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RESPONSE

Academic publishing riposte. Do not shoot the messenger

Iain Stevenson*

Centre for Publishing, Department of Information Studies, University College London, London, UK

Iain Stevenson is Professor of Publishing and Director Emeritus of the Centre for Publishing at University College London. He has worked in the academic publishing area for many years and has been on the governing board of the Publishers' Association. Current research is on the history of British publishing, on new publishing technology, and on the experiences of new authors in Britain and France.

Right at the beginning of what I contend to be a contentious and seriously-flawed essay on academic publishing, Harvie *et al.*'s Proposition suggests that the authors are far from the cool and objective analysts of academic publishing they claim to be. I find their Proposition to be highly selective, quoting exclusively well-known critics of commercial academic publishing, and ignoring a very wide contrary literature. In the immortal words of my late undergraduate tutor, they appear to 'proceed from a preconceived notion to a predetermined conclusion' apparently without benefit of research, reasoned arguments or any knowledge of the complex ecosystem of publishing, libraries and client users. Also, I contend that Harvie *et al.* more or less exclusively concentrate on journal publishing, and that in the STM (science, technology and medicine) field, ignoring the very different issues and problems in the arts and humanities, let alone the publication of monographs, textbooks and learning resources.

In the interests of disclosure, I should first of all set out my credentials for making this response. From 1977 until 1999, I was an academic publisher at a number of commercial houses. I set up and operated an academic publisher from scratch. I bought and successfully reinvigorated a failing university press which the owning institution had despaired of ever making work. After a short stint as publishing director at HMSO, then being privatized, I translated to the academy, first to City University London, where I established a professional MA in publishing (incidentally the first specifically to teach academic journal publishing as a

*Email: i.stevenson@ucl.ac.uk

core module) and then in 2006 to University College London as director of a newly-established centre for publishing which provides postgraduate education and undertakes research and consultancy in publishing. My staff and I have built up, I believe, a respected and admired international reputation for the quality of our research, which is based on knowledge, experience and critical evaluation of the facts.

A line-by-line refutation of Harvie and his colleagues' assertions would be tedious and I suspect pointless, as I suspect that no amount of reasoned and informed argument would shift them from what appears to be a deeply entrenched position. Instead, I challenge what I believe to be their more flawed arguments, and offer countervailing arguments which I hope will contribute constructively to this important debate.

Do commercial publishers make excess profits on the backs of cash-starved academic libraries and their meekly complaisant readers?

I have written elsewhere (Stevenson, 2009, 2010) about Robert Maxwell and his highly dubious pricing strategies while pointing out that without him the range and diversity of publication vehicles available to the academy would be much poorer than it is today. It was remarkable that when Maxwell was ejected from his company, Pergamon Press, it was his academic editors and authors who campaigned for his return. Were these leading scholars and researchers, including several Nobel laureates, all simple dupes who were unaware of his pricing policies? No, I believe not: I believe they wanted Maxwell because he gave them, through his web of journals, what they wanted: academic recognition and status, opportunities to travel and attend conferences, and reasons for promotion.

Today, Maxwell's inheritors face a very different market from that of the 1970s. Library budgets are under continual pressure and all publishers know that subscriptions will face cuts and that they will have to react by making special offers – like the often-criticized Big Deals. Of course, commercial publishers have to make a profit – they would go out of business if they did not – but compared with other businesses, their margins are not excessive. Interestingly, the latest figures Harvie *et al.* quote seem to be from 2012. The world has changed dramatically even in a year. I always find it odd that academics never complain about the costs of hardware and software from such organizations as Microsoft, Samsung and Apple. Have a look at their corporate accounts and margins. And don't get me started on Amazon, and especially Google. I invite you to consider Google and its text-scanning activities to sell back to you what you already own.

Do commercial publishers charge much more than not-for-profit academic societies?

