

CASE STUDY

Journals at bepress: new twists on an old model

Irene Perciali, Director of Journals, and Aaron Edlin, Chairman

Abstract

Founded by professors in 1999, The Berkeley Electronic Press now publishes 39 electronic-only journals. Since 1999, other academic journal publishers have explored a variety of new business models, with mixed results. In contrast, bepress's model, just as distinctive now as it was then, has resulted in steady growth. The model rests on three principles: improve, but do not break, the traditional journal; allow non-subscribers to read articles as guests; and offer reasonable and sustainable prices to libraries. Even in the shifting landscape of open access, there remains a place for professional journal publishers who offer innovative improvements, traditionally qualified content, and reasonable prices.

Introduction

The Berkeley Electronic Press (bepress) was founded in 1999 just at the end of the dot com crash (read, the worst time since the Great Depression to start a business) by economics and law professors from the University of California, Berkeley. These professors recognized the potential of technology, and especially Internet technology, and organizational innovations to dramatically improve academic journal publishing.

The bepress founders saw three major problems with traditional journals: slow turnaround, limited access, and high costs. In economics, for example, it might take two years or more for an article to go from submission to publication; bepress's EdiKit, a peer-review management system, speeds up the process, so that most articles receive decisions in ten weeks. Access to traditional journals is only available to readers at subscribing institutions; bepress introduced an innovative guest access policy that allows all readers, whether subscribed or not, to download articles. Traditional journals can be prohibitively expensive; bepress journals are priced well below industry averages, and subscription prices do not increase from year to year. A large part of our cost savings is that we publish our journals entirely online with no print counterpart. This is the model we began with, and it has proven successful through the years. We now publish 39 online-only journals (as of December 2007), primarily in the social sciences, with growing clusters in health, medicine, and engineering.

Other models: struggling or unproven

Since 1999, the academic journal industry has seen much innovation in publishing and business models. Enough time has passed that some evidence, formal and anecdotal, has begun to take shape about the longer-term viability of new business models for academic publishing. Some of these innovations are now showing wear and tear.

The traditional subscription-based model, as it has been deployed by many commercial publishers, has taken quite a publicity beating, with much criticism of high and increasing subscription prices, and some boycotting of the most expensive journals by editors and authors. Recent experiments with hybrid open access have shown promise, but have also raised questions about whether, and how, hybrid open access will lower the price of the subscriptions those publishers still sell to libraries.

Open-access journals (in the Gold model of open access) that derive their funding from institutions, grants, or author research budgets, have made significant progress in visibility and credibility – journals in the Public Library of Science are one leading example. Such journals, however, have yet to prove their financial sustainability over the long term. The past few months have seen significant set-backs for publishers who have tried to finance their journals with revenue sources other than library subscriptions. Despite significant and interesting experiments with its business model, the University of California Press was not able to sustain the American Anthropological Association journals, and the Association ended up retreating to a more traditional subscription-based publisher in order to secure the revenue it needed. BioMedCentral, a publisher who relies on fees from authors, their funders, or their institutions, has lost two major institutional customers – University of Illinois and Yale – who found they could no longer financially justify participation.

The Green model of open access – self-archiving – also has yet to prove its viability. In this model, publishers, authors, and institutions work together to ensure that copies of published articles are archived in open access repositories. Significant progress has been made, with more publishers willing to permit and even help with self-archiving, and more universities setting up repositories. Faculty uptake has been disappointing, though, and it is unclear whether mandates will work, whether a cultural shift is needed, or whether some new model will emerge in its place.

In academic journal publishing, there is no shortage of new ideas and any number of them may prove to be viable and replicable over the long term. For example, it is possible that publishers will find new revenue streams from advertising, or will find a reasonable way to charge institutions for their faculty members' publications. It is possible that scholars will finally be persuaded to deposit all their articles in open access repositories. Perhaps foundation and grant support will become an integral part of journal publishing, and we will see others assume the Public Library of Science model of free and highly innovative journals.

The bepress model

Meanwhile, bepress has steadily grown and thrived for the past seven years. The company grew from annual revenue of \$15,000 in 2000, to over \$4 million today. We add about five new journals each year, and the number of articles submitted to bepress journals has grown significantly – about 40% annual growth for each of the past three years. The fact that our submissions have grown so much indicates the popularity of our journals; our publications rate has grown more slowly, which indicates that our journals are steadily increasing their selectivity and quality.

