans AP African-American History Course Over 'Educational Value'



Ex-NFL Coach Tony Dungy Spreads Kitty-Litter Myth And Twitter Gets Catty



Georgia Football Player, Staffer Killed In Crash After Bulldogs' Championship Parade



Football Coach Forces Players To Do Hundreds Of Pushups Before Several Hospitalized



Seattle Schools Sue Tech Giants Over Social Media Harm



Florida School District Bans Book About Same-Sex Penguin Couple: Report



Mastermind Of College Admissions Bribery Scandal Faces Sentencing



'I Bawled': A Congresswoman's 18-Month Fight For A Neglected Tribal School Just Paid Off



Trans Kids Stuck In Limbo As Virginia Delays Anti-Trans Policies



Feds Open Investigation Into Texas Schools After Removal Of LGBTQ Books



Poll Shows 'Critical Race Theory' Attacks Flopped In Midterms



Millions Of Student Debt Forgiveness Applicants Get False Good News Email



The Best STEM Gifts For School-Age Kids, According To Education Experts



Florida Formally Dismisses QB Jalen Kitna Amid Child Porn Charges



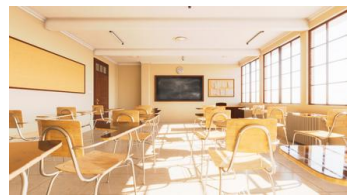
Biden Pauses Student Loan Payments While Debt Relief Plan Is Tied Up In Court



Mike Pompeo Names 'The Most Dangerous Person In The World' And It's A Surprise



John Stamos Downplays Lori Loughlin's Involvement In College Admission Scandal



My Teacher Chose An Unthinkable Way To Teach Us About Slavery. I'm Still Haunted By It.

[NEWS](#)

[POLITICS](#)

[ENTERTAINMENT](#)

[LIFE](#)

[VOICES](#)

[HUFFPOST PERSONAL](#)

[ELECTIONS](#)

[NEWSLETTERS](#)

[ABOUT US](#)

[ADVERTISE](#)

[CONTACT US](#)

[RSS](#)

[FAQ](#)

[CAREERS](#)

[ARCHIVE](#)

[USER AGREEMENT](#)

[COMMENT POLICY](#)

[DMCA POLICY](#)

[HUFFPOST PRESS ROOM](#)

[ACCESSIBILITY STATEMENT](#)

[PRIVACY POLICY](#)

[CONSENT PREFERENCES](#)