

Open Access Publishing: The historical and current developments surrounding changes at the New Zealand Journal of Employment Relations

ERLING RASMUSSEN*, FELICITY LAMM** and JULIENNE MOLINEAUX***

Abstract

The article highlights the long process that open access publishing has taken both in terms of our decision to provide open access to the *New Zealand Journal of Employment Relations* but also in the general sphere of open access publishing. The article commences with a brief overview of the different debates and forms of open access journals. We also chronicle the various stages of our decision to move from the traditional, user-pays model to open access publishing. While technological developments have facilitated more open access publishing, there are also a number of key barriers, especially the universities' use of rankings of journals as performance management proxies, which makes it difficult to move from traditional to open access publishing. It is suggested, however, that open access requirements from major funders could be a game changer which will support better public access to research findings and adjust the balance between traditional and open access publishing.

Keywords: open access publishing; subscription-based publishing; journals rankings

Introduction

This article reflects on our journey towards open access for the *New Zealand Journal of Employment Relations*, as well as providing open access to the textbooks that we have written. This journey has occurred in stages and the key decision-making moments are highlighted below. It is remarkable how this personal journey is aligned with growing international and national support for open access publishing and an increasing academic and political debate over access to research findings and adverse publishing costs. The open access movement has a long history, reflecting the growing concerns over the large profits and profit margins of major publishing firms. But since the so-called 2003 'Berlin Declaration', which set out open access principles (see below), new and cheaper technology has facilitated a rise in different publishing avenues, thus challenging the traditional forms of publishing.

While different publishing approaches are possible, there are also several barriers to overcome before open access publishing will rival traditional academic publishing modes. A key barrier is the international trend of tertiary institutions using journal rankings as part of performance managing academic staff. The current preferential journal rankings used in New Zealand have been generated from Australia and, more often than not, favour overseas journals. Rankings have, therefore,

* Professor of Work and Employment, Department of Management, AUT University, Auckland, New Zealand. Email contact: erling.rasmussen@aut.ac.nz

** Associate Professor, Department of Management, AUT University, Auckland, New Zealand

*** School of Social Sciences, AUT, Auckland, New Zealand

something of an imperialistic dimension which can be harmful for national or indigenous research initiatives and have clearly bolstered the influence and incomes of international publishing firms.

Although the article highlights how open access publishing has gained in status and influence over the last couple of decades, this may not be the crucial wholesale reform needed to rein in traditional publishing approaches and the tertiary institutions' fixation with ranking systems. Instead, it is the shift in philosophy amongst key funders of research that has enhanced the accessibility of research reports and findings. Major funders of research are now insisting that there will be open public access to the insights gained by the funded research, though often in tandem with publication in traditional research publications. This is the case in Northern Europe where, for example, the Danish government has set the target of having public access to all publicly funded research by 2025 (Wien & Dorch, 2018). Likewise, there are now many funders in Australia and New Zealand where open access to research insights will be stipulated in the funding criteria (for example, the Australian Research Council and Australia's National Health and Medical Research Council). In the future, we expect more funders will incorporate such requirements and start policing these open access criteria more vigorously.

Different forms of open access

There are varying degrees of open access journals. There are also varying degrees of quality, as Harzing (2014, p.2) cautions:

[O]penaccess, online technologies are interacting with new revenue generating business models and historic assessment systems, leading to the rise of predatory open access (POA) journals that prioritize profit over the integrity of academic scholarship. Such interaction is leading to disruptive distortions that are systematically undermining academia's ability to disseminate the highest quality scholarship and to benefit from free, timely access.

The different forms of open access journals are commonly categorised into three groups: "gold", "green", and "hybrid" open access journals (Laakso, 2014). In the "gold" open access category, the journal editor(s) publish the articles directly onto the journal's website (Björk, et al., 2014; Zhang & Watson, 2017). "Green" open access refers to indirect free access to an article or an earlier version of the manuscript that is available on the web at a location other than the website of the journal publisher (Harnad et al., 2004). "Green", in this context, comes from the notion of publishers giving a "green light" for uploading openly available copies of the article contents (Laakso, 2014). A key difference between "gold" and "green" open access is that with "gold" open access, the entire journal content becomes available from a single website whereas with "green" open access, copies of a random and limited selection of the articles are scattered around the web (Björk, et al., 2014).