I suggest this is untrue. Instead, I argue that the highest charging publishers are often the big American scientific and medical membership societies. A bundle of journals from one major US society publisher will cost almost $50,000 in 2014 for nine top journals for international customers wanting online and print subscriptions. Admittedly, this society publisher does support open access initiatives and the revenue from its journals supports laudable academic activities, including meetings and scholarships. In less-exalted realms, many smaller learned societies depend on their

journals and other publications for their very existence. At a recent information day for its society clients, I met the administrator of a small but vital learned society in the social sciences who told me that 80% of her income came from publications revenue. Without it, her society would have to fold as membership subscriptions could in no way cover even a small fraction of their activities.

Are commercial publishers parasites on the goodwill and free labour of academics?

There is a persistent myth that publishers are simply printers, that they take from editors and authors perfectly-honed text, slap it between paper covers or online, and then grab the lion's share of the cash which rolls in from uncritical subscribers. Anyone who has ever seen the large editing suites in most major publishers will see that manuscript processing is an expensive operation using highly-talented and dedicated managerial and editorial staff (many of whom I have trained) who have to be paid, housed and provided with benefits. If you think line editing is easy or unnecessary, then I invite you try it, or to attempt to publish an un-copyedited paper where the author and academic editor have omitted, misattributed or otherwise mangled text, illustrations or references.

Moreover, most publishers will invest heavily in new journals with small initial circulations which will lose money heavily in their first few years. Most not-for-profit publishers could not afford to do this and the initial losses do have to be recouped eventually. Many publishers suggest new journals and provide the research and development to establish them. In my career, I have suggested, developed and launched several now internationally respected and highly successful journals. These include the *Journal of Quaternary Science* and *Population, Space and Place,* where I wrote the initial scope and brief, recruited the editors and editorial board, sold the idea to the sponsoring societies and outlined the losses to the publishers' boards. All, I believe, now have good levels of circulation and make respectable profits, but none broke even until three to seven years after launch. I might also remind readers that unarguably the most distinguished globally-recognized and prestigious scientific journal of them all, *Nature*, was the brainchild of Frederick Macmillan and was nurtured through its sometimes faltering early years by a commercial publisher who truly cared about research and its dissemination. Is *Nature*, and its many spin-offs, not a major contributor to world science and its success?

OK, but the world has changed. Open access will do for 'greedy' publishers

The simple response to this is 'follow the money'. The principle of open access is that you can read journals free of charge at the point of use. Instead of the library paying a subscription, the author pays an article publishing charge (APC), currently about US$1500. It's not a bad idea and many commercial publishers run open access journals. Harvie *et al.* approvingly cite the Public Library of Science (PLoS), yet I suggest it functions only because it receives grants, subventions and other non-publishing income – as do virtually all 'not-for-profit' open access publishers. The open access question that has never been satisfactorily answered is where does the APC come from, and what happens to it if a paper is rejected? Authors in the sciences may have access to grant money to pay publication charges, but not so in the arts and humanities. More worryingly, will the fact that an author has paid to submit put

pressure on editors and peer reviewers to accept substandard papers? Rejected authors don't get their submission fees back and will not take rejection complacently.

Open access will undoubtedly be an important component of the academic publishing matrix in the future, but it is wrong to see it as an anti-publisher strategy. Its successful development will require publisher input and many publishers are leading the field in creating successful formats. I suggest that it is the subsidized models, like PLoS, that will fade away because they have severe operational flaws. They were very useful in opening up the process, but may not be sustainable in the long run. Research has shown time and again that authors want their papers to appear in prestigious journal marques; some authors still ideally want print publication. My own feeling is that this will change and newer models will emerge, but probably not for a decade.

There are more points I could make, but I think this addresses the main issues for debate. There are certainly challenges and pitfalls ahead, but nothing is to be gained by 'monstering' commercial academic publishers. As I warned in an article in *Times Higher Education* in October 2012, there are unscrupulous so-called 'publishers' waiting in the wings to exploit unwary and naïve authors and editors, and who make the 'raptors' of established publishing look like pussy cats. Be careful what you wish for, it may just come true!

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