

Article

Reclaiming Society Publishing

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Abstract: Learned societies have become aligned with commercial publishers, who have increasingly taken over the latter's function as independent providers of scholarly information. Using the example of geographical societies, the advantages and disadvantages of this trend are examined. It is argued that in an era of digital publication, learned societies can offer leadership with a new model of open access that can guarantee high quality scholarly material whose publication costs are supported by society membership dues.

Keywords: learned societies; geographical societies; commercial publishing; scholarly publishing; open access

Among the numerous changes effecting academic publishing since the 1970s, one of the most profound has been the commercialization of society publications.

To illustrate, my own publication record as a human geographer is indicative. Since 1994, when I first published in a peer-reviewed journal, I have had English-language publications in 38 academic journals. Of these, however, only three journals were society publications not published by commercial publishers. Furthermore, of the three, none was the journal of a major national disciplinary learned society (one was *Historical Geography*, the annual journal of the Association of American Geographers' Historical Geography Specialty Group, and the other two were online publications associated with interdisciplinary societies)¹. Indeed, even if I wished to publish in a non-commercial journal associated with a national learned society, as a monolingual English-speaking geographer this

¹ A fourth article, from which this article is derived, was published in Finnish in *Terra*, the Finnish/Swedish-language self-published journal of the Geographical Society of Finland [1]. Portions of this article are reprinted here with the permission of the Geographical Society of Finland.

would be impossible. At least in the global North, every English-language national geography society journal is controlled by one of two companies: U.K.-based Taylor & Francis, which owns the Routledge imprint, or U.S.-based Wiley-Blackwell. The Australian, Irish, South African, and U.S. geographical societies' journals are published by Taylor & Francis while the geographical societies of Canada, New Zealand, and the U.K. contract with Wiley-Blackwell. Non-English speaking countries' society journals that are predominantly in English have likewise been captured by this duopoly: Denmark and Norway are with Taylor & Francis while The Netherlands and Sweden are with Wiley-Blackwell.

This was not always the case. Through the 1960s, practically all learned societies published their scholarly journals in-house. The turn toward commercial publication of society journals began in the 1970s and 1980s, but it accelerated in the 1990s, first with the rise of online indexing and bundled subscriptions and then, by the end of the decade, with searchable, full-text, electronic publication. Learned societies lacked the technical expertise and marketing networks to thrive in this new digital environment, and commercial publishers required content to bolster the “bundles” that they were selling to libraries. As consultant Mark Ware notes in the trade journal *Learned Publishing*:

Many publishers have concluded that publishing on behalf of societies and associations can be an attractive business. Adding already established journals will increase revenues and profits far faster than launching new journals, and without the capital cost of acquisitions. In uncertain times, economists talk about a “flight to quality”—for publishers, holding “must-have” material certainly feels more secure than marginal content—and society journals are often of top quality. [2]

Thus, publishers approached learned societies offering substantial contracts in return for the right to publish their journals. Cash-starved (or perhaps just cash-hungry) learned societies readily agreed.

The few national societies that have bucked this trend are generally those that have continued to publish their journals in a language other than English. The Geographical Society of Finland provides a telling counter-example. It continues to publish its quarterly journal, *Terra*, in Finnish (with an occasional article in Swedish)². Although the journal is published in an electronic version, this is available only at Finnish university libraries. In addition, bound copies of *Terra* are mailed out to the members of the Geographical Society of Finland. There is minimal distribution beyond Finnish libraries and Geographical Society of Finland members, which is hardly surprising given that there are probably only a handful of Finnish-speaking geographers who reside outside the country. Predictably, issues of *Terra* are thin (typically two or three articles, plus book reviews) and a significant number of the articles are on Finland-specific topics.

At first glance, the Geographical Society of Finland's decision to continue publishing outside the English-language, corporate publisher mainstream would appear to put Finnish geography at a disadvantage. After all, Finnish geographers, like academics around the world regardless of discipline, are increasingly required to demonstrate the “impact” that they have beyond the confines of their university, and few could deny that *Terra*'s impact beyond Finland is necessarily limited by both language and distribution mechanism. However, this assumes that the rest of the publishing world is stable. It is not. As electronic publication becomes the norm and funding agencies require that

² Swedish is Finland's other official language, and about five percent of Finns speak Swedish as their primary language.

sponsored research be made available to the public, established publishers, national research councils, politicians, university administrators, library professionals, and scholars are engaged in an ongoing debate that has rapidly gone beyond “gold” *versus* “green” open-access models³ to query whether “brick-and-mortar” publishing houses and “paper-and-glue” journals are needed at all. Could mainstream journals be replaced by self-maintained low-cost or no-cost, open-access, peer-reviewed websites? After all, journals are already largely self-maintaining, as much of the work in journal publishing is performed by individuals who receive either no direct compensation (e.g., authors and reviewers) or token compensation (e.g., editors). Furthermore, many of the direct services provided by commercial publishers are connected either with print publication (which is fading into oblivion) or integration with database software (which also may be becoming less important as researchers turn to freely available services like Google Scholar). Indeed, to continue with the Finnish model, the Geographical Society of Finland has seized on these opportunities by making its other journal, the biennial, English-language *Fennia*, on-line only and open-access. *Fennia* has no registration or submission fee and is published via Open Journal Systems, an open-source, no-cost, journal-hosting platform that was developed by a consortium of North American libraries funded by Canada’s Social Science and Humanities Research Council. To be sure, the editors of *Fennia*, like those of *Terra*, miss out on some of the marketing benefits enjoyed by editors of corporate-published journals. However, readership rates for electronically-distributed open-access journals are often considerably higher than those of their subscription-based counterparts [3,4], which suggests that these journals can successfully market themselves through word-of-mouth and social media. Society-based self-publishing is not a panacea: In both the *Terra* and *Fennia* publishing models, as in the more common corporate-published society-based or publisher-owned publication, authors, reviewers, and editors devote uncompensated or poorly compensated labor to the production of knowledge. However, only in the corporate models is a by-product of this labor the transmission of funds from national research councils and students (who fund the budgets of university libraries) to profit-making multinational publishing enterprises (who receive these libraries’ subscription payments).

