

*Open Access in International Relations: A Symposium**

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Abstract: The electronic revolution in academic publishing brings promises as well as pitfalls. The main promises are greater efficiency, vastly greater access to the journal literature, a more equitable global sharing of intellectual resources, and hopefully improved quality. Open access – free entry to the electronic version of the journal literature – is in many ways a logical continuation of this development and will brake the trend towards accelerating journal costs. But if the subscription revenue simply disappears, neither publishers nor editors will have the necessary funding to keep up peer review and other editorial routines. One alternative is to levy page charges for publication. Intermediate models are also possible, where the journal may keep its copyright to the final edited product while authors are allowed to post the final submitted version on their website. At the moment, open access is uncommon in international relations, but the publishers and owners of journals, including academic societies such as ISA, would be wise to think through these issues before they become acute. This symposium is a contribution to that process.

Keywords: Open access, academic journals, publishing

The electronic revolution

The last few decades have seen an electronic revolution in journal publishing. Authors no longer have to submit three copies of their manuscripts – they attach it to an e-mail (as in this journal) or upload it to a manuscript tracking system (as in our sister journal *International Studies Quarterly*). Correspondence with reviewers, decision letters, revisions, copyediting, ‘typesetting’ – everything is electronic. While most leading journals still publish hard copies, the electronic version is the one most frequently consulted. A major journal may print 1,500 copies but have 150,000 article downloads in a year. As a reader, you have the world of learning at your beck and call

* *Author's note:* This *ISP* symposium arose from presentations at a roundtable at the 51st Annual Convention of the International Studies Association, New Orleans, LA, 17 February 2010. I am grateful to Henrik Urdal and the other authors in this symposium for comment on the introduction as well as to Douglas A. Van Belle, Kristopher Bishop, Amy Brand, and Brian Pollins, who also contributed to the ISA panel. My own work has been supported by the Research Council of Norway.

once you switch on your computer. If you have an urgent need to read an article in the first issue of *American Political Science Review* (1906) you can download it from Jstor. Access is further facilitated by the bundling of journal subscriptions and by e-mail alerts advertising individual articles or tables of content of favorite journals (Björk et al. 2010).

While the electronic revolution has contributed to greater efficiency in journal publishing, probably has improved the quality of the journals, and certainly has improved access to the articles, any new technology also brings new problems. One of these is increased concern about the financial viability of journals and academic publishers. That is at the core of the debate about open access, the topic of this symposium.

The electronic revolution has made journal publishing into a profitable business. As an owner of five academic journals¹, the International Studies Association is a major actor in social science publishing. Its current publishing contract plus revenue from Jstor brought in nearly one-third of ISA's total revenue in 2009.² The recent inclusion of the four youngest ISA journals in ISI Web of Science, further adds to the value of the ISA journals package. Following the decision of ISA's Governing Council to invite competitive bids from publishers for the ISA contract at the next renewal³, the income stream from the ISA journals may increase even further. All the more urgent that the Association should think through whether and how this revenue stream may be affected for demands for more open access.

Open access – promise and threat

With electronic publishing the marginal cost of making a journal available to a new reader is close to zero. Since the journals are written, reviewed, and edited by scholars, mostly on a non-profit basis, it is not surprising that the idea arose in the early 1990s that the product should be made freely available to the scholarly community⁴ (Willinsky

¹ *Foreign Policy Analysis, International Political Sociology, International Studies Perspectives, International Studies Review, and International Studies Quarterly*. In addition, ISA has an agreement with Taylor and Francis that *International Interactions* is published as an ISA journal, while still owned by the publisher.

² www.isanet.org/neworleans2010/governing_council_agenda2010.pdf and www.isanet.org/neworleans2010/governing_council_2010_minutes.pdf.

³ http://isanet.ccit.arizona.edu/newyork09/ISA_Governing_Council_Meeting_2009.pdf.

⁴ Cf. Willinsky (2005) and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Open_access_%28publishing%29.

2005). This idea was also driven by the price of academic journals, which was rising faster than library budgets.