Over the last few years, more and more traditional subscription-based journals, most of them belonging to the large commercial publishers, have started to offer authors a hybrid open access option. There are a variety of hybrid models. In some hybrid models, the published article sits behind a paywall but the author can self-archive or self-publish on their own webpage, sometimes after an embargo period (Zhang & Watson, 2017). In these cases, the rights to self-publish or for readers to reproduce the article are bound by the restrictions of the publisher's copyright policy (see Suber, 2015). In another hybrid model, the publisher is partially funded by subscriptions and only provides open access for those individual articles for which the authors (or research sponsor) pay a publication fee. One could argue that these are not true open access, if it can be considered 'open' at all. In yet another version of a

hybrid model, some open access journals require authors to pay a fee for publication, covering the costs of editing and typesetting (and possibly a *koha*, a volunteer payment, for reviewers). In some cases, an author's institution or research grant will cover these fees, but it does create an imposition on the author. Some would argue, though, that these developments can be seen as a slowly creeping threat to liberal, unpaid, self-archiving rights. Moreover, there is growing evidence that paying to make an article open access does not represent a worthwhile investment, if the motivation for publishing in a hybrid open access journal is to increase the number of citations (Mueller-Langer & Watt, 2014; Zhang & Watson, 2017).

The recent promotion of open access publishing

Open access publishing has a long history, and, in many cases, it has been wholly supported by universities that have established renowned publishing houses, such as Oxford University Press and Harvard University Press. However, open access publishing appears to have taken a major leap forward in the new millennium as the activities of major international publishing firms have become more controversial. The pressure for more open access prompted the so-called Berlin Declaration in 2003, which established criteria for Open Access:

The author(s) and right holder(s) of such contributions grant(s) to all users a free, irrevocable, worldwide, right of access to, and a license to copy, use, distribute, transmit and display the work publicly and to make and distribute derivative works, in any digital medium for any responsible purpose, subject to proper attribution of authorship

The promotion of open access publishing also gained widespread media attention as part of Harvard University's attack on publishers and their continuous price hikes of journal subscriptions during 2011 and 2012.

A memo from Harvard Library to the University's 2,100 teaching and research staff called for action after warning it could no longer afford the price hikes imposed by many large journal publishers, which bill the library around \$3.5m a year (Sample, 2012, p.1).

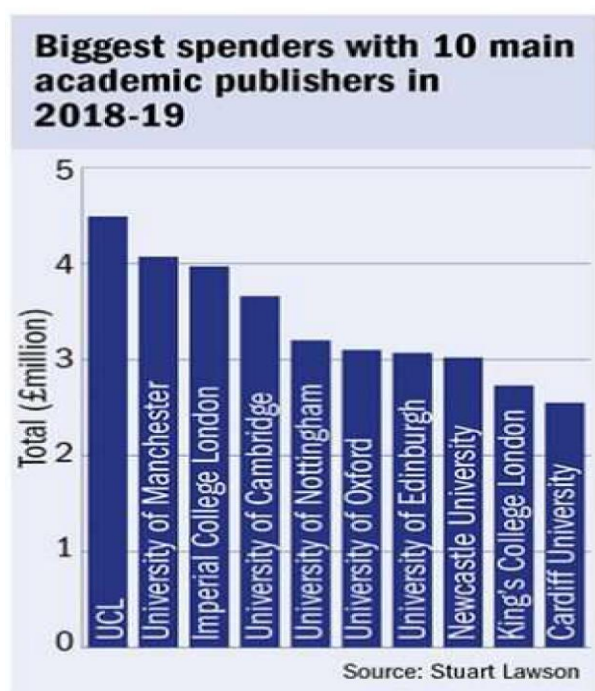
The memo also "...encouraged its faculty members to make their research freely available through open access journals" (Sample, 2012). It was made clear that publishers were achieving extraordinary profit margins (over 35 per cent in some cases) and annual subscriptions to some journals were in the tens of thousands of dollars.

While there was no mention of a specific publishing company, the Harvard University action prompted a boycott campaign, which gathered the names of more than 10,000 academics, against international publishing firm Elsevier. Elsevier felt obliged to state that it had good collaboration with Harvard University and other major universities, and that it had only raised its prices with five per cent per year in recent times. Still, the boycott drew attention to the prices, profits and profit margins of major publishing firms, and resulted in Harvard University recommending that its researchers make their research freely available in open access journals (see below).

So what happened after the attack on publishers and their prices by Harvard University? On the surface it seemed that not a lot had changed. The publishing firms kept increasing their prices, universities

were under financial pressure to keep accommodating these price increases and, at many universities, student fees kept rising, partly to cover the subscription costs. The extent of British universities' costs is indicated in Table 1 which shows that British universities paid large sums to the 10 main academic publishers. Overall, some £950.6 million were paid to the world's 10 biggest publishing houses between 2010 and 2019 (Grove, 2020). According to a recent media report, Elsevier had a £2,538 million revenue in 2018, with £942 million in profit and a profit margin of 37.1 per cent (up 0.1 per cent compared to 2017) while Elsevier's owner, the firm RELX, had a £7,492 million revenue and £2,346 million operating profits (Page, 2019). These kind of profit margins would surely be the envy of most businesses and is reliant, of course, on 'free' labour provided by academics.

