

APE 2018: Academic Publishing in Europe, Introduction

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

As you have already heard, I am the President of the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities, which hosts your workshop in its building. In my capacity I am often asked to say a few friendly words, explain to the attendees of a conference what the Academy is and wish everyone a successful meeting.

However, in the current case I am not really a neutral person, unfamiliar with the subject of the workshop. I have started campaigning for Open Access in academic publishing about twenty five years ago in a time when this term did not yet exist and have kept on doing this ever since.

Therefore, I will say nothing about the Academy and a few more words than just “Hello”. My remarks may sound somewhat offensive, but they faithfully describe my view of the current situation in academic publishing.

I am also a member of the negotiation team of the German DEAL-project that tries to significantly change the way scientific results are published.

After a long time of contemplating about the way how scientific publishing should be organized, I became convinced that Gold Open Access is the way to go. I will not explain here why I feel confident that this is the best way and I cannot describe here the reasons why basically all German scientists and librarians have joined the move towards this goal. This would take too much time. But I am happy to be able to report that the latter development is indeed the case.

I have always been aware of the significant imbalance and the fundamental divisions of the academic publication market. Being in the DEAL negotiation team, this became even more apparent.

On the side of the scientists, there is an atomistic market where, up to now and unfortunately, many of the actors play without having any clue about the economic consequences of their activities. This has changed in some academic subjects like my own field, mathematics, in Germany and a few other countries where buyer alliances have been organized, which are, as expected, immediately accused of forming monopolies. And they are taken to court: Fortunately without success and with the result of strengthening the alliances.

On the publishers’ side, there is a very small number of huge publication enterprises with very smart marketing people. They totally dominate the market, produce grotesque profits and – amazingly – manage to pretend to be the good Samaritarians of the sciences. And there are the tiny others, I understand that

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this is the majority of the academic publishers gathering here. These are, though, attentively observed by many delegates of the big players who are letting them play the game, ready to swallow them if an opportunity comes up.

I am sure that, when you, the small publishers, discuss with the representatives of the “big guys”, these are most likely very friendly to you. But once you are in a negotiation situation, like I have been, when it comes to discussing system changes, and when the arguments are starting to get tight, the smiles disappear and the greed begins to gleam. You will hear in words and not implicitly that the small academic publishers are considered to be just round-off errors, tolerated for another while, irrelevant for the world-wide scientific publication market, having no more influence at all. These are not my words.

One big publisher stated: If your country stops subscribing to our journals, science in your country will be set back significantly. I responded – with the same amount of aggression – that it is interesting to hear such a threat from a producer of envelopes who does not have any clue of the contents of what he distributes.

I wonder what the roles of meetings such as this one are. Are the small academic publishers convinced that they can still play a role and that they can survive? In what direction, do you think, is the academic publishing market moving? Will you be able to co-direct it? Will you side with the intentions of the scholars or will you try to copy the move towards becoming a packaging industry that exploits the volunteer work of scientists and results financed by public funding?

The sciences do need support for their publication endeavors, no doubt, they are ready to pay for these services, but they increasingly become aware that they have become a small piece in the wheelwork of exploitation machinery. All scientists I know resent this.

I noticed that, yesterday, there was a debate entitled “Resolved: Science and Scholarship should be curated and hosted by public institutions, not by commercial publishers”. I would be happy to learn the results of this discussion, in particular, I would like to read the written version of the keynote of the final contribution of yesterday’s evening, entitled “Scholarly publishing in the future”. I would be glad to hear that you became also convinced that the academic publication business has to take a turn.

As stated in the beginning, I, personally, do know what I want, but I do not know whether this can be achieved. I do know, though, that the major publishers are VERBALLY agreeing, but NOT ACTING in this direction at all, simply in order to maintain their huge profit margins. In a market economy no one can argue against profit maximization, but one is also allowed to act against it. The danger of that may be really disruptive instead of smooth moves in the development of the academic publication market.

Anyway, we witness exciting times, and I would wish that this workshop could find a way to go into the direction of Open Science which, in my opinion, is the ultimate goal of making the results of all scientific endeavors public - and that is what all scientific activities are about.

You may not have enjoyed my somewhat unusual words of welcome, but I do hope that you will enjoy this year’s APE-conference!