

Editorial

In defense of (some) commercial journals

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Abstract

Not all commercial publishers are alike. Of the many epithets thrown at the commercial publishers of academic works, "greedy" ranks as the most common. But for journals facing serious competition, like *Library Hi Tech*, the pricing strategies tend to conform to market realities. University-based publication can legitimately challenge commercial publishers. *Library Hi Tech* has already faced serious competition, and survives thanks in part to resources provided by our commercial publisher.

At the Association of College and Research Libraries conference in Denver in March, I attended a session on "Creating Change: Scholarly Communications in Transition". One of the speakers had been the editor of a widely respected commercial journal whose subscription price had reached \$2,000 per year. He rebelled, took much of his board with him, and started a new rival online scholarly journal, which he published through his university department. The journal is free to all readers, but he plans to charge authors a "formatting" fee once the journal becomes sufficiently well established

He described his outrage at his former publisher in a short skit based on the Faust legend. The speaker donned red-rimmed dark glasses and took on the role of editor Mephistopheles persuading an innocent assistant professor (played by a member of the audience) to sell her soul (in this case, her copyright) to the Devil (his former publisher) in return for tenure. The audience loved the skit, and it certainly made his point. But was he right?

A month or so before the conference, a guest speaker had come to my university, where he particularly wanted to present his ideas to a group of librarians. His theme was the terrible cost of journal publications, and his message urged universities to take control of their own intellectual property. He expected that more and more responsible journal editors would walk away from their commercial publishers and start online journals in their own department. In general, my colleagues agreed.

I stood up at that meeting, as I do now in print, to explain why I feel no shame in editing an academic journal from a commercial publisher. My reasons divide into two separate groups. The first have to do with market economics, and the second with the sustainability of some of the alternative models that have been proposed.

Market economics

Not all commercial publishers are alike. Of the many epithets thrown at the commercial publishers of academic works, "greedy" probably ranks as the most common. Speakers

calculate the enormous profits that publishing houses make at the expense of impoverished academe. Excess profits may well be true for some journals where competition is weak. For *Library Hi Tech* the competition is strong, and I see no evidence of such profits at Emerald, our publisher.

It is true that the price of *Library Hi Tech* has gone up in recent years. Part of that increase represents investment in creating a digital presence, which I had long pushed for as an editor. The article-formatting, for which the ACRL speaker expected to charge authors in his free online journal, represents only one aspect of the expense of a digital presence. In addition to formatting, online journals need servers and Internet connections. In the idealized world of anti-commercial publication, the university or the department covers these expensive services, which involve not only hardware and software, but well-paid technicians and hard-to-find professional computing staff.

Publishers like Emerald also must develop an interface that limits access to paid subscribers. It may seem like an unnecessary expense, but payment for goods, even for intellectual property, has a strong basis in our capitalist culture. It is not considered greedy for a company to cover its expenses, pay its employees a decent wage, meet its bank obligations, and give investors enough return on their capital that they stick with the enterprise. I have a minimal knowledge of Emerald's finances, which lie totally outside of my area of responsibility as an editor. But my colleagues at Emerald do not act like people making obscene profits. Working hard to make ends meet seems like a fairer description.

In our market economy, journals, like other goods, come and go depending on whether anyone is willing to buy them. I would not willingly pay more than a couple of hundred dollars per year for a private subscription. Most people will not. If they want to read an expensive journal, they look for a library copy. It is a rational economic behavior that makes the market for expensive journals smaller and smaller. Expanding a subscriber base may not be an option: some journal topics are just too narrow. Smaller runs mean that publishers must divide essentially the same production

costs among fewer subscribers. If they do not, then they have chosen to subsidize that title from some other source. This is elementary economics.

