



## From the IPA 2012 Congress to the Finch Report – publishers and open access

The [Finch Commission report](#) was released in the UK on 18 June. Entitled 'Accessibility, sustainability, excellence: how to expand access to research publications', this report, by an independent working group headed by Dame Janet Finch, tackled 'the important question of how to achieve better, faster access to research publications for anyone who wants to read or use them.'

The report and its subsequent [endorsement by the UK government](#) and [then by the EU](#) stirred a storm of controversy in the open access community as a result of its central recommendation: that the UK should opt for a 'gold route' approach to achieving this goal, with substantial government research funding allocated to supporting article processing fees (APCs) for publication of UK scholars' work in open access journals. The role proposed for repositories was to 'play a valuable role complementary to formal publishing, particularly in providing access to research data and to grey literature, and in digital preservation.'

The most vehement objections were from supporters of the 'green route' of open access repositories and mandates for the deposit of journal articles in those repositories. A key thread in these early responses to the Finch report has involved speculation on how publishers might react, debating whether there will be price gouging on APCs, and whether the move to gold OA will entrench the hegemony of publishers. In short, critics ask whether publisher interests have driven this policy direction.

[Stephen Curry's post in the Guardian](#) countered this view with the perception that 'the research publishing business remains in ferment'. I attended the [International Publishers Association 2012 Congress](#) in Cape Town the week before the release of the Finch Report. Given the potentially dramatic shift in scholarly publishing that the Finch Commission introduced just after its closure, the IPA discussion suddenly has added significance. It was little reported and there were some interesting discussions, which I think endorse Stephen Curry's view – the publishing industry is indeed in ferment, hardly a position of strength.

Moreover, with debate over whether or not this policy will be detrimental to [scholars from the developing world](#), the fact that the IPA was held in South Africa also offers perspectives on this issue.

### Publishers and digital disruption – a 'tsunami'?

The impact of the global momentum of open access was recognized at the IPA Congress, where OA was described as 'a tsunami' by Michael Mabe, CEO of the International Association of STM Publishers, 'like nothing the world has seen'.

WIPO Director Francis Gurry in his speech also used a strong metaphor for digital disruption, describing it as 'a perfect storm', arguing that change is now so rapid that it is not possible to be ideological, as the circumstances on which ideology depended are in flux. Copyright is now about challenge and contention, he argued, with the central controversy in the knowledge society being the clash between property rights and the social, central to the way knowledge and creativity are transmitted in our society. It would be nice to have a neat solution, he said, but there were none and so an incremental approach is the most useful approach.

The sense of overwhelming, even cataclysmic change that surfaces in this discourse does not strike me as the language of confident market manipulators, although, of course, publishers trying to extract as much as possible from the new deal would be an obvious outcome. It is their ability to control the situation that is in question.

### Publisher attitudes to green and gold

Michael Mabe of STM, made great play of the serious difficulties that were experienced in the development of a digital observatory for the EU's Peer Project, which sought to research the effects of large-scale green route deposit. He complained of the technical problems that arose from the incompatibility of the data they were taking in from various sources, the complexity of implementation and the extreme unwillingness of authors to deposit. While the participating publishers contributed 22,500 articles, there was a very low rate of uptake by authors invited to deposit. Of the 11,000 authors canvassed, 10 deposited 'timeously' and the intervention finally resulted in 170 authors depositing, a 2% take-up.

So, with regional green route model as difficult and obstructive as this European enterprise, Mabe's conclusion was (unsurprisingly) that if the free deposit route is that difficult then surely it is better to pay to publish. Given the closely-linked dates of the Peer project completion, the Finch Report announcement and the EC adoption of a green or gold solution, it is likely that these initiatives reinforced each other's findings, given an overlap of the people and organisations involved in the various initiatives.

Was this chest-beating on Mabe's part a publisher propaganda exercise? Did the gentleman protest too much? Although I was tempted to read it this way at the time, a check on the [Peer findings](#) suggested otherwise. Some of the key findings concerned the difficulty of building large-scale infrastructure; the unlikelihood of author self-archiving creating a critical mass of content, and the preference of scholars for the version of record – the final journal article. Of the positive results, one was that the acceptance and utility of OA has grown considerably.

