

At the Speed of Thought: [1](#)

Pursuing Non-Commercial Alternatives to Scholarly Communication

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Scholars, information specialists, and academic libraries have warned of a crisis in scholarly communication for years (Sosteric 1996). For a time, it was hoped that electronic publication would bring some much needed relief by reducing the cost of distribution of the primary journal literature. However, despite hopeful statements in the early years, it now appears increasingly unlikely that electronic publication will bring relief. Some commercial publishers, rather than seeing electronic publishing as an opportunity to reduce costs and bring needed relief to the academic libraries that they *serve*, have chosen to exploit the opportunities for increasing profit presented by the new technologies. From our 1998 perspective, the 1996 vision of a future communication system where scholarly skywriting is conducted in a low-cost, collectivist manner by the scholars themselves now seems largely a hopeless fantasy.

A recent statement issued by The International Coalition of Library Consortia (ICOLC, *Statement*) confirms our worst fears. Using their growing monopoly position and control over the scholarly communication system, commercial publishing houses are forcing libraries to purchase *both* paper and electronic versions of their journals at rates that are already higher than the standard print cost and at rates that the ICOLC fears will eventually add as much as 40% or more to the cost of scholarly material in journals. This is certainly not the dream of independent scholarly publishing; it is the nightmare of unregulated monopoly control.

In a press release introducing the statement, the ICOLC notes:

The explosion in electronic licensing, the wide variance in publisher practices, rapidly escalating prices, and a concern about the reduction in the number of independent scholarly information providers all served as the impetus for the statement. The Statement calls for developing multiple pricing models, separating charges for electronic licenses from those of paper subscriptions, and lowering the cost for the electronic information below that of print subscriptions. ICOLC expresses its concern over the growing practice of publishers that levy initial surcharges on electronic information, which is compounded by significant multi-year inflation surcharges and prohibitions against libraries canceling print versions of journal titles. As a result, while libraries may receive access to a larger array of titles by paying the 'print price plus electronic subscription cost plus inflation,' the total base price for electronic access over the print subscription could increase by 40% or more within as little as three or four years.

A similar attempt to consolidate the strength of libraries and perhaps win support from the scholarly community took place in Europe in late 1997. A coalition of 15 Dutch scientific research libraries came together to express their concerns over an announcement by Reed Elsevier of its intent to merge with Wolters Kluwer (both major scientific publishers) and to

pursue "a strategy of increasing its focus on 'must-have' information." Seeing the anti-competitive nature of the proposed merger, the Dutch librarians adopted a set of principles aimed at bolstering their position in negotiations with publishers and reducing the possible impact of skyrocketing electronic journal prices.² Like the statement by the ICOLC, this is an attempt to consolidate the strength of libraries and perhaps win support from the scholarly community by attempting to make clear the stakes involved.

Unfortunately, in the long-run, libraries are virtually powerless *by themselves* to offset the practices of commercial publishing houses. When it comes right down to it, an academic library simply must have the key journal titles. They serve an academic market, after all, and it is this market that largely determines which journals should be made available. If the academic market continues to demand the high-prestige titles, and if we, the faculty authors, continue to submit our work to these journals, there is little libraries will be able to do but cope with our needs and purchase the high price journals.

Barriers to Independent Scholarly Publishing

So what is to be done? At one point, scholars like Steve Harnad, Andrew Odylzko, and Bernard Hibbits made calls for a new future of independent scholarly publication outside of the commercial mainstream. In the context of the crises in the scholarly communication system, proselytizing a future for independent publication was a laudable project. However, the vision of independent communication has not been realized primarily because scholars have been reluctant to take up the call to independent publication. Despite the powerful potential of information technologies to wrest control of the scholarly communication system from the big commercial publishing houses, relatively few individual scholars have initiated journal projects. It is perhaps this failure on the part of the academic community to move quickly to independent publication that has encouraged commercial houses to grow bolder in their demands.

But why the reluctance? What are the barriers that have slowed the revolution in scholarly publication within the academic environment? Probably one of the most significant barriers to independent scholarly publication is simply the amount of work involved. There can be no doubt that editing journals takes a lot of work. And it takes even more work when you add typesetting and production duties to the job requirements. Add to this the necessity of developing a high degree of computer literacy and you have a daunting barrier to participation in the electronic revolution.

A second barrier, closely related to the first, is that editorial duties are not as highly regarded as publishing scholarly articles or books when it comes to tenure and advancement decisions. As a result, even those individuals who may be willing to take on some of the work of publishing a journal in their field may be reluctant to do so because of the time it takes away from other, more important, activities. In a decision between putting time into an activity that moves you towards tenure and editing an electronic journal, the current reward structure virtually guarantees that scholars will pass up opportunities to start publication projects.

Third, access to the system of scholarly communication is largely closed to all but the most

established scholars. Legitimate restrictions on access, which follow an almost guild-like structure, ensure that quality is maintained. However, there is a significant contradiction and irony in the way control is maintained. Mechanisms for apprenticing scholars in even the old technologies seem undefined and there are no efforts to develop a craft structure for electronic publication. Because of this guild-like structure, and because of the relatively inadequate uptake mechanisms, most up and coming scholars would not have sufficient confidence to cross the line into the scholarly communication system without proper guidance and encouragement (and we would probably be safe in assuming that most new scholars would be discouraged from initiating journal projects). This is, of course, the rub, since it is young scholars who are most likely to take the risks associated with initiating an electronic journal project. Perhaps it is this weakness in the current system of quality control that is preventing a more rapid adoption of new technologies by scholars. And while some may argue that it is necessary to move slowly, failure to utilize initiative at any level supports commercial penetration and control almost by default.

