Scholarly communications shouldn't just be open, but non-profit too

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Much of the rhetoric around the future of scholarly communication hinges on the "open" label. In light of Elsevier's recent acquisition of bepress and the announcement that, owing to high fees, an established mathematics journal's editorial team will split from its publisher to start an open access alternative, ***Jefferson Pooley*** *argues that the scholarly communication ecosystem should aim not only to be open but non-profit too. The profit motive is fundamentally misaligned with core values of academic life, potentially corroding ideals like unfettered inquiry, knowledge-sharing, and cooperative progress. There are obstacles to forging a non-profit alternative, from sustainable funding to entrenched cynicism, but such a goal is worthy and within reach.*

Two big stories swept through scholarly publishing last week. Elsevier, the sprawling commercial publisher, bought bepress, the admired institutional-repository software maker. The acquisition distressed librarians and open access (OA) advocates around the world. bepress, nominally for-profit but in a mom-and-pop sense, had been swallowed whole by the ruthless profiteer that scholars love to boycott. Elsevier's extortionate subscription pricing, its late-breaking OA opportunism, and its recent buying spree have left bepress customers – academic librarians, for the most part – feeling betrayed.

The second story cut the other way. Earlier in the week, the editors of the *Journal of Algebraic Combinatorics* announced plans to jump ship from the journal's owner, publishing giant SpringerNature, to start an open access alternative, *Algebraic Combinatorics*. The editors, joined by nearly all the editorial board, cited Springer's practice of "double dipping" – high subscription fees *and* steep author charges to unlock single articles. Springer and other commercial publishers, the editors wrote in their press release announcing the move, are "profiting from the volunteer labour of the academic community, and adding little value".

So bepress went big-league commercial, even as the math editors opted out of the for-profit system. The new journal's owner is MathOA, a non-profit foundation run by scholars. The group is modelled after LingOA, another scholar-governed non-profit whose three journals all flipped from commercial publishers. Both groups have committed themselves to "fair" open access principles, which, among other things, "strongly recommend" that journal owners be "fully" non-profit. "A for-profit company accountable only to shareholders", the statement pointedly stresses, "is not compatible" with these principles.

So the new *Algebraic Combinatorics* journal will be open access, and won't be charging usurious author processing charges. But the non-profit, scholar-run nature of its governance is, arguably, the crucial move. MathOA can't be bought by Elsevier. bepress had no such protection. As a for-profit – even a mission-driven one – it was a fattened target.

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Scholarly communication is up for grabs. The bound journal volume is already gone, and the paper-codex monograph, for all its armchair tenacity, is likely to give way too. There are lots of exciting models for what published research might look like, even in the near future. What's unclear – what's really up for grabs – is whether the new ecology will be non-profit or venture-funded. There's a contest underway, pitting non-profit platforms and initiatives, supported by foundations like Andrew W. Mellon and Alfred P. Sloan, against projects underwritten by the legacy publishing industry and Silicon Valley venture-capital firms. The contest isn't really about feature sets or new formats: the basic values of the academic enterprise are at stake. We have the chance to disrupt (to repurpose a stale verb) the strange, if explainable, joint-custody arrangement we currently have: non-profit universities and for-profit publishers. A publishing ecosystem centered on scholarly values – rather than 30 per cent, Elsevier-style profit margins – is within reach. For that to happen, we have to throw our weight behind the non-profits, before it's too late.

Without fanfare, the two camps are already forming, the one profit-seeking and the other mission-committed. Rival infrastructures are getting built, with dozens of startups and initiatives in one or the other camp. The for-profits have a head start in the natural sciences, while most foundation-funded efforts are centered on the (presumably less lucrative) humanities. It's hard to tell which projects are out to make money, since ownership details get buried behind splashy landing pages that, like their non-profit counterparts, tout "the rise of open research". But the for-profits already have a big footprint.

Take Digital Science, a startup incubator owned by the German publishing conglomerate Holtzbrinck, which also owns a majority share of SpringerNature. Digital Science invests in, or owns outright, a stable of future-facing firms: Altmetric, the analytics tracker; figshare, the data repository; ReadCube, the fast-growing reference manager; Overleaf, a scholarly writing tool; TetraScience, a lab-instrument dashboard; and on and on.

Holtzbrinck's Digital Science portfolio is, in effect, an ecosystem-in-waiting – a bet on the scholarly communication landscape of the near future.

Or consider Authorea, the lauded writing platform started by a pair of physicists who met at CERN. In 2014 the founders took on a $610,000 investment from a pair of New York venture capital firms and, two years later, $1.5 million more from a Silicon Valley-based VC. So it was no surprise when, later that year, Authorea itself bought another innovative science-software startup, The Winnower, which champions open access and post-publication peer review.

