The “Academic Spring” — Shallow Rhetoric Aimed at the Wrong Target

Posted by Kent Anderson ⋅ Apr 12, 2012 ⋅ 71 Comments

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Recently, the term “academic spring” has appeared in relation to statements from the Wellcome Trust and the Elsevier boycott started by mathematician Timothy Gowers, mainly in coverage in the Guardian, which seems to have become a cheerleader in the open access (OA) movement.

The term “academic spring” was apparently introduced by a librarian named Barbara Fister. The term borrows from the Arab Spring, a set of uprisings that started in 2010 during which thousands if not millions rose up against tyrannical regimes, risking and sometimes losing their lives in an attempt to create more representative governments. Many regimes were overthrown. In some countries, new military regimes have taken temporary
(we hope) control. In Egypt, protests are ongoing as the military hasn’t set a clear path toward elections. Libya is still in transition. Syria has been a bloodbath.

The “academic spring” as envisioned by coverage in the *Guardian* and in Fister’s blog post is altogether different from the Arab Spring and, I would argue, is a term inappropriately and cynically borrowed. How can you cheapen the striving of an entire culture for representative government by equating that with complaints about paywalls? But there is a deeper problem with equating a boycott of publishers or a call for open access with a revolution against great and domineering powers — that is, by targeting publishers, academics are targeting the wrong power-players in the academic marketplace.

It’s becoming increasingly clear that there is a more plausible candidate for the role of villain in this overcharged environment, a powerful group exploiting academics, taking taxpayer funded research for itself, and shifting risk from itself to those it ostensibly values. But it’s not publishers. It’s the universities themselves.

Yesterday, I published a review of *The Economics Shaping Science.* It becomes clear from this carefully written book that one of the main economic transformations in science careers is publication — academics publish in order to turn information that has no inherent economic value for them (it is non-rival and non-excludable) into things that are rival and excludable, and therefore have economic value (namely, priority and prestige). Academics accomplish this transformation through the act of citable publication. Journal publishers create and maintain the venues that establish and record priority and lend prestige, including the third-party validation, the underlying coordination of peer-review, the maintenance and integration of platforms, the dissemination and longevity of materials, and so forth. This is the case no matter the underlying business model of the publisher.

Or, as the Mythbusters recently said, “The difference between screwing around and science is writing it down.” This really is the essence of why publication matters so much.

The “academic spring” is meant to force publishers to stop erecting paywalls. As an alternative to readers paying, some funders and activists want journals to be funded largely by research dollars derived from the researchers’ own grants (and by extension, granting entities). These pre-paid articles are then freely available for anyone to read them.

This makes little rational sense given the economics of science, which may explain why the Gowers petition has only received 9,000 signatures (as compared with the 30,000+ the initial PLoS petition garnered years ago), and why a recent similar petition in the US failed to even gain 1,000 signatures (but don’t tell the *Guardian* that — it doesn’t fit with their narrative):
1. **Scientists sense there is little to be gained.** Given the transformation accomplished by publishing (from economically valueless for the authors to economically valuable for the authors), the only economic value an author derives is from prestige and priority. (There is no economic value to scientists retaining copyright, either, kids.) Therefore, the best venue for publication (the best brand) and the first recorded finding are what the rational player in this market would seek. There is no clear reason to have unqualified readers who add nothing to either prestige or priority value. The citation advantage myth demonstrates this — OA publication adds to readers but not qualified readers, those who care about prestige and priority. Therefore, the value of OA is not increasing significantly, with stagnant prices demonstrating this.

2. **Funding overlaps are obvious and problematic.** Gold OA article publication fees are typically paid out of research funds. When OA publication was less common, this aggregate amount may have been trivial. Now, it is deep into millions of dollars, if not into the hundreds of millions, money flowing directly from research grants and awards to OA publishers. Subscription dollars, on the other hand, flowed from other budgets — department overhead, library acquisitions, and personal. By insisting on a system of research-dollar funded OA, academics are depleting their available grant funding to pay publishers. This is not completely rational. Instead, it is a looming Tragedy of the Commons around research funding.