Fourth, independent scholarly publication has been largely seen as an anomaly and there are still questions about the quality of independent publication on the Net. These concerns seem largely undeserved. Publications like the *Electronic Journal of Sociology (EJS)* <http://www.sociology.org> get tens of thousands of hits a month, draw papers from all levels of the academy (including established authors), and have achieved international recognition. And the *EJS* is not alone in this. So the basic problem seems to be convincing "the establishment" of the acceptability of alternative publication. The general scholarly world seems to have already reached its own conclusions.

Fifth, there hasn't been a deep sense of urgency to spur scholars into action until now. At this point, however, it is hard to deny that serious and damaging changes are occurring in the academy. Higher education, once at least marginally dedicated to liberal ideals, is slowly and inexorably being turned into a venue for profit generation. The long-term implications have been explored elsewhere,³ but it is clear that not only access, but also our own livelihoods are being threatened.

Sixth, while individual projects have abounded, there have been few attempts to develop the level of organization required to create a broad, multi-disciplinary coalition of educators, researchers, and administrators dedicated to revolutionizing the scholarly communication system. Such an organization is sorely required. Not only because a coalition of journal editors and institutions will raise the standards and acceptability of craft based journal publication, but also because such a coalition will be able to exert considerable market power in the highly monopolistic world of academic journals.

International Consortium for Alternative Academic Publication

This is a call for participation in a broad-based initiative dedicated to the development of an international alternative scholarly communication system outside of the commercial mainstream. Founded in Canada and housed at Athabasca University, it is named the International Consortium for Alternative Academic Publication <http://www.icaap.org/>. The coalition's mission is to reduce the barriers to independent scholarly publication by bringing

together scholars and institutions from all countries and all disciplines who are interested in bringing economic health back to the scholarly communication system. ICAAP resolves to work towards overcoming blocks that have prevented a shift away from commercial dependence and will pursue the following agenda:

Providing Editorial Assistance

In order to increase the chance that individual scholars will publish their own journals, ICAAP will devote the bulk of its revenue to hosting journals and providing final production assistance (HTML markup, copy-editing, etc.). ICAAP will also develop online resources and tutorials in order to help facilitate the development of alternative outlets for scholarly work.

Enhancing the Prestige of Editorial Work

In order to encourage scholars to develop their own journal projects, editorial work will have to be sufficiently rewarded. We believe it is possible to raise the status of editorial work in the academy simply by exposing the difficulties, challenges, rewards, and contributions that editors make to the progress of science. ICAAP will tirelessly proselytize this cause to the scholarly world.

Enhancing the Prestige of Independent Electronic Publication

There should be no reason that commercial publishers are seen as any more prestigious than independent publication efforts. After all, it is we who provide the critical editorial and review work. Commercial houses simply provide production services and editorial standards. To remedy this imbalance, ICAAP will develop cross-disciplinary publication standards. In developing these standards, ICAAP will focus on developing high-quality publication without the expensive frills that commercial publications most often use to justify higher prices.

Providing a Route For Apprenticing Young Scholars in the Craft of Scholarly Communication

Recognizing that part of the problem is a lack of appropriate training, ICAAP will, through its official organ *The Craft* <http://www.icaap.org/TheCraft/>, provide a venue for apprenticing young scholars in the art and science of scholarly communication. It is hoped that eventually these scholars will go on to initiate their own independent journal projects outside of the commercial mainstream.

Providing Technical Expertise and Standards to Move Independent Efforts Towards Greater Standardization

It is imperative, if independent scholarly communication is to advance beyond its current uncoordinated state, that technical standards be developed to ensure efforts are not duplicated or wasted and that the cost to the system is not raised through this duplication of effort. ICAAP proposes to develop, in consultation with stakeholders, technical standards for the production and distribution of scholarly information. One such effort already underway is our web

indexing robot <http://www.icaap.org/database/journals.html>. This robot is unique in the realm of web robots not only because it targets only scholarly resources (thus eliminating the problems associated with the many less discerning robots on the Web), but also because it is capable of structuring the indexing of journals on familiar search fields.

ICAAP already has affiliations in Australia, Canada, Denmark, Mexico, and Russia. We are currently seeking to expand our board of directors with interested scholars from all disciplines, and we are seeking affiliations with stakeholder organizations with an international scope. We at ICAAP hope that you and your organization will join us in our mission to revolutionize the scholarly communication system.

Endnotes

¹ The author would like to acknowledge the work of Steve Harnad as inspiration for the title of this article and the ICAAP catch phrase, *At the Speed of Thought*, from his work, "Post-Gutenberg Galaxy: The Fourth Revolution in the Means of Production of Knowledge," 1991, <ftp://ftp.princeton.edu/pub/harnad/Harnad/HTML/harnad91.postgutenberg.html>

² These guidelines state that libraries that subscribe to a print version of a journal should not have to pay more than an additional 7.5% for electronic access to that same journal, and that libraries should not pay more than 80% of the print rate to subscribe exclusively to the electronic version. "We've been talking about a 'journal crisis' for years," says one of the Dutch librarians. "It looks like it's finally arrived. We're fed up." Quoted in the International Federation of Library Associations mailing list IFLA-L@INFOSERV.NLC-BNC.CA from [Terry Kuny](#), in the article "Libraries Join Forces on Journal Prices" (Science 278.5343 [28 Nov 1997]: 1558).

³ Mike Sosteric, ed., (1998) *Pedagogy and the Colonization of the Academy: Business and Consumerism in the Classroom*, Spec. issue of *Electronic Journal of Sociology* 3.3. Available at <http://www.sociology.org/vol003.003/>.

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