It is also elementary economics that a publisher will drop a title, however much beloved by its audience, if too many members of that audience decline to pay. In my experience, publishers are relatively unsentimental about particular titles. One angry member of the ACRL audience said that libraries could win instantly if they all just refused to subscribe to overpriced titles. Probably those journals would die (instantly), and the publishers would turn to something else. Such a pyrrhic victory holds few charms.

I am not suggesting that all journals are fairly priced. Far from it. Some publishers undoubtedly make profits that most librarians would characterize as greedy, simply because they face no serious competition. But not all commercial publishers fit that category. For those with serious competition, the pricing strategies tend to conform to market realities. Otherwise they go out of business. Let us not damn all commercial journals because some have taken advantage of markets where they have virtual monopolies.

Academic alternatives

University-based publication should try to challenge commercial publishers in realms where the market is small and entirely academic. This is the basic proposition of the SPARC initiative from the Association of Research Libraries, whose mission has been to “spark” competition. SPARC is essentially a professional enterprise, like many of the university presses, and it is run with enviable skill. Project Muse from Johns Hopkins is another example of professional academic publishing, managed in this case directly by a well-established university press. These initiatives are cost centers that face many of the same market forces as the commercial publishers, and respond in similar ways. Not only do I wish them well, but I work with them, and with my own university press, on various digital projects that are part of my library job.

The kind of academic publishing about which I have concerns is the sort where a unit of the university that is not the university press undertakes publication ventures. I will call these “departmental journals”. The work of reviewing, content editing, copy editing, formatting, and online dissemination gets most of the attention in the lectures of advocates. Three important issues that affect sustainability do not: advertising, independence, and regularity.

Advertising

More than one colleague has explained to me with the thin patience of certain knowledge that Web-based publications do not need advertising, because anyone who wants to find the articles can just use their favorite Web-search engine. Perhaps this is true for others. I find that I rarely read online journals that I am interested in (and occasionally write for) unless I get an e-mail informing me that a new issue is ready. The best online journals do put some effort into spreading word about themselves, but they do not necessarily have booths at conferences, talk with indexing services about expanded coverage, or other aspects of keeping a journal’s name in front of readers and potential authors. A narrowly focused departmental journal with a cohesive audience might survive for a time without advertising. The question is: how long? Many departments will not recognize articles in unindexed journals as valid for tenure.

Independence

Editorial independence helps to ensure the intellectual integrity of a journal. A commercial publisher offers a degree of separation from academic controversies that a departmentally sponsored journal cannot. Generally commercial publishers put few constraints on contents, because they have no personal stake in the ideas. Few departments (or libraries) can claim equal neutrality.

Even something so common as getting a new chair could force a department-journal editor to battle internally for server space, or for software

maintenance needed to maintain availability. The chair will realize, as the editor may not, how much it costs to run a free journal, and may not see the journal as a high priority in financially tight times.

Editorial continuity is also easier to maintain with some degree of workplace independence. A fellow Emerald editor recently changed universities. If her journal had been a house-organ of her former employer, editorial responsibility would probably have changed too.

Regularity

Regularity can be a problem even in commercial journals, despite the pressures of external deadlines and payments linked to the on-time delivery of text. Some advocates for departmental journals talk glibly about putting articles up as soon as they are accepted. Sustaining such a commitment is hard. Most academic editors have other demands on their time: classes to teach, students to advise, committees to attend. Library-based editors like me may have departments to run or other work to do that fills and overfills the work-week. Regularity is hard, even for an experienced editorial team. And once regularity begins to break down, so does the audience and the journal’s influence.

Conclusion

I am more than ready to support initiatives to create competition in the marketplace for academic journals, especially for those suspected of making abnormal profits. Competition is healthy, according to economists from Adam Smith to Milton Friedman. Journals like *Library Hi Tech* already face such competition, and survive thanks in part to resources provided by our commercial publisher.

Without such resources, running a journal is hard. The ACRL speaker may have escaped being Mephistopheles only to become Sisyphus with a journal that might prove impossible to get over the crest of long-term sustainability.