3. **The Pogo problem.** Pogo’s most famous quote is, “We have met the enemy and he is us.” Scholarly publishers are often academic centers or societies themselves. Depleting funds from these publishers in order to accomplish a dubious outcome (more readers who matter at best peripherally to prestige and priority) turns out to create self-inflicted wounds. Publishing enterprises that subsidize societies have a harder time as competitive initiatives like PubMed Central and OA repositories take traffic away, driving down ad impressions and usage stats librarians use to value subscriptions, leading to decreased revenues from publications. As these subsidies diminish, membership fees increase, grants shrink, or other fees are created for each community. Or, the academic or society publisher embraces OA to compensate for lower subscription revenue prospects, and thereby moves us closer to the research funding Tragedy of the Commons.

Meanwhile, without any publisher’s hand in this, **library budgets have been shrinking as a percentage of university revenues for decades**, despite the fact that universities have been actively recruiting more and more scientists and researchers, benefiting mightily from their work, and over-producing PhDs. More and more academics are being forced to accept soft-money jobs and adjunct positions as universities pad their endowments and shield themselves from the risks of full-time faculty and dedicated research staffs. And the intellectual property of federally funded research has become the legal property of these same universities in the United States at least, many of which make millions of dollars exploiting it while some scientists hit it big.

And academics are protesting publishers?

Publishers — OA or subscription — are essentially partners with scientists
and researchers, creating a clear, well-attenuated, and highly valuable route to transforming ideas into careers.

Of course, there are more journals, and many more important journals, than there were 30 years ago. But ask yourself these questions:

- Who shrank the library budgets while simultaneously courting researchers and research dollars?
- Who’s training too many PhDs for the economy to absorb, while generally (through commission or omission) misleading PhD candidates about how viable a PhD will be?
- Who has moved away from tenure-track positions and intramural funding?
- Who has become too reliant on blunt and unreliable metrics like impact factor and $h$-index to rank faculty?
- Who holds the IP for federally funded research in the United States, and exploits that without returning it to the taxpayer?

Many of these university-driven practices make publication in journals all the more valuable — getting funding has become more tooth-and-nail at the researcher level, and a brutal $h$-index year can spell the end for some. This is why pay-for-publication has flourished recently. Competition for grants, status, priority, and prestige is all the fiercer because there's such a reliance on soft money now. Instead of “publish or perish,” it’s “fund or fail.”

As it has done with the Monbiot rant and other open access retreads, the Guardian is giving full throat to these rhetorical bombshells. For some reason, the editors of this particular paper — which I otherwise admire — have lost their objectivity when it comes to topics like open access and the Gowers petition. That’s too bad, but perhaps they’ll come to their senses before too long.

For there to be a true “academic spring,” academics would need to demand that administrators return to spending the same percentage on library acquisitions they spent, well, let’s say 10 years ago; require they be paid to do research and not be forced to constantly scrounge for grants; hold universities accountable for telling students what their chances of good careers in the sciences actually are, rather than just padding their enrollment numbers; and so forth. Confronting administrators with ideas like these would take real courage, not the empty courage of hitting the kid closest to your out of frustration while the big kid walks away with your lunch money.

Complaining about a partner that helps academics accurately and reliably transform economically non-viable information into highly valuable academic credit? That seems like academic silly season, not academic spring.
About Kent Anderson

I am the CEO/Publisher of the Journal of Bone & Joint Surgery, Inc. Prior to this, I was an executive at the New England Journal of Medicine. I also was Director of Medical Journals at the American Academy of Pediatrics.

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Discussion

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1. *grabs popcorn*

I’m not sure I’d blame universities for everything – the soft funding situation is a deeper problem to do with the way research money is allocated from research councils. The only way to get more research done is to bring in more in the form of short-term research funding. But that’s a different problem.

Incidentally, I’m amused by the Grauniad putting such weight on the Wellcome’s decision to join the “academic spring” by announcing that they will, errm, enforce their own rules.

2. Many academics act in self-interested ways. Some of these are direct and transparent, including the search for prestige and promotion through publication and the private exploitation of publicly-funded IP. Some of these are indirect and less visible, such as the slow erosion of library budgets and the incremental growth in graduate student numbers. Kent’s blog contributes neatly to the proper scrutiny of our own practices as an academic community.

He also scores a nice hit on the self-inflating headlines about an ‘academic spring’. Of course, journalistic hyperbole is a very easy target.