AUSTRALIAN RESEARCH WHO PROFITS? IT’S SIMPLE, SIMON.

Colin Steele 1077 words

Improved access to Australian research is essential to maximise educational, economic, cultural, social and health benefits and to reflect Australian taxpayer investment in research.

However, instead of an open information commons, Australian research is largely locked up behind expensive multinational publishing firewalls, constituting almost information feudalism.

Australian governments constantly emphasise the need for financial efficiencies in higher education, so one might have thought that the huge amounts of funding, both direct and indirect, involved in the creation, publication and distribution of Australian research might have been a higher priority for relevant government and university bodies.

Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull stated at a Melbourne Institute Forum in November 2015, "Everyone I talk to thinks that the problem is that academics have got – their incentives are very much associated with publish or perish".

The pressures on researchers to publish, and thus gain research evaluation brownie points, has dramatically increased in the last decade. Publishing metrics, in university league tables, feedback into issues, such as overseas student recruitment, and further distort rational discussion on the costs and structures of scholarly publishing.

A December 2017 *Nature* article reported that the *Web of Science* database alone records 39 million research papers published from 1900 -2015, with a staggering 21% not being cited at all. Another 2017 report claimed that up to 50% of the 8000 articles published daily are only read by their authors, peer reviewers and journal editors.
The annual global growth rate in articles is growing at 3-4%. Publications and associated metrics have become the symbolic currency of scholarly value. Who benefits from this global publishing deluge, other than multinational commercial publishers?

Multinational publisher profits, some with annual margins above 30%, have significantly increased in the last two decades. Elsevier, Springer Nature and Wiley-Blackwell, now represent about half the US$10 billion GDP scientific publishing industry. Elsevier, the RELX Group's STM (scientific, technical and medical) arm, saw operating profits in 2016 total £853 million.

No one is disputing that scholarly publishing has real costs. The crucial issue is what constitutes reasonable publisher profit levels and, importantly, who owns the research output of universities and research organisations.

Currently most publicly funded university research is freely given to publishers by academic authors, with their universities then having to buy back that research through library journal subscriptions.

In that process, researchers usually renounce their copyright given the frantic institutional pressure to publish. Many publisher copyright agreements leave researchers unable re-use their own works or to effectively share them globally. Publisher firewalls also prevent wide public access to publicly funded research.

Glyn Davis, Vice Chancellor of Melbourne University, in his October 2017 UPP lecture in London, emphasised the need to open up Australian research from behind publisher pay walls, “all those papers in obscure academic journals, all that intellectual property locked up in institutions that could instead be providing quick economic returns for the taxpayer”.

British university libraries pay around £200 million per annum to buy back their research in scholarly journals, Australian university
libraries pay around AU$260 million and the 125 research libraries in North America spend more than $US2 billion dollars.

If one also takes into consideration the considerable subsidies, ranging from campus infrastructure provision to academic time freely given in article creation and subsequent peer reviewing, then collective action for transformative change in scholarly publishing is long overdue.

A recent three-year struggle, under New Zealand’s freedom of information laws, by University of Auckland academic Mark Wilson, to reveal the cost of annual journal subscriptions, culminated in the New Zealand Ombudsman’s ruling that the right to make such information public outweighed any commercial interests of publishers and universities. Incidentally, where are similar FOI figures for Australian universities?

Wilson found that New Zealand universities paid almost US$15 million in 2016 to just four publishers Elsevier, Springer, Wiley and Taylor & Francis and subscription costs rose 17% over 3 years, clearly exceeding the CPI inflation rate.

Another effect of the rise of journal subscription, ‘Big Deals’, is the decline in the purchase of academic print monographs. Books are often seen as the physical gold standard in research evaluation for the humanities and social sciences. This, despite many academic monographs only having a print run of 2 to 300 copies, with prices set high for publisher profit.

Impact agendas being implemented by governments in Australia and the Northern hemisphere will hopefully help Australian open access university presses. In 2017, the ANU Press, with over 700 titles since 2003, had over two million downloads. Over 50% of downloads were from outside of Australia, with USA, Britain, France and China the top downloading countries. ANU also published its first batch of Open Access course books, which were downloaded more than 27,000 times in 2017.
There is a strong case, perhaps through referral to the Productivity Commission, for a national examination of cost transparency and effectiveness in scholarly publishing.

The Productivity Commission’s Report on Intellectual Property Arrangements, Recommendation 16 on Open Access, provides a framework for relevant organisations to come together to unlock Australian scholarly research, but governmental interdepartmental progress has apparently been slow to coordinate action on this recommendation.

The December 2017 Universities UK report *Monitoring the Transition to Open Access*, notes that open access to research content has never been a movement towards free access, but that the “financial weight that comes from publishing needs to be kept in check if our universities are to continue to make high-quality UK research openly available. Only then can our research outputs help to drive improvements in the wider economy and society”.

Again whither national Australian policy action in this context? Bodies, like the Council of Australian University Librarians (CAUL) the Australian Open Access Support Group (AOASG) and the National Scholarly Communication Forum (NSCF), provide policy advice to groups, such as the Deputy Vice Chancellors Research Committee and Universities Australia.

None of these, however, can direct individual universities, nor relevant government departments, into collective action. Universities often compete against each other, and follow short-term money trails in reward systems.

The 25th NSCF, *Improving Access to Australia’s Research – Policy Frameworks*, held at the Australian Academy of Science in Canberra on 31 August 2017, highlighted the need for coordinated policy leadership in government and universities. Australia needs to follow
the global FAIR maxims to make research output, both in text and data, findable, accessible, interoperable and reusable, for the public good.

-----------------------------------------

Colin Steele is Emeritus Fellow at the Australian National University and Convenor of the National Scholarly Communications Forum 2005-2017