Clearly, open access would provide for even wider dissemination of the outcome of academic research. This research is frequently paid for by public funds, so the public should be able to access the publications – so the argument goes. Some foundations and government agencies are beginning to push for open posting of all publications from projects that they have funded. OECD (2007) recommends that member states require open access to publicly funded data. Many academic journals require data to be publicly available upon publication of the article (Gleditsch and Metelits 2003), even in the absence of open access to the article itself. The European Union has launched an initiative for open access under its Seventh Framework Programme.⁵ The argument has caught on to a considerable extent. According to the Directory of Open Access Journals, 5,542 quality-controlled scholarly journals are available for free in full text in a variety of subjects and languages. Of these, 2,361 journals are searchable at article level. No less than 461,806 articles are available from DOAJ. Across all disciplines, 20% of peer-reviewed articles published in 2008 were freely available; for the social sciences the figure was 18.⁶ Several studies (e.g., Davis et al. 2008) claim that articles with open access have no higher citation rates, while others find that there is an ‘open access advantage’, highest for the most-frequently cited articles (Gargouri et al., 2010). Evans and Reimer (2009) find that the open access advantage for a journal is larger when it first comes online through commercial sources. Another argument in favor of open access is that it opens up new opportunities for readers with no affiliation to established research institutes or in the third world where universities may be too poor to afford a wide range of top journals. However, most major journal publishers now participate in programs to provide free journal content to scholars in the developing world.⁷ The ISA journals are available for free or nearly free in 435 libraries in developing countries.⁸

⁵ Cf. <http://ec.europa.eu/research/science-society/index.cfm?fuseaction=public.topic&id=1294&lang=1>.

⁶ www.doaj.org/. Accessed 21 October 2010. The figures are from Bjørk et al. (2010), which has a link from the DOAJ website.

⁷ See, for instance, the International Network for the Availability of Scientific Publications, www.inasp.info/file/3d034b8bae0a3f7e1381979aedc356a9/about-inasp.html.

⁸ Personal communication, Terri Teleen, Blackwell-Wiley, 8 November 2010.

The reverse side of the coin is also quite obvious. The time of the editorial staff and other editorial office expenses have to be paid for, as well as the copy editing, typesetting, and distribution of the journal. For very small journals like the *Nordic Journal of Political Economy* (Mehlum 2012), with only a few published articles per year, the expenses may be minimal. For a journal like *ISQ* with close to 400 submissions a year, running an efficient editorial office becomes quite expensive. At the moment these are paid for by the owner of the journal, directly or indirectly through royalties or subsidies of the editorial office. Everything else being equal, if a journal like *ISP* was made freely available to everyone, there would be no money available for subsidies to the editorial office. Even though many academic journals receive open or hidden subsidies from universities and other host institutions as a quid pro quo for the honor of serving as home to a prestigious journal, it cannot be expected that they will be able or willing to pick up the total tab in perpetuity.

Driving up the prices

Some of the open-access literature is strongly anti-big business. Librarians, in particular, have blamed the exploding cost of journal subscriptions on ‘superprofits for large commercial academic publishers’ (Smedsrød and Longva, 2010: 30). A website run by two economics and business professors⁹, points out that commercial scholarly publishers have discovered that journals that are deemed to be essential by users will be kept by libraries more or less regardless of the price. It further claims that the price differential between the prices charged by ‘for-profit’ publishers such as Elsevier and Kluwer and by non-profit societies and university presses has widened and now stands at about 5:1 for the price per page and 15:1 for the price per citation. If this was correct, the situation in international relations would look quite rosy, since most of the top journals are owned and published by societies or university presses. However, many of the journals on this website have been misclassified. For instance, *International Studies Quarterly* (owned by ISA and published by Wiley-Blackwell) and *Journal of Peace Research* (owned by Peace Research Institute Oslo and published by Sage) are listed as ‘for-profit’¹⁰, along with their close competitor *Journal of Conflict Resolution* (owned and published by Sage). Ironically, among these three journals, it is the ‘for-profit’ *JCR* that

⁹ www.journalprices.com, run by Theodore Bergstrom and R. Preston McAfee. Various indices can be downloaded for a large number of journals. Accessed 21 October 2010. See also Bergstrom and Bergstrom (2004).