Beyond the few surviving society-based self-published journals, numerous other low-cost or no-cost publishing opportunities exist, from independent journals published on Open Journal Systems and similar platforms to the various blogs that have emerged to publish scholarly geographic essays and commentaries and that potentially could challenge the mainstream journal article as the paradigmatic academic outlet. To be certain, this turn to low-budget academic publishing is not without dangers. The Internet is crowded with start-up journals that merge the ease of internet publishing with the “gold” model to offer rapid publication with minimal peer review (for critiques, see Scholarly Open Access, n.d.) [5]. Almost every day I receive an e-mail from a new open-access journal, either requesting me to sit on its “Editorial Board” or publish in it at a fraction of the “gold” Article Publication Charge demanded by mainstream publishers.

³ Under the “gold” open-access model, an author pays an Article Publication Charge when the article is accepted, and the article is made freely available to all. Under the “green” model, after a period behind a journal’s paywall, the article is published on self-maintained or university-maintained archive sites.

Amidst this turmoil, there may be a future where the Springers, Elseviers, Taylor & Francises, and Wiley-Blackwells of the world, after consolidating the market and forcing out small players, price themselves out as new, more nimble start-ups emerge that are freed from the burdens of paper publication, integration with proprietary databases, sunken production costs, and contracts with learned societies. In a pattern familiar to historians of capitalism, the very innovations that have made consolidation optimal may, in the next era, lead to its decline. After all, if we are entering an era in which “production” of an article involves little more than uploading it to the web so that it is searchable via Google, then what is the advantage of paying a commercial publisher, let alone a high-priced legacy publisher, to manage this process?

The answer is that established journals offer legitimacy: “proof” that the article has been through a rigorous peer review process. The chemist on a university promotion board will know nothing about an individual geography journal but she will assume that a title published by Elsevier or Wiley-Blackwell is a legitimate academic publication that adheres to standard refereeing practices.

But if the main function of the publisher is to signify quality, then one should ask: Which is more trustworthy as an enforcer of academic rigor? A for-profit enterprise under pressure to generate revenues for shareholders by maintaining titles and page-counts, or a learned society whose reputation—and that of the discipline and members that it represents—would be tarnished if it were known to be publishing scholarship that had not been thoroughly vetted? To be clear, I am not suggesting that there is a record of commercial publishers asserting direct editorial control over their society (or other) titles or subverting the peer review process. Indeed, in my experience as a member of the editorial team of a publisher-owned journal (*Political Geography*, which is owned and published by Elsevier), I have been impressed by the publisher’s willingness to facilitate—and even participate in—dialogue published in the journal’s pages concerning its own corporate practices [6]. Nonetheless, various statements and actions made by the publisher over the years suggest a structural tension between the publisher’s desire for quantity (which is necessary to maintain revenues) and the editors’ desire for quality (which is necessary to maintain reputation): Elsevier’s unilateral expansion of the journal’s publication frequency (which was reversed only after considerable protest from the editors); a comment at an Editorial Board meeting where an Elsevier representative commended the journal for raising its acceptance rate which had been “too low”; encouragement from Elsevier to organize more special issues in thematic areas that have received high citation counts.

Perhaps, then, the time is ripe for learned societies to use their status as arbiters of academic integrity and re-assert a leading role in academic publishing. Not unlike the “gold” and “green” open-access models, a new era of society-led open-access publishing would involve some shifting of financial burdens. Costs currently born by consumers (as in the current library subscription model) would instead be born by producers through their membership in learned societies. Thus, there is some resemblance to the “gold” producer-pays model. However individual costs would be kept much lower than in the “gold” model, in part because they would be spread across the discipline and in part because publishing would be re-claimed from for-profit enterprise. Thus, this model maintains the best aspect of “open-access” in that material would be freely available to all readers while also maintaining the best aspect of the current system in that there would be no incentive to discriminate against non-grant-funded research.

As a range of “gold” and “green” open-access options, alternative publishing fora, and start-up journals compete for the attention of authors, readers, and promotion committee reviewers, learned societies will be ideally poised to reclaim the mantle that they held forty years ago as guarantors of quality and integrity. To be certain, this future will be resisted, not just by publishers but also by learned societies that would stand to lose publisher payments that typically constitute 41–50 percent of a society’s revenue [7].

Thus, the next era of conflict over academic publication norms may involve struggle *within* learned societies, as reformers advocate non-renewal of corporate publication contracts and the old guard argues for continued relationships with the publishers who keep the professional societies afloat. Loss of revenue would come at a cost, and many learned societies might have to curtail valuable activities, so this is not a decision to be made lightly. Additionally, it is likely that few academics will have the stomach (or time) to launch organized insurgent movements. Nonetheless, the best route for reclaiming academic publishing may well involve first reclaiming the learned societies.

Conflicts of Interest

In addition to serving as associate editor of the Elsevier-published journal *Political Geography*, the author is a dues-paying member of the Royal Geographical Society and an associate member of the Association of American Geographers. The content of this article is not intended to represent the position of any of these organizations.

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