



Libraries Surviving the Existential threat: Time to Overthrow Hegemony of Commercial Publishers

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Abstract

Time and again, libraries are facing existential threats. It may not be inappropriate to say that libraries were initially reluctant to embrace Information and Communication Technology (ICT), especially in the Asian sub-continent. However, the way ICT intruded into our lives, libraries were left with no choice except to embrace ICT, which otherwise had posed an existential threat to libraries, especially with the advent of e-content. Questions were also being raised on the true contribution of an institutional library to an institution's academic and research activities following the decline in library readership. These sub-institutions were dubbed lax by the respective institutional administration, resulting in downsizing and curtailment in the library budget. The waning library budgets and the escalating subscription costs have once more posed a challenge to institutional libraries, whereby libraries cannot subscribe to enough resources for their clientele and pose themselves as a rich and resourceful library. Thereon, the monopoly commercial publishers enjoy over subscription pricing of research journals has rendered libraries ineffective, posing an existential threat to libraries. Accordingly, the undergoing conceptual framework revolves around how libraries can survive this existential threat and overthrow commercial publishers' hegemony.

Keywords: Commercial Publishers, Information and Communication Technology, Publisher Hegemony

Introduction

With the turn of the century, viz., post year 2000, questions were being raised over the need and importance of libraries in the digital era, as information seekers could access the required information from the world wide web using the internet. Publishers started publishing eBooks and e-journals that are accessible online, as with newspapers and magazines. This transformation from print to digital publishing at one point had posed an existential threat to the libraries, whereby conventional library practices turned almost non-existent. The information seekers were more enticed by information technology (IT), and as such, they preferred to consume information online via the internet; hence, they preferred to visit a cyber café instead of a library. Questions were being raised over the functioning of libraries, as information seeker were even able to access the digital content subscribed by their institutional libraries outside the libraries on their desktop from any remote location. As such, there was no need for the library clientele to visit the library to access the required

information. Those visiting the library were also required to use electronic gadgets to access the library's digital content. As such, most libraries associated with academic institutions were upgraded and IT-enabled. Hence, libraries survived this existential threat by embracing the digital environment. The transition of libraries from print to digital collection was the need of the hour. As more and more content was being made available in digital form, libraries had no choice except to procure and provide the same to their clientele. Secondly, had libraries not embraced the digital environment, libraries would have disappeared from the scene, as there were almost no takers of conventional library services.

After a couple of decades, libraries are somewhere again standing at the crossroads of existential threat. This time, the threat is posed by the commercial publishers who have monopolized the research information publishing market to suit their commercial interests, whereby these big publishing houses have started charging exorbitantly from the academic and research institutions for subscription of research journals in their institutional libraries. Needless to say, the libraries associated with higher education institutions and other scientific institutions primarily invest in procuring research information published in research journals. Libraries possessing rich research information are known as healthy and are living to their true nature, while libraries not in a position to subscribe the required research information are deemed as sick, as they are not serving the real good purpose for which such sub-systems are in place. The monopoly of big publishing houses has somehow started turning libraries into sick units, as most of the libraries have lost the ability to subscribe to research journals for their clientele due to price escalation. On one hand publishers enhance the subscription rates of journals each year, on the other hand library budgets have started waning for the want of declining budgets of parent institutions, with the result libraries are somewhat forced to tailor their subscription packs fitting their budget. Thus the ever shrinking library budgets and the ever escalating subscription costs have rendered libraries helpless, whereby even the libraries associated with richest academic institutions are not in a position to procure all the required content to fulfill the information requirement of their users. This monopolization of research information by the big and commercial publishers has pushed libraries towards a new existential threat.

The undergoing discussion is an attempt to give a conceptual framework whereby libraries not only would be able to survive this existential threat posed to them by the commercial publishers, but will break the monopoly and hegemony of commercial publishers by rendering more enhanced and improved research information service to their clientele at most affordable cost.

