

# ON THE DUBLIN CORE FRONT

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## Of budgets and boycotts: The battle over open access publishing

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*“When we played, World Series checks meant something.  
Now all they do is screw up your taxes.” – Don Drysdale*

### ABSTRACT

This article recounts the history of electronic journals, and the evolution of library processes to manage them. The article reviews recent controversies regarding the future of electronic publishing, and describes one important and innovative electronic publisher, the Public Library of Science.

### KEYWORDS

electronic journals; e-journals; electronic publishing; open access; Public Library of Science; PLoS

**F**ew people with whom I talk remember the very early days of electronic journals. In 1987, when *New Horizons in Adult Education* was first published by Syracuse University, a new information medium was born. There wasn't a news conference or ticker-tape parade to celebrate this innovation. Like many of the early e-journals, *New Horizons* was created with little fanfare by university scholars. As late as 1991, only 8 peer-reviewed e-journals existed, and they were of little academic value. Forward thinkers like Ann Okerson, Charles Bailey, Stevan Harnad, and Paul Ginsparg recognized even during these early experiments the potential for mass electronic distribution of scholarly journals. This movement, however, didn't affect serials purchasing or control, which continued in a traditional manner in most academic libraries.

### MOSAIC

At the close of 1993, Mosaic was released and within 18 months became the most widely-used web browser in existence. Mosaic was the lenses that illuminated the World Wide Web, a breakthrough that has since fundamentally altered the research process. Amidst the many changes resulting from Mosaic and the Web, publishers began tinkering with online access to their journals. It seems ridiculous in hindsight, but at the time no one knew if print journals delivered via the web would be popular or marketable. In some part because of this uncertainty, many publishers gave away their online content to institutions that were print subscribers. Libraries spent many hours determining



how to catalog these resources. Fledgling web developers put up annotated e-journal lists, and not remarkably, people used them. Some technically competent professors – at the time defined as those who regularly used email – took advantage of the new offerings. Libraries didn't mind providing the service, since the resources were free, and although it meant cataloger and web personnel staff time, it seemed worth it. Many academic libraries in the mid-1990s were leaders on their campuses when it came to having a web presence. Development of e-journal lists was among the first value-added content to grace these pages.

## **E-JOURNAL ONSLAUGHT**

The evolution of library reaction to electronic journals was not gradual but supersonic. Seemingly one day these unimportant entities, ignored by most, became resources we “had to catalog” and “had to get on our web pages.” Large collections of e-journals needed to be available to users overnight. Jim Holmes, Head of Serials Cataloging at the University of Texas at Austin, described the impact well. “Some time late in 1995, an email message arrived in technical services from the Associate Director for Technical Services. She was so excited about URLs and told technical services that it should also be excited and should be giving URLs a lot of thought. About 100 fingers pressed the delete button, trashed the message, and got back to cataloging the *Newsletter of the Texas Republic*” (Holmes, 1998). Jim goes on to say that within months, UT Austin had purchased access to JSTOR, Project Muse, and the American Institute of Physics collections, representing over 6,000 URLs, and the adage about job security was not comforting.

There were instigating factors, of course, such as the increased availability of personal computers connected to high-speed campus networks, better quality graphical representation, and let's not forget laser printing – a byproduct of the digital era that haunts me still. Over the past few years, more automated means of cataloging and otherwise providing access to e-resources have developed, and users, faculty and students alike, have come not only to rely on e-resources, but to expect them. Print journals are a burden to retrieve and photocopy; microfilm, well forget it. Today's “culture of convenience” demands immediate gratification, and since libraries are a service profession, we have tried to accommodate these demands, however labor intensive or expensive they may be.

That's the abridged version of how we find ourselves where we are, and where we are is in large part an uncomfortable place. Providing free e-journal access to libraries that subscribed to the journal in print was a brilliant marketing move on the part of publishers, not unlike the drug dealer who generously gives away his product until his target's hooked. Libraries turned their faculty and students into junkies, all while smiling from ear to ear, saying “aren't we wonderful.” We're in the midst of a time when we can no longer bankroll our users' habits – due as much to the uncertain economy as to changing pricing models.