Readership has grown to over one million readers - professors, researchers, and practitioners - worldwide. Scholars download bepress journal articles over 1,000 times per day, and over 450,000 scholars receive regular email alerts of new content. Well over 1,000 institutions subscribe to our journals, both nationally and internationally.

Given the uncertainty around sustainable business models in recent years, this may be an especially good time to take another look at the bepress journal model. What's our approach? The bepress journals business model rests on three principles: improve, but do not break, the traditional journal; allow non-subscribers to read articles as guests; and offer reasonable and sustainable prices to libraries.

Improve upon, but do not break, the traditional journal structure

Our first principle is to publish high-quality journals that improve upon, but do not break, the traditional journal structure.

Peer review is necessary to identify and improve the best articles for a given journal. No alternative model has successfully emerged to do so. Our journals are all peer-reviewed; they publish in volumes and issues; they are selective, and rigorously edited and peer-reviewed by some of the world's best-known and most widely-published scholars, from major universities (i.e. Berkeley, Columbia, London School of Economics, Cal Tech), research centers (i.e. RAND, the Jackson Laboratory), and government agencies (i.e. the Federal Reserve Bank, the EPA, the Department of Homeland Security). Editors include two Nobel Prize winners in economics: Joseph Stiglitz (*The Economists' Voice*) and Edmund Phelps (*Capitalism and Society*). Journals at bepress look and feel like traditional journals, and do not experiment with the style or basic tenets of peer-review and of editing to produce final, polished articles.

Instead, we have experimented with, and we believe have greatly improved, some of the weaknesses of the traditional journal process. Most importantly, we vastly shortened article publication time. Thanks to the use of our internet-based peer review and editorial management system, our organizational innovations, and the hard work of our editors and

reviewers, almost all bepress articles receive decisions in less than ten weeks. They are then published whenever the author finishes the final version, with no significant publication delay. The median time from submission to publication in recent years has ranged from 13 to 19 weeks. We are able to move so quickly for several reasons. Most of our journals publish content incrementally; they do not keep articles on hold for discrete issues. We use consistent formatting and style guidelines, which simplifies the final publication steps. And publication is electronic-only: editors simply upload papers to the journals' websites, and there are no printing and mailing delays.

But the greatest efficiencies are gained at the peer-review stage. Traditional peer-review can take months or years, because it is all too easy for even the most diligent editor, reviewer, or author to lose track of a manuscript's progress for long periods of time. With bepress's EdiKit software, scholars get the necessary reminders and clear status reports to act efficiently. Editors assign papers to reviewers electronically; reviewers send their comments back to authors electronically; authors receive comments and upload their revisions electronically; and so on. This back-and-forth is facilitated by periodic reminders and deadlines, which make it possible for all the scholars involved to stay on track and make timely changes and decisions. Editors tell us that, in comparison with other systems they use for other journals, EdiKit saves them the most time. It is also easier to learn and use: our trainings with new editors take less than an hour.

Electronic facilitation aside, the speed of peer-review ultimately depends on the. Even with the help of electronic peer-review software, journals often find it hard to get reviewers to submit reviews promptly. Every author wants a fast review, but researchers are all busy, and it's hard to get them to provide as fast a review as they would like for their own work. The problem is a lack of connection between the speed at which an author does reviews and speed at which his own work is reviewed. There is a social contract that implies that I review others' work quickly, in exchange for others reviewing my work quickly. Once upon a time this worked, but the social contract has broken down. To solve this problem, we made the social contract explicit in an Authors & Reviewers' Bank. When authors submit, they 'borrow' timely reviews from the bank. If the reviews are done on time, the author then 'owes' timely reviews to others. It is a contract, and people honor it. To see an example of the agreement in full, visit <http://www.bepress.com/bejeap/policies.html#arpolicies>.

Guest access

But what good is high-quality rapidly-published scholarship, if only a few people can read it? The second principle underlying bepress journals is wide access, through our innovative guest access policy. We allow all unsubscribed readers to access the full text of all articles at no charge, after they fill out a short form that allows us to inform their library of their interest.