Willem van der Stelt, Executive VP for Corporate Strategy at Springer endorsed this, speaking enthusiastically about the development of OA journals in a global environment in which Brazil, India and South Africa are becoming stronger players. Springer is investing heavily in OA journals, currently launching 100 of them. Springer owns Biomed Central, the largest OA journal publisher. Van der Stelt said that Springer has left Biomed alone since it was purchased, did not interfere with its way of working and has used it to change the culture of Springer. He suggested that they might change the company into an author services company – what this means needs some unpacking.

Springer's new suite of OA journals extends across all subject fields, including the social sciences and includes Springer Plus, a science mega-journal on the model of PLOS One. It will be interesting to see whether these OA journals are, like BMC, more open to developing country issues, more aware of the world outside of the global North and more egalitarian in their approach to what constitutes important global research.

The hybrid model, which has only had a 3% uptake, would see subscription prices falling year by year, van der Stelt said, if uptake increased. (what is clear, however, is that this option is not popular with authors.)

There were more oblique interventions that endorsed my sense that, for all the bluster, publishers realized that there is going to be downward pressure on publishing profit margins as changes impact on the industry. Salvatore Miele of CERN raised the prospect of [SCOAP3](#), a consortium approach to OA journal publishing in high energy physics designed to lower costs and now in procurement phase. This and other disruptive journal initiatives, like [PeerJ](#) are likely to challenge complacencies in the traditional journals.

This does not look to me like a context in which gold OA subsidies will drive high prices. Rather, as [Richard van Noorden argued in Nature](#):

*If researchers do fall in line, the wide adoption of open access will shift everyone's publishing behaviours. Scientists may start discussing with universities where, and how much, they can afford to publish. Publishers and learned societies that rely on profits from library subscriptions will have to be more transparent about the costs of publishing. The latest open-access journals, such as PeerJ and eLife, may gain from the resulting melee (see [Nature 486,166; 2012](#)).*

So the tendency is more likely to be downward pressure on APCs from research authors who will now find themselves directly responsible for paying publishing costs rather than having this happen at a remove, by the less powerful librarians.

## A different vision for repositories?

The most vehement objections were from supporters of the 'green route' of open access repositories and mandates for the deposit of journal articles in those repositories. This up until now has probably been the dominant policy route for OA. To my mind the inclusion of non-peer-reviewed 'grey literature' is an important revision of what has been up until now an almost religious aversion to thinking about anything other than peer reviewed literature. Much valuable research emerges in research papers, policy briefs and reports on research in progress. ArXiv has demonstrated the power that this kind of publication has in building research collaboration. At the IPA Congress, Salvatore Mele, Open Access Director at CERN [described this terrain](#). Open matters, he argued, and makes scientists happy, bringing them both visibility and citations..

The Finch Report view of the potential for digital repositories bodes well for African universities, where we have found a strong interest in digital collections of research papers of this kind.

## A softer face for publishing?

Also important – although apparently not heard and understood by some of the big publishers, I discovered in tea break conversation – was the need to improve the image of publishing, to put a better face on the way publishers are perceived. We need to provide a soft face for IP in a hostile environment, Francis Gurry argued, talking about publishers and negotiation of an instrument for the visually impaired. Certainly the battle over SOPA and PIPA in the US and the boycott of Elsevier that resulted demonstrated a high level of suspicion and hostility to large publishing. Too-high prices were recognized as an aspect of this negative perception – as author agent Wendy Strothman said, the industry has to learn to deliver content efficiently in any medium at a good price in a market in which publishers have to learn to become B2C businesses. Or as Gurry put it – we cannot have a situation where it is easier for a consumer to get a product illegally than to buy it legally.

## And for Africa?

I think the jury is out on what this could mean for us in Africa. The immediate worry that has been expressed in reaction to these developments is a fear that once again, African academics will be excluded by the high price of APCs. The availability of waivers does not seem to help this perception, perhaps because of the unattractiveness of being in a position of dependency.

Today's news, though, adds another dimension. Thompson Reuters has announced a partnership to include [the SciELO journals platform on the Web of Science](#). This will include the South African journals that are steadily being added to the [SciELO South Africa](#) platform. The growth of locally produced journals – and the replication of a model like the SciELO SA programme, carried out by the Academy of Science of South Africa and supported by the Department of Science and Technology – could be a beneficial outcome of the radical policy shift that we are seeing.

There is a price on this shift, however and that is the willingness of governments and research institutions to invest in scholarly publishing. At the moment, one of the startling aspects of the Africa higher education policy environment is the absence of attention to research communication, something that is now putting us seriously out of line with the rest of the world.

More on that in the next blog.

by Eve




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