## **PUBLIC LIBRARY OF SCIENCE**

Help may be on the way thanks to open access, “the movement to publish scholarly literature on the Internet and make it available to readers free of charge and free of unnecessary licensing restrictions” (Suber, 2003). The open access concept is, of course, not new. Various e-print servers in disciplines such as physics, computer science, and economics have existed for years. The Open Archives Initiative was founded in 1999 to enhance access to scholarship amassing in the growing number of e-print archives. Among the OAI's greatest accomplishments is its Protocol for Metadata Harvesting, a mechanism for providing and capturing metadata about e-prints. Theoretically, e-print repositories combined with a search/retrieval tool like the Protocol for Metadata Harvesting could obviate the

need for traditional publishing outlets if peer-review controls were in place. Last month, the Public Library of Science, a non-profit organization of scientists and physicians, established such controls when it launched its first journal, *Biology*. Three years in the making, the Public Library of Science (PloS) is a fully-featured scholarly journal publisher, with an outstanding editorial team and a unique pricing model. Public Library of Science journals are free – almost. Readers of the journals pay nothing. Authors pay a fee, \$1,500, to publish their articles – a fee that the Public Library of Science expects to be subsidized by institutions – many of which spend a much greater amount on subscriptions to commercial journals.

In *Biology*'s inaugural issue, founding members Patrick Brown, Michael Eisen, and Harold Varmus explain their motivation for forming the Public Library of Science. They state their goal is to “catalyze



a revolution in scientific publishing by providing a compelling demonstration of the value and feasibility of open-access publication. If we succeed, everyone who has access to a computer and an Internet connection will be a keystroke away from our living treasury of scientific and medical knowledge. This online public library of science will form a valuable resource for science education, lead to more informed healthcare

decisions by doctors and patients, level the playing field for scientists in smaller or less wealthy institutions, and ensure that no one will be unable to read an important paper just because his or her institution does not subscribe to a particular journal.” Obviously the open access movement is exciting, at least from a librarian’s perspective, but there are still many issues yet to be resolved, both technically and politically.

## **OPEN ACCESS**

On the heels of the Public Library of Science’s debut were harsh words from scholars and librarians regarding journal pricing. Reported on the Liblicense listserv on 20 October 2003, scientists from the University of California called for a boycott of Cell Press journals, citing that its owner, Reed Elsevier, is “breaking an unwritten contract with the scientific community: being a publisher of our research carries the responsibility to make our contributions publicly available at reasonable rates” (Walter, 2003). The authors further contend that Elsevier “values profit above its academic mission.” The criticism stems from the California Digital Library’s negotiations with Cell Press regarding a site license to *Cell*, *Neuron*, *Immunity*, *Molecular Cell*, *Developmental Cell*, and *Cancer Cell*, the annual cost being \$90,000, or as Lynne Herndon, President and CEO Cell Press noted in her Liblicense response to Walter and Yamamoto, “\$1.50 per top quality journal per year for each active user within the UC system” (Herndon, 2003). Of greater intrigue is Cornell University’s recent announcement that it will cancel a few hundred Elsevier journals as a result of failed negotiations with the world’s leading scientific publisher (Cornell University Library, 2003). At stake is a mere 2% of Cornell’s serials collection, albeit an important 2%, that costs the library over 20% of its serials budget. The 2004 price increase that would be assessed on top of the \$1.7M Cornell spent on Elsevier subscriptions in 2003 was unsustainable, forcing Cornell to pull out of its “big deal.” Will others follow?

## **CONCLUSION**

A colleague suggested at a recent meeting that Elsevier recognized the writing on the wall with respect to the open access movement, and as a result was doing everything possible to maximize profits now. At first his comments struck me as ridiculous, but upon reflection, and the subsequent and increasing number of open access initiatives spawned of late, I think he was on to something. A leading European financial agency lowered Elsevier’s rating, in response to the “newer and more

successful article-fee based open access system “ that directly opposes Elsevier’s traditional subscription-based model (BNP Paribas, 2003). I doubt the brass at Elsevier are terribly concerned about being coined an “underperforming” company by one investment house, but certainly the recent adoption of open access policies by the Howard Hughes Medical Institute and the Wellcome Trust, which provide hundreds of millions of dollars per year to researchers around the world, and the Company of Biologists, publishers of premiere journals *Development*, *Journal of Cell Science*, and *Journal of Experimental Biology*, should raise eyebrows, even in Elsevier’s lofty perch (Open Access Now, 2003; Wellcome Trust, 2003; Company of Biologists, 2003). It will be suspenseful in the years ahead to watch proponents and detractors of open access maneuver towards a scholarly publishing checkmate.

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