¹⁰ Even though I pointed out this error in an e-mail 22 February 2010 and they promised to correct the database.

has the lowest price, whether by page count or citation count. This raises the question whether it is just greedy publishers that drive up the prices or whether academic societies aren't also happy to spend the extra revenue when the prices go up. In fact, when a journal owned by a society is published under contract by a commercial publisher, the two have joint interest in keeping the subscription price high. Not so high, of course, as to drive the subscribers away, but high enough to make good earnings. There are clear differences between publishers. *International Interactions*, published and owned by Taylor & Francis, is four to five times as expensive (by page or by citation) as *JCR*, owned and published by Sage. Even less expensive than *JCR* are *International Security* and *International Organization*, both published by university presses. In some fields, it is alleged that leading journals push the prices up because they are seen as indispensable and hold 'a Faustian grip' on the market (Parks 2002¹¹). In international relations, the top journals are not the ones leading the race to higher prices.

The varying business models

The traditional business model is that individuals or libraries pay for electronic access to a journal, either on a stand alone basis or as part of a bundle of journals. In the fully open access model ('the gold road', Harnad et al. 2010; cf also Campbell, Morgan, 2012), there are no subscription fees. Thus, revenue to the publisher (and indirectly the journal) has to come from author fees, either for submission, for publication, or both. This can be a significant impediment for some authors, and where funding is available it is likely, in the final analysis, to come from the same public and foundation sources that fund library subscriptions. For instance, PLoS One requires a standard publication fee of \$1350, although fee waivers are available for authors with insufficient funds.¹² In the field of international relations, the *Research Journal of International Studies*¹³ charges \$300 per published article. Most of the 272 journals listed under social science in the DOAJ directory, do not appear to have publication charges, but then I have to confess (at the risk of sounding arrogant) that I hadn't heard of any of them before perusing the DOAJ list. *Nordic Journal of Political Economy*, the open access journal described in Mehlum (2012) also does not charge for publication, but is not listed by DOAJ. Clearly, a breakthrough for open access has yet to occur in the social sciences.

¹¹ Ironically, unless your library subscribes to this journal, it will cost you \$30 to download a copy of Parks (2002) from the publisher.

¹² www.plosone.org/static/checklist.action.

¹³ www.eurojournals.com/international_studies.htm.

But if it gains further ground in the hard sciences, the social sciences will probably follow.

There are a number of intermediate models. A journal may combine income from subscription and author fees, particularly for special services like color graphs. Alternatively, if the subscription fee is kept as the main source of revenue, access may still be granted by allowing authors to post copies of the manuscript, usually after peer review but before final copy editing, or even a copy of the final article after an time interval ('the green route'). Such posting may be at the individual scholars website, at the institution's repository (Brand 2010), or in special archives such as arXiv¹⁴, with over 630,000 items, which started out in physics but now extends to other disciplines. (So far, 'quantitative finance' is the only social science included.) According to Harnad et al. (2010), most international publishers allow some form of article posting.

A future for open access in international relations?

Academic societies in the social sciences, including the ISA, are usually characterized by a great deal of social and political concern. This is reflected in discussions about such issues as ethical investment of the endowment and diversity in the governing bodies and in meetings. From that perspective, it is perhaps surprising that there hasn't been a groundswell of opinion in favor of making society-owned journals available to unaffiliated scholars and to universities in the third world. If such a movement emerges, it would face some hard choices. Thomson (2012) is undoubtedly right that at the moment journal editors have other and more pressing concerns. But if full open access with no financial compensation to the editorial office and the publisher were to be implemented, the question of how to maintain the editorial office (and thus the quality control of some of the flagship journals of the profession) would become an immediate and pressing concern. Better then to start that discussion before the issue becomes acute. That is the purpose of this symposium.

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¹⁴ <http://arxiv.org/>. Accessed 21 October 2010.

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