



## **Has Scholarly Publishing Overstayed at the Hybrid Hotel?**

**An Interview With  
Rob Johnson, Founder/Director, Research Consulting (Nottingham, UK)**

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**KENNEALLY:** Publishing success stories from the digital age are few and far between. In scholarly publishing, so-called hybrid access is one such rare bird. Indeed, hybrid OA is now the fastest growing and most popular journal publishing model in the world. That success, though, may prove its undoing.

Welcome to Copyright Clearance Center's podcast series. I'm Christopher Kenneally for Beyond the Book. In a recent guest post for The Scholarly Kitchen, a blog from the Society for Scholarly Publishing that covers what's hot and cooking in scholarly publishing, Rob Johnson contemplated the dilemma at the heart of hybrid open access business models. Conceived as a short-term waystation for closed subscription journals as they move to transition to open access, the hybrid model has instead established itself firmly in the scholarly publishing environment and is now thriving. Founder and director of UK-based Research Consulting, Rob Johnson watches the scholarly publishing world at his office on the campus of the University of Nottingham, from where he joins me now. Welcome to Beyond the Book, Rob.

**JOHNSON:** Hi, Chris. It's great to be with you.

**KENNEALLY:** We're looking forward to chatting with you about this special guest post for Scholarly Kitchen, which was a very well-received one and much discussed, and we'll look at some of the issues that you have raised. But for our audience, I think it's important to set out a little more detail – what the hybrid open access model is and how it came to achieve the success it currently enjoys.

**JOHNSON:** Sure. Well, I think the definition of a hybrid journal is a subscription journal – so the traditional closed access business model of subscriptions – that then allows authors or institutions or indeed funders to pay a fee at the article level to make that individual article open access. So you can end up with this, by definition, hybrid model, where some articles in a journal are subscription-only and held behind a paywall, but some of them are paid for to be open access, and thus free to read and potentially to reuse.



What we've seen and what I described in the article is a very rapid growth over the last decade or so, where a number of journals have transitioned from a wholly subscription-based business model to a hybrid model, and then the number of articles being made open access within those journals has also grown fairly rapidly, although from a very low base.

KENNEALLY: It's been reasonably well received, this hybrid business model, in the publishing world. It certainly has been well received by publishers, for I guess the obvious reasons.

JOHNSON: That's right. I mean, I think the options open to publishers in looking at moving to open access are potentially to launch new open access journals, but obviously you have to build the profile and the reputation of those journals from scratch, or to flip an existing subscription journal wholly to an open access model, which will typically mean charging article publication charges or APCs for every journal, or potentially to adopt the hybrid model. And the hybrid model is much easier and much less risky, in that you retain your existing subscription models, and you just allow people to pay article by article where they want to make it open access.

Of course, the contentious part of this is people are then paying – or institutions, funders, authors are paying additional amounts to make articles open access over and above the subscriptions. I think that's where this has become a contentious business model in the recent past, and that was one of the things that I wanted to draw attention to in the post.

KENNEALLY: Right. As you say, funders object. Most prominent among them, perhaps, is the Wellcome Trust, also there in the UK. But they are hardly alone. In countries across Europe, many government agencies that also fund this type of research and therefore fund APCs for these open access article – they've begun to object. They see a problem with it, partly because this may just entrench itself and not get to the stated goal of open access. So expand a bit on the funders' objections and what they're asking publishers to do about all of this.

JOHNSON: I think you touched on the key issue there, Chris, which is that the original idea behind the hybrid business model, at least from the perspective of some policymakers and funders, was that this was a transitional model, so that it was possible to make a proportion of articles open access in a hybrid journal, but over time, that proportion would grow and grow and grow until the point where it could actually flip wholly to a fully gold open access business model, meaning all of the



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articles were funded on the basis of APCs, and there was no need for the subscriptions to continue.