Even the repository and social-sharing platforms that scholars use to find books and articles – and to distribute their own work – are increasingly dollar-driven. In the profit-seeking camp are Elsevier's trio of recent acquisitions: the Social Science Research Network, Mendeley (the popular reference manager-cum-network) and now bepress. And the two heavyweight academic social networks, Academia.edu and ResearchGate, are both funded by Silicon Valley venture capital firms.

Meanwhile, the Mellon Foundation has seeded over a dozen high-profile initiatives on scholarly publishing. Since 2014, Mellon has disbursed over $27 million to projects that – taken together – look a lot like an alternative infrastructure for spreading scholarship. Among the many Mellon-funded projects is Manifold, an open-source monograph publishing platform built by the University of Minnesota Press and CUNY, which recently launched in beta. Mellon has seeded an open-access journal platform too, the in-progress Vega – a rich-media alternative to the venerable Open Journal Systems. The foundation also supports the Open Library of Humanities, the UK-based journal platform known for its novel library-subsidy model for open-access publishing. Even the web-annotation software hypothes.is ("the internet, peer reviewed") receives substantial Mellon funding.

One of the foundation's backend projects is Editoria, an open-source digital book-production platform in active development. Another is UNC Press's Longleaf Services, which used Mellon funds to expand its suite of production services to its university press clients. And then there's Michigan Publishing's Fulcrum, which aims to host books *and* journals, as well as "new forms of multimodal publications". There are other initiatives in gestation – a Yale University Press portal for image-based monographs, an NYU project to develop a semantic-tagging rethink of the book index, and a Stanford effort to develop a platform and peer-review process for digital humanities web-based work.

On the repository and social-sharing side, non-profits include arXiv and bioRxiv, along with the new SocArXiv, announced just months after Elsevier's SSRN acquisition. Mellon has even funded an alternative to Academia.edu and ResearchGate, Humanities Commons. The new open-source site's mission is to provide a "trusted, non-profit network" for scholars – and not, in a thinly veiled dig at its venture-funded rivals, to generate "profits from users' intellectual and personal data".

It's easy to see the connective logic of the Mellon initiatives: there's a project-by-project division of labour that, as a distributed whole, looks like a full publishing ecosystem – a digital-first successor to our PDF-and-print purgatory. The armada of Mellon projects is also an implicit rival to the for-profit startups incubated by Holtzbrinck and the venture-capital firms. Together with the Center for Open Science, founded in 2013 with support from the Laura and John Arnold Foundation, and the Public Knowledge Project, the group behind Open Journal Systems, the Mellon-seeded initiatives represent a scholarly front in a battle that is already underway.

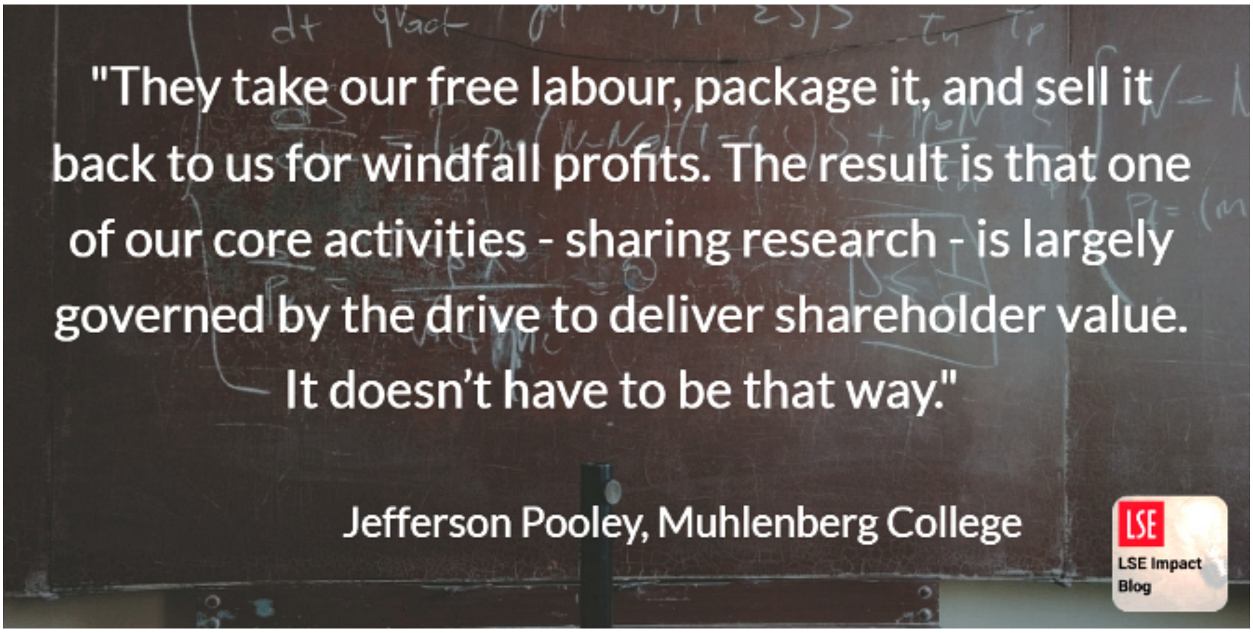
Image credit: Write the future by Felipe Gavronski. This work is licensed under a CC BY 2.0 license.