Table 1: British Universities and some of their spending on academic publishing



Source: cited in Grove, 2020

A recent media article (addressed to the Minister of Education) by two Danish researchers has called on a paradigm shift in favour of open access publishing (Wien & Dorch, 2019). Again, Elsevier's profits and profit margin were mentioned, but it was also pointed out that it was necessary to address the management behaviour of universities. In particular, the prevalence of journal rankings as a crucial element of staff management systems was a major barrier to shift the balance towards open access publishing. This barrier could mean that the Danish Government's target of having open access publication by 2025 will be difficult to achieve. It was suggested that the proposed paradigm shift could happen if there were two fundamental changes: the universities' fixation with journal ranking as part of their performance management systems should be countered; and public funders' insistence on open access publishing from public funded research should be complete. Finally, it was suggested that all academics should report on their open access publishing.

While the debate has shown the major negative effects of traditional publishing, such as costs, ranking obsession, ‘free’ labour exploitation and direct and indirect public funding subsidising publishing revenues, there has been less focus on the positive impact of publishing firms and how they have changed their role in recent decades. The major publishing firms have established considerable expertise in publishing academic research. They have invested heavily in new technology; their websites are often ‘state of the art’ and they have considerable distribution and marketing expertise. Their links with the academic research communities can facilitate an early option of new research initiatives or challenges. Recently, the major publishing firms have branched out to offer many tailored teaching and research services whereby they leverage their expertise in editing and publishing. For example, Sage Author Services offers: English language editing, translations, manuscript formatting, plagiarism checks, video abstracts, and artwork preparation. Likewise, textbook publishers can offer custom-made course plans with supporting materials and test banks.

Our road to open access publishing

Our road to open access started when we became involved in the development of textbooks in the late 1990s (see Deeks & Rasmussen, 2002; Rasmussen & Lamm, 1998), because of students’ negative reactions to the prescribed compilations of journal articles or overseas textbooks. It is important to stress that, during the writing of these texts, we had considerable help from the associated publishing firm, and we were able to draw on the firm’s editing, production and marketing expertise. As per usual, the publishing contract was clear in stipulating that the publishing rights (which included future updated versions) were firmly lodged with the publisher. Although the authors were granted the authorship rights, it was obvious that the publishing rights constituted the most important component, including the allocation of the income stream.

An impasse appeared when we wanted to proceed with a website that would provide additional material for textbook readers. Again, the detailed publishing and ownership contract made it abundantly clear that the supporting material would be lodged on the publishing firm’s website and the publishing firm would own that material. The publishing firm would also be in control of the upload of supporting material, the speed of this upload and the ability to change uploaded material. Faced with these constraints, we thought it would be preferable to build our own website. This would also allow us to incorporate research and supporting material from other researchers (Rasmussen et al., 2006). Thus, we have had our own dedicated website with supporting textbook material for the last two decades (see: www.employment.org.nz).

Another important step towards a different publishing mode was the shift away from printed hard copies of the *New Zealand Journal of Employment Relations* starting in 2005. The move towards online publishing was partly driven by cost considerations (printing costs and postage costs) and partly driven by more flexibility in compiling and presenting the journal articles. We established our own open access website for this purpose; it is still operating and will be updated to fit with the coming open access publishing of the *New Zealand Journal of Employment Relations* (see below).

When the New Zealand market for textbooks became less lucrative for publishing firms, there was a marked decline in the number of publishing firms continuing to operate. Our publisher Pearson Education left New Zealand, with a smaller company Edify, taking over most of its activities. As part

of this market adjustment, we obtained the publishing rights to our textbooks from Pearson Education (that is, Rasmussen, 2009; Rasmussen & Lamm, 2002). Initially, it was the intention to publish the textbooks through Edify but no agreement was reached on how this would be done. Consequently, we decided to go for an open access platform whereby the various chapters of the textbooks would be freely available. This would mean that students would have free, gratis access to textbook material. Currently, draft textbook chapters are being used in teaching at a couple of New Zealand universities.

