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PROMETHEUS DEBATE – OPEN ACCESS PUBLISHING

Academic publishing is the subject of the debate in this issue of *Prometheus*. John Houghton and Charles Oppenheim base their proposal on a report they and others submitted in 2009 to the Joint Information Systems Committee in the UK. They propose alternatives to the way in which academics publish and publishers are rewarded. They suggest that forms of open access would be preferable to the prevailing system.

Economic implications of alternative publishing models

John Houghton (Victoria University, Melbourne) and Charles Oppenheim (Loughborough University, UK)

A knowledge economy is one in which the generation and exploitation of knowledge drives the creation of wealth. Scholarly publishing plays a key role, being central to the efficiency of research and diffusion of scientific and technical knowledge.

Recent advances in information and communication technologies are disrupting traditional publishing models and radically changing our capacity to distribute information. One key question is whether there are new opportunities and new models for scholarly publishing that might better serve researchers and more effectively communicate and disseminate findings.

Addressing this question, we look at the costs and potential benefits of alternative models for scholarly publishing, focussing on the system-wide cost differences between traditional *subscription publishing*, *open access publishing* using the 'author-pays' model, and *self-archiving* where authors deposit their work in open access repositories making it freely available to anyone with Internet access.

Basing our analysis on process re-engineering, we cost all the activities involved in the scholarly publishing lifecycle. We then sum the activity costs for the alternative publishing models, and explore the impact of changes in accessibility and efficiency on the return to public investment in R&D. John Houghton said:

“Different publishing models can make a material difference to the costs faced and benefits realised, and more open access to findings from publicly funded research would be likely to have substantial net benefits”.

“During a transitional period of 20 years, we estimate that, in an open access world:

- The combined savings and increased returns to R&D resulting from *open access publishing* all journal articles produced in the UK’s universities using an ‘author-pays’ model might be around 3 times the costs; and
- The combined savings and benefits from *open access self-archiving* in parallel with subscription publishing might be around 7 times the costs.”

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A *Prometheus* proposition is matched by responses to the proposition, five in this case:

Steven Harnad (harnad@uqam.ca), ‘The immediate practical implications of the Houghton Report: provide Green open access now’

Martin Hall (martin.hall@salford.ac.uk), ‘Minerva’s owl. A response to John Houghton and Charles Oppenheim’s ‘the economic implications of alternative publishing models’

Steven Hall (slcshall@btinternet.com), ‘A commentary on ‘the economic implications of alternative publishing models’

Mary Anne Kennan (mkennan@csu.edu.au), ‘The economic implications of alternative publishing models: views from a non-economist’

Christopher May (c.may@lancaster.ac.uk), ‘Openness in academic publication: the question of trust, authority and reliability’

Not surprisingly, publishers have their reservations about open access, as is evident from Stephen Hall’s response. The other respondents are of the opinion that academics generally support open access, but perhaps more in principal than in practice. Publishers conventionally give structure to academic publishing. Self publishing or institutional publishing on the internet

are possible, but might lack the same structure. But if there are to be commercial publishers, they must be paid. It seems logical that they be paid direct rather than through the current tortuous system, but there is no rush to write cheques. And is the argument for open access weakened when academics are often more concerned about where they publish than what, when papers are written to be counted and cited rather than read?