Now, the problem is we haven't seen widespread uptake of hybrid open access being supported outside of a few countries, of which the UK is one of the most prominent. So while a large number of authors – articles from UK authors are now being made hybrid open access, that's not replicated across the world. If you look at an individual journal, generally it remains a very small proportion of the total articles that are being made open access. So the idea that this is a sort of steady progress towards being able to flip an entire journal has really been given the lie, I think, by some of the recent data that we've been looking at. The sense is that the proportion of hybrid content is not really moving beyond 10% or 20% at the most. So if we are ever going to make a flip, that's going to be a long way down the road.

In the meantime, those funders and countries and institutions that are supporting hybrid are saying, well, our costs have gone up, because we're paying subscriptions to access the rest of the world's content, and we're paying APCs to make our authors' content open access over and above. So they feel aggrieved that they're paying more.

Now, from the publishers' perspective, what they're saying is, well, you're making your content free to the rest of the world, but the rest of the world isn't doing the same. So naturally, you have to pay to access that, as well. There's a real difference of perspective when you look at it globally or when you look at it institutionally or nationally, and that's really at the heart of, I think, this sort of conflict that we're now facing. Publishers feel it's very difficult to move from this current situation of a small proportion of articles being OA, but institutions and funders feel they're paying too much, and they want to see some mechanism to bring the cost down without slowing the transition to open access.

**KENNEALLY:** And as you say, Rob Johnson, the perspective matters for those who are on the funding side of things. They refer to this as double-dipping, with all the pejorative that that would seem to suggest, and they are suggesting that publishers remedy the situation by so-called offsetting practices. Tell us about what offsetting hopes to achieve. What are the pros and cons there?

**JOHNSON:** Yeah, the principle behind offsetting is rather as the title suggests, that it's actually offsetting payments for APCs, article publication charges, against those for subscriptions by the same institution or the same country. The difficulty is that most publishers will argue that offsetting already exists, in that they offset the income they receive for article publication charges in hybrid journals against the



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income they receive from subscriptions at a global level. The problem is that as I've explained, that doesn't lead to a sort of channeling of the savings back to the institutions that have paid the APCs. It distributes them very widely across the world.

So what institutions and funders are increasingly pushing for is offsetting at the national or institutional level, where those additional APCs that are put in are offset against subscriptions from the same institutions or organizations. Now, that makes sense up to a point, but what it means is that all of those in the rest of the world who are continuing to pay subscriptions at a certain point may start to say, well, hang on. We're still paying subscriptions at the same level, but more and more of the content we're subscribing to is open access, so we should be paying less. So the publishers are in the position of those who are paying for APCs wanting to pay less, or at least not pay more than they are currently, but those who are subscribing in the rest of the world also potentially starting to argue for paying less. I think the publishers are rather caught between a rock and a hard place right now.

**KENNEALLY:** Indeed, it sounds like that. Rob Johnson, we're talking about your post for The Scholarly Kitchen called Time to Check Out of the Hybrid Hotel. The point you have made here is that it seems to find us in a place where subscription-based publishing is starting to feel a lot like the Hotel California – you can check out anytime you like, but you can never leave. What are you getting at there?

**JOHNSON:** I think, yeah, harking back to that song from the Eagles, it's quite easy to start along this road of transitioning to open access. It's not difficult to make a subscription journal hybrid. You're opening up an additional revenue stream. You're allowing some of your articles to become open access. That's the easy step. That's the checking out. But actually leaving subscriptions behind is the really hard bit, because at that point, you're foregoing the majority of your revenue from those journals, and it's not clear that the revenue that can be generated from APCs is necessarily going to be a sufficient substitute for the subscriptions revenue. That was the idea behind the wording I used in the post, that it's very easy to start moving away from subscriptions, but actually to leave entirely is proving very, very difficult.

**KENNEALLY:** You do a lot of work looking at the scholarly publishing world, Rob Johnson, and you can use that data to give us a glimpse of what lies ahead. What are some of the pressures you think publishers can expect from funders and libraries and governments in the next 12 to 24 months, and what choices are left to publishers to respond to these pressures?