The form does not require registration, user names, or passwords; it does require a small pause in the research process where scholars identify themselves as guests and attest to

their interest in an article. From readers' point of view, then, the result is much like open access: they find an article online and it is possible to read without a subscription. From the authors' point of view, their papers have an audience and reach that far surpass any subscription-based journal. Guest access thus offers many of the benefits of open access.

Surprisingly, however, the strongest case to be made for guest access is the business case: guests drive sales. Guest access accounts for at least 75% of our subscription sales, if not more. Why do libraries subscribe, you may ask, even though their faculty can access articles for free? We are able to report to libraries demand for journals to which they do not subscribe. From a librarian's standpoint, this is a valuable service: we provide information about demand on their campus that helps them allocate resources more effectively. This model is similar to the National Public Radio model in the United States, where some listeners foot the bill with contributions, but all of them (including contributors) must suffer periodic 'Pledge Breaks' where the stations ask for contributions. In our case, however, the Pledge Breaks constitute a short web form and only those who don't contribute (i.e. non-subscribers) suffer them. Once librarians realize that faculty are interested enough in a journal to regularly use it even while taking time for 'pledge breaks,' they do what they can to make it easier for their faculty to access the articles. When a library does subscribe, we've found that usage on its campus increases four to ten times over, because the articles are easier to access.

Our commitment to scholar-friendly policies also extends to generous permissions: scholars are permitted to archive their work on personal websites and institutional repositories with no delay, and we are constantly looking at other ways to extend permissions in order to keep ahead of academic needs.

Reasonable prices and policies

And what's the use of high-quality journals that everyone reads, if they're too expensive to afford? We make it easy for libraries to subscribe because we offer high-quality journals at very affordable prices. This is the third principle that makes the bepress model sustainable: none of our journals costs more than \$500, and the average price is closer to \$300. In large part this reflects cost efficiencies gained through electronic-only publishing, in large part it reflects how well the guest access process works to gain new sales, and in large part it reflects a simple choice to offer reasonable prices.

We do not raise the price of individual journals from year to year. We have found that we simply do not need to, and that it is far more valuable to reassure librarians that their budgets are safe with us. Our number of subscribers grows, and continues to have room to grow, and we add about five journals per year to the collection. Our complete package of journals, *ResearchNow*, does grow in price to reflect the added journals, but is itself offered at discounts of 30% or more.

A case study

An example will illustrate how these three principles – better journals, guest access, and reasonable prices – work together. *Studies in Nonlinear Dynamics and Econometrics* (*SNDE*) is a journal that came to us in 2002. It had been published by a university press only in print only beforehand; their sales and readership were too low to make the journal sustainable for that press. We were able to take the journal on because our costs, publishing the journal only in electronic form, are substantially lower.

SNDE now receives upwards of 16,000 full text downloads per year. The journal went from around twenty institutional subscriptions in 2002, to around 150 today, not counting the over 400 institutions who receive it as part of the complete collection of all bepress journals. Most importantly, the journal has vastly improved in selectivity and impact. It now accepts only 17% of papers submitted, and its Thomson/ISI impact factor has grown dramatically. In 2002, it ranked 163rd out of 166 economics journals, with an impact factor of 0.03. Today, it ranks 88th out of 175, with an impact factor of 0.661.

Why did *SNDE* do so well as a bepress journal? It had a dedicated editor and editorial board to start with. Thanks to electronic dissemination and bepress's innovative guest access policy, we were able to help it reach a much wider audience, gaining notice, recognition, submissions, and citations as a result. And, thanks to our low cost structure and our commitment to reasonable prices, we were able to do so while pricing it at \$280, well below the comparable econometrics journals that can cost as much as \$2,000.

What can be learned from bepress's success?

In 2000, bepress founded its first journals to solve the prevailing problems of journal publishing at that time – slow turnaround, limited access, and high costs. We feel that our solutions continue to work for the new problems that the academic journal industry faces in 2008. Here is what we have discovered.