In the undergoing discussion, attempt has been made to put forth some

measures for libraries associated with research and higher education institutions

Problem Statement

The large-scale commercialization of the global journal publishing industry has posed many challenges to academic and research institutions worldwide. The journal publishing industry over the years has grown larger than life, the pricing policy which is totally unregulated and outrageous, damaging libraries, hence warrants taking some concerted efforts. The price hike in subscription model by the publishers has already forced libraries to compromise with lot of subject areas (**The Guardian, 2012**), thereby posing the existential threat to libraries. The publishers have monopolized the industry so that the producers of research information are made to pay heavily to purchase their research results. The biggest tragedy with the academia and other scientific community is that despite providing every support free of cost to the commercial publishers from producing research results, its refining to bringing out the finest research piece, even paying Article Processing Charges (APCs), but the moment same academic or scientific community want to access their published research results they are made to pay for accessing their own produced information. The discussion offers the long terms solution to the problem, whereby libraries have to play a more proactive role and have to own the responsibility.

Objectives of the Study

The study has been undertaken with the following objectives:

- To help draw awareness about and overthrow the monopoly and hegemony of commercial journals publishers, who more or less have hijacked the industry and are running it only to suit their commercial interests.
- To help libraries and library professionals to redefine their role, who are the worst sufferers for not being able to procure the desired research information for their clientele due to ever escalating subscription costs of research journals?
- To present an overview to academia in general about the need and importance of overthrowing the monopoly and hegemony of the commercial publishers.

Economics of Journal Publishing Industry

It is being estimated that the global journal publishing industry is the second largest industry in the world after entertainment industry with a turnover of around USD 19 billion (**Buranyi, 2017**). The five big journal publishing houses, viz., Springer Nature, Wiley-Blackwell, Elsevier, Taylor

and Francis and Sage have more than 53% market share of journal publishing industry, with Elsevier alone publishing around 3000 journals having global market share of around 16% with profit margins more than Google, Microsoft and Coca-Cola (**Buranyi, 2017; Larivière et al., 2015; Ware & Mabe, 2015**). Even the libraries belonging to the richest academic and research institutions have raised concerns towards the rising subscription cost of the research journals, whereby institutions like Harvard have said that it could no longer afford the price hike imposed by the journal publishers (**Sample, 2012**). The university then was spending around USD 3.5 million per year on the subscription of journals. This forced the university to issue a memo to its faculty and researchers encouraging them to publish their research results in open access journals, including resigning from the editorial board of those journals which are not open access.

Each year around EUR 420 million are being spent across Europe on the subscription of journals and needless to mention that each download cost an individual information seeker to pay anything between USD 30 to 50 (**European University Association et al., 2018**). This gives a brief idea about the type of industry journal publishing is and how big publishers are actually monopolizing things to secure their profits. David Prosser, the executive director Research Libraries UK (RLUK) sees it as the long term structural problem and can't be overcome easily. Prosser said that after reentering the subscription deal with publishers, the 30 member libraries of RLUK saved around pounds 20 million and gave them some breather towards subscriptions (**Sample, 2012**). Even libraries are finding it extremely difficult to continue to subscribe to the list of journals as required by their users. Price rise in the costs of journals often forces libraries to cut down on the number of titles that they subscribe (**Unesco & Madalli, 2015**).

Traditional Journal Publishing Practices

There is no second thought in it that research journal publishing should be entrusted with those who are themselves researchers and do hold research expertise in any given subject area. Given the fact, previously Higher Education Institutions (HEI's) especially, colleges, universities, research and scientific institutions and other autonomous bodies used to publish research journals from their respective departments. All such research journals were mostly published in print form and were circulated among academic and research institutions of similar interest on exchange basis, while institutions not publishing research journals and the individuals used to subscribe such journals at a very nominal cost. What was most appealing about such journal publishing practice was the mutual exchange of journals between different departments of different

universities, colleges, institutions etc. at no cost. Hence exchange and sharing of information among the scholarly community was either free or at nominal cost, only to meet postage and printing charges unlike commercial publishers who are hell bent to earn profit only. Needless to talk about the role of authors, editorial board members, reviewers etc., which continues to same even today, however in absence of modern day Information Technology (IT) support, the process was lengthy and time consuming as the communication was postal.

Research journals under traditional methods were either printed at in-house press, which mostly rich and bigger institutions used to own or the work of printing was outsourced to some local printer on laid down terms and conditions. Hence the journal publishing practice was more of subsidiary nature or at most used to generate revenue to match the maintenance cost.