Most of the rhetoric around the future of scholarly communication hinges on the "open" label, and for good reason: the internet, together with the longstanding willingness of scholars to write for free, really has made possible an "unprecedented social good". But there's nothing about open access per se that precludes for-profit provision – indeed, the prevailing author-pays model made quick converts of the commercial publishing industry. As long as they retain the lion's share of the estimated $10 billion sloshing around in library serials spending, the incumbent publishers are happy to evangelise for OA. And nearly all the for-profit digital startups, from Academia.edu to Authorea to figshare, profess a commitment to open science.

So it's fair question: if everyone is working for the same "open" future, why carp about earnings and shareholders? The main reason is that the profit motive is misaligned, fundamentally, with the core values of academic life. The market's restless rent-seeking corrodes ideals like unfettered inquiry, knowledge-sharing, and cooperative progress. We see this on our own campuses: in sponsored biomedical research, "technology transfer" patent offices, and the miasmic spread of business jargon. We rightly resist the market's campus incursions; there's no reason why we should exempt scholarly communication – the thing that knits our institutions together – from that same scrutiny.

The business context matters, of course. Privately held companies are not subject to the relentless, quarter-to-quarter desperation to beat Wall Street expectations like their publicly traded peers. Venture-backed start-ups face the unique ferocity of the VC "100x" endgame: the company's sale, IPO, or shuttering. Scale and scope matter too: a tiny software independent like Scrivener developer Literature and Latte has a mission-conscious freedom of manoeuvre that just isn't possible for a Fortune 500 information conglomerate like the Elsevier parent RELX Group – which, like all publicly owned companies, has a legal obligation to maximise shareholder value.

So there's no simple, bright line captured by the "for-profit" moniker. What counts, instead, are the incentive structures that guide companies. The disturbing thing about the for-profit scholarly communication ecosystem, even at this embryonic stage, is that so much of it sits on the value-extraction end of the continuum. And the bits that aren't – the smaller, independent firms – are always and already acquisition targets. bepress is only the latest case in point.



We're in a soupy interregnum, brought on by new affordances and the cost savings of digital publishing. If the future is indeed "open", the question really is: what kind of open?

Over the last few decades, a handful of oligopolist firms have come to dominate scholarly publishing. They take our free labour, package it, and sell it back to us for windfall profits. The result is that one of our core activities – sharing research – is largely governed by the drive to deliver shareholder value. It doesn't have to be that way.

We are, nearly all of us, committed to the university tradition, which (among other things) means that we conduct our teaching and research outside the profit system. How strange, then, that we delegate the bulk of our knowledge-sharing to firms whose goal – by design and by incentive – is to "monetise" us. We know how it happened: a more costly and specialised service, in the era of print production, was outsourced to small firms which, by merger and acquisition, gave way to the publishing conglomerates. Along the way, scholarly societies – now reliant on the rents – auctioned their own journal "portfolios" to the highest bidder.

We have the chance, in this moment of flux, to wrest it all back from Elsevier – to choose MathOA, in effect, over bepress. It's true that there are lots of obstacles, starting with the foundation underwriting for the emerging non-profit ecosystem. The foundation grant cycle favours the first infrastructural step, without the built-in maintenance revenue of a corporate parent, venture funder, or monthly subscription. The humanities bent of Mellon's initiatives in particular – in tandem with the frenetic private-sector investment in the natural sciences – risks a two-cultures divide between corporate OA for the science journal and foundation subsidies for the monograph. There is also the big challenge of weaning off would-be allies on the non-profit side – scholarly societies and university presses – from their dependence on subscription revenues.

Perhaps the steepest obstruction is our own well-earned cynicism. The university, with its audit culture and industry "partnerships", is already so entangled with corporate values that its "non-profit" status strikes many of us as hollow. What difference does it make, by extension, to bring scholarly publishing back into the fold, when the "fold" itself is shot through with market thinking?

The first set of challenges, around sustainable funding for a non-profit infrastructure, has a viable answer: the key is to redirect the billions – even a fraction of those billions – that libraries currently spend on subscriptions to the new, scholar-run platforms. These dollars are crucial, too, to underwrite an OA future for the university presses and scholarly societies.

It's that last obstacle, the argument from defeat, that will require the most energy. We have to convince our colleagues that a non-profit future for scholarly communication is within reach and worth fighting for. This means, among other things, encouraging boycotts, calling out the venture-funded startups, and promoting the alternatives. We need to make the case, in short, for a digital future that is not just open, but non-profit too.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Impact Blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our comments policy if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

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