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JOHNSON: I think, as I alluded to in the article, a number of funders, particularly in Europe, have indicated that they are losing patience with the slow rate of transition. So they're saying, we've kept our side of the bargain. We've made more funding available to support this transition to open access. You mentioned the Wellcome Trust, which has been a significant supporter of open access and a significant funder of hybrid APCs, but also the UK Research Councils have put significant amounts of money into this and many other funding bodies across Europe. Although some funders don't permit hybrid APCs, a lot of them actually do. So even funders like the National Institutes of Health in the US – it's possible, as I understand it, to use grant funding to support hybrid APCs.

So a lot of money has gone into hybrid, but as I said, the transition is not really happening, and funders are starting to say, actually, this just isn't working for us. The levers they're starting to pull are to say we're no longer going to support hybrid APCs. I think significantly, the European Commission is contemplating the rules of its next Framework Programme. This is a seven- or eight-year program or support for research and innovation – tens of billions of euros that go into this – and they are indicating that they will no longer allow hybrid APCs to be funded under that program. There's similar noises starting to come out of some of the UK funding bodies. What they're suggesting, I think, is that unless there is offsetting to keep the total costs down, then hybrid is just going to be something that they won't continue to fund, so actually that revenue stream will dry up for publishers.

But at the same time, I think the policymakers aren't saying we don't want you to make things open access. They're saying we expect you to make content open access, but to do so under these offsetting deals, where effectively the increase in cost is contained.

What does that mean for publishers? Either they have to leave the hybrid hotel and get forced further down that road towards open access and start to take some of those risky decisions about, well, actually, can we transition a journal to a fully open access model, or can we afford to take on these offsetting deals, and what are the implications for our subscriptions revenue elsewhere as we see a growing proportion of content become open access? Now, I don't think there's any easy answers to those questions, and that's going to be very much a case-by-case assessment to make at the journal level.

KENNEALLY: Right. And the debate around open access and the drive to fully open access business models, Rob Johnson, concentrates the minds in scholarly publishing, because it concerns not only the financial part of the operation, but the part that is, I think for many people in scholarly publishing, the most important



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part, which is disseminating knowledge and creating innovation and leading to discovery. So that's all important, and it really does, as I say, kind of generate a great deal of debate. Your post attracted a fair amount of attention. There were some interesting comments there. What are the ones that stuck out for you?

JOHNSON: I think there were a number of comments around the case for open access. What is the rationale behind this? And I think it's worth reemphasizing that for some policymakers, they do see knowledge as a public good and something that should be open, but also they see benefits. They see economic benefits, they see societal benefits to making scholarly literature open. That's behind the drive for this, and I think that's why there's very little willingness to relent on this move towards open access, particularly from European policymakers.

I think the other couple of comments that I'd pick up on were just the observation that hybrid APCs do tend to be higher than fully gold APCs. So if a funder is looking at bang for buck in terms of cost per article of making an article open access, their money will go further in fully gold open access journals. Again, that's another reason why we're seeing a shift away from hybrid.

KENNEALLY: It does seem at the end of the day, Rob Johnson, that the scholarly publishing world is one where it's life in the fast lane, to quote another Eagles tune.

JOHNSON: Absolutely. And I think if you look at just the number of developments and announcements that have come out in the recent past, it's only getting faster. Just last week, Springer Nature released a study looking at the benefits of hybrid, demonstrating that there's more downloads for open access articles in hybrid journals, there's more citations, there's more news mentions. This is the publishing community to some extent anticipating these concerns and saying, well, hang on. Hybrid has value – the sorts of reasons that I outlined in the post. So we are seeing a bit of a fight back from the publishing community to try to preserve the role of hybrid, but I'm not sure it's going to be enough. I think we are going to see more change being imposed by funders and policymakers.

KENNEALLY: Rob Johnson, founder and director of UK-based Research Consulting in Nottingham, England, thanks so much for joining us on Beyond the Book.

JOHNSON: Thanks, Chris.

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Beyond the Book co-producer and recording engineer is Jeremy Brieske of Burst Marketing. I'm Christopher Kenneally. Join us again soon on Beyond the Book.

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