Finally, it was decided in 2019 to move the *New Zealand Journal of Employment Relations* to the open access platform of the Tuwhera website, which is administered by the Auckland University of Technology (AUT) Library. This process of migration to the Tuwhera website will be completed in 2020, starting with the next issue, NZJER, 45(1). While there are many other Australian and New Zealand journals which are published online (as discussed below), the range and availability of the services offered by the publishing team behind the Tuwhera website provides several advantages in respect of our journal. As an established platform with dedicated staff, Tuwhera operates a Creative Commons license for all its peer-reviewed publications. Creative Commons means that not only can anyone read the articles, but they can reuse them. Tuwhera provides training and offers operational support for editors. Importantly, it is free for us to use and free for the public to access. We have also decided not to charge authors to publish their work as this practice goes against open access principles. This will put some cost pressures on our publishing (for example, in respect of editing and journal formatting) which will have to be covered through financial support from other sources (see McCabe & Snyder (2015) for a more detailed discussion on the economics of open access journals).

Discussion: where are we now and where are we going?

Over the last two decades, the debate about open access publishing has gained more traction as the publishing sector has become more concentrated and internationalised. More academics have also become more aware of the issues associated with the dominance of these international publishing firms, especially the considerable costs absorbed by tertiary institutions every year. The high profit margins of some publishing firms are clearly associated with the traditional publishing process where academics do a considerable amount of ‘free’ labour; both in terms of the research itself and the editorial and reviewing process of academic publishing. In nearly all cases, this ‘free’ labour has been underwritten by public funding and/or grants. The traditional publishing approach can be seen as diminution of the public role of tertiary institutions. The need to produce specific high-level research outputs (that is, journal articles accepted in highly ranked journals) means that academics will often disseminate their research more narrowly and slowly; wider society benefits less than enough from public investments in research. It has also been argued that large publishing firms ‘monetise’ research and this drives their interest in academic publishing which, again, tends to narrow public access to academic research findings.

The use of metrics as a management tool is a major barrier in the growth of open access publishing. Journal rankings can be viewed as damaging because they incentivise academics to narrow their research focus and outputs to fit the metrics. In particular, small sub-disciplines (which may have low readership levels and, therefore, low impact factors) are discriminated against in the construction of rankings.

... [Rankings] can skew the choice of research methodology, lengthen publication lead times, cause academics to be disloyal to the specialist journals in their field, favour theory over practical relevance and unfairly discriminate against relatively young disciplines... (McKinnon, 2013, p.6).

Originally designed to assist librarians with purchase decisions, journal citation metrics are one proxy for research quality. Citation metrics and rankings and other such surrogates for quality are used by institutions in their hiring and promotion decisions, and by funding panels when assessing applications. The construction of rankings, therefore, is not a neutral science. Many ranking lists give precedence to American journals, which may not reflect the needs or characteristics of the field in the author's home country. Some US journals discriminate against writers who are not familiar with the US academic cannon and may publish few non-US studies (Bankovsky, 2019), disadvantaging, in particular, indigenous scholars.

While there have been calls for a paradigm shift, it is unlikely, in our opinion, that there will be a substantial swing away from traditional to open access publishing in the foreseeable future. However, a re-balancing of current publishing approaches towards open access publishing could be a start that could reduce many of the negative aspects of traditional academic publishing and domination of large, international publishing firms. With profit margins being very high in several cases, there is clearly room for some considerable adjustments.

Conclusion

While the road to open access publishing has been long and slow, there are now many universities supporting open access publishing. We are following other open access endeavours by moving the *New Zealand Journal of Employment Relations* to an open access platform in 2020. The use of the Tuwhera platform provides several advantages and will allow the Journal to continue its academic research publication as well as benefiting from that everybody can access research findings. We are also making our textbooks open access which will certainly benefit students in terms of costs.

Open access is not just about being able to read for free, it is also about being able to share or re-use material without gaining permission. As Prosser (2003, p.163) argues

many authors find the open access journal model attractive as it immediately and significantly extends dissemination of an author's paper from those at a few hundred institutions worldwide lucky enough to have a subscription to all interested readers with access to the Internet.

Creative Commons licenses, a form of copyright designed to promote sharing so long as specified rules (for example, attribution of the author) are followed, are a good fit for editors looking to achieve open access status for their publications.

Although many academics would agree that traditional publishing approaches prevent access to research findings and are costly for education and research institutions, they are also under pressure to submit and support highly ranked journals. As long as universities use journal ranking as proxies for research quality and critical indicators in their performance management, it will be an uphill battle for open access publishing. There is also a crucial consideration in how the expertise and facilities of publishing firms can be used in the pursuit of improved research access. The crucial role of research funding bodies could be a major lever to shift the balance in favour of open access publishing, and if universities start demanding similar types of openness in respect of research findings, then the balance would shift even further in respect of open access publishing.

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