The traditional journal model still resonates

Readers continue to rely heavily on quality signals when it comes to academic journals, perhaps even more now that the academic publishing model has undergone so much experimentation. Recent studies all show that many scholars are nervous about shaking up traditional journal models, because they equate this with harming peer review, which they still view as of central importance.¹ According to Harley et al. in particular, faculty often assume that open access journals have no peer review. As a result, they are reluctant to submit to open-access journals, and may consider their colleagues' papers in such journals to have less value. The author-pays model, too, was seen negatively, as self-promotion and “fundamentally in conflict with the peer-review process.”²

Our journals still have the look and feel of traditional journals, and we do our best to keep all the familiar markers of credibility that faculty rely on: peer-review and well-known

editors. Our success suggests that the traditional journal model holds significant sway, perhaps even more so today than seven years ago.

There is still a valuable role for professional publishers

Many scholars approach professional publishers such as bepress to find new journals, even if they have open-access publication and hosting tools at their disposal. Scholars seek the credibility associated with published (rather than hosted) journals, as well as the expertise and services of a fully-fledged publisher. In the case of some journals (though not necessarily all, and perhaps not in all fields), the value that publishers add can be quite meaningful – helping editors recruit content, disseminating a journal to a broad audience, including a non-academic one, promoting a journal at conferences, building a brand, managing the journal's presence in databases, maximizing the journal's discoverability by search engines, ensuring a professional published style, and so on. If the tide has turned against some commercial publishers because of their pricing and business practices, perhaps the alternative, rather than changing models, is to find professional publishers who practice affordable pricing and scholar-friendly policies.

Getting revenue from library subscriptions remains viable

Some publishers have stopped launching new journals because library budgets are dwindling. Provided that the cost of subscriptions is reasonable, we have found that libraries will buy new journals. And, there are benefits to leaving purchasing power in hands of libraries and readers, rather than authors or research institutions. According to Yale librarian David Stern, both Green and Gold OA 'significantly reduce the number of organizations making up the present revenue base.'³ Selling subscriptions to libraries, rather than selling the right to publish to authors and their research sponsors, spreads the costs more widely to all the parties concerned. The question of 'what's worth reading' may still be a different question than 'what's worth funding.'

A viable third way

Our guest access model, paired with affordable prices and high-quality journals, represents a third way between traditional subscription-controlled journals and open access ones. We do not see it as the only answer; ours is one model among many, and may be better suited to some disciplines and types of journals than others. We see both virtues and drawbacks in other models. For example, full open access (such as the Public Library of Science journals) avoids the inconvenience of our web forms, but requires cost recovery from authors and foundation support. At the same time, bepress has found a sustainable way to balance open distribution and equitable cost recovery; one that has worked as a profitable business model for seven years and counting. Indeed, the bepress guest access policy was shortlisted for the ALPSP/ Charlesworth award for Publishing Innovation in 2007.

Timing isn't everything

Although we founded our electronic publishing company at the worst possible time – the end of the dot-com boom when venture funding became unavailable, recession started, and library budgets shrunk, it turns out that hard work and a few good innovations did prevail in the end.

Note: Parts of this paper appeared in a presentation at an ALPSP seminar, Evolving Business Models in Scholarly Publishing, October 22, 2007, Washington D.C.

References

1. Harley, D., Earl-Novell, S., Arter, J., Lawrence, S., and King, C.J., The Influence of Academic Values on Scholarly Publication and Communication Practices. URL: <http://cshe.berkeley.edu/publications/publications.php?id=232>. Rowlands I. and Nicholas D., New Journal Publishing Models: An International Survey of Senior Researchers. CIBER report for the Publisher's Association and the International Association of STM Publishers, 22 Sep 2005, URL: http://www.homepages.ucl.ac.uk/~uczciro/pa_stm_final_report.pdf. University of California Office of Scholarly Communication and the California Digital Library eScholarship Program, Faculty Attitudes and Behaviors Regarding Scholarly Communication: Survey Findings from the University of California, August 2007, URL: <http://osc.universityofcalifornia.edu/responses/activities.html>.
2. Harley et al., 6.
3. Stern, D., Open Access or Differential Pricing for Journals: The Road Best Traveled? *InfoToday* 2005: 29 (March/April), URL: <http://www.infotoday.com/online/mar05/stern.shtml>.