Advent of Commercial Publishers

Given the tedious process of traditional in-house institutional print journal publishing by the concerned departments and the cumbersome circulation process, the HEI's started outsourcing the journal publishing practices to private player's viz., commercial publishers, retaining the role of maintaining editorial board members, manuscript invitation, and their review to finalizing each issue of each volume. This work was voluntary and unpaid, as it required scholarly services which could have only been provided by the department concerned and the subject experts involved therein. The departments continued to retain the publishing rights for journal for some time and thereafter commercial publishers started making gradual inroads and so do they started retaining the publishing and copyrights from authors. This helped commercial publishers to establish themselves and over the years got complete hold of the research information publishing industry. The arrival of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) proved a great boon to the journal publishing industry and the commercial publishers exploited ICT to its optimum both for publishing and access purposes. Post introduction of IT in publishing industry, there was no looking back for the commercial publishers, this unfolded a new economic boom in the industry, whereby industry is being dubbed to be having turnover around USD 19 billion (**Buranyi, 2017**) the second highest in the world after entertainment industry.

Hegemony of Commercial Publishers

The commercial publishers have monopolized the journal publishing industry in such a way that it has turned into a golden goose for them (**Hagve, 2020**). The monopolization of publishing industry has to be blamed

both to publishers and the global research community for not objecting the unethical practices adopted by the publishers over the years to secure their commercial interests.

The widespread popularity and acceptance of Open Access (OA) concept by the research and scientific community of the world was seen as a potential threat by commercial publishers, with the result they hijacked the concept of OA publishing and presented the idea of OA in such a way so as to suit their commercial interests. The commercial publishers offered hybrid OA publishing to authors against Article Processing Charges (APC) ranging anything between USD 1000 to 6000 per article (**Pandita & Singh, 2022; Ware & Mabe, 2015**). Harvard is of the view that open access publishing has shown a lot of promise and appears to be the way forward, including the author pay model (**Sample, 2012**). But the Harvard needs to understand that once the golden goose of the publishers come under knife and are allowed to work through author pay models, how is that over the years researchers will not put in to similar kind of price hiking situation whereby it may become increasingly difficult for researchers to publish their research results even through author pay walls. There is a need is to understand that the commercial publishers are hell bent to mint money and it doesn't matter to them whether it comes from the authors or through subscriptions by institutions or individuals.

Regulating subscription cost of research journals is purely in the hands of the commercial publishers and there is no mechanism in place whereby necessary checks may be imposed on the price escalation of journal subscription costs by the government and its agencies. The subscription costs of research journals have escalated manifold over the years. Harvard, one of the world's richest universities of the world has dubbed the situation as suffocating both fiscally and academically, whereby subscription costs during the last six years have jumped over 145%, which is a very untenable situation (**Sample, 2012**). This monopoly of publishers in price regulations have resulted institutional libraries to curtail their subscriptions to fit within their budgetary limits. Even there is no check on the prices charged by publishers from each individual institution on account of subscription of similar database packs. Under the garb of price negotiations publishers don't have a uniform price policy for its customers, as such charge on the basis of any successful negotiations.

The biggest monopoly the publishers enjoy is over their product. These commercial publishers know it very well that there is no substitute or alternative to their product, as the research article or any research information required by an institution or individual can be made available either in the shape of a specific research article or a specific research journal as such information consumer has no choice accept procuring that article or journal from the publisher of that very article or journal. Given

the fact, there is no danger of losing a customer or substituting the research information, hence the biggest monopoly publishers enjoy over their consumers.

There is a growing outcry among the academic and research circles of the world for the acts of knavery on the part of publishers towards global scientific community, whereby publishers are cheating researchers of their hard work and dishonestly amassing wealth by selling the scientific outcome to information seekers (mostly researchers again) provided free of cost by the researchers to the publishers. Publishers have amassed billions of dollars on the research results produced by authors, but authors in turn neither get any share from the profit earned, nor do they receive any rebate on the subscription of journals. What is more astonishing about this consensual intellectual theft is that researchers provide everything to publishers free of cost, be it research results by authors, editorial services by the editorial board members of the journal or the reviewer services, everything is voluntary and unpaid, while on the other hand publishers amass huge profits silently without sharing anything with authors, thus robbing researchers of their hard work.

Researchers contribute everything freely so that end users may get benefited or the society as a whole, but the callous attitude of commercial publishers, who otherwise also could have contributed their way by levying nominal subscription charges so as to generate revenue to meet bare minimum maintenance or sustenance costs, the counterproductive role which publishers could have easily played, but unfortunately didn't.

The Harvard raises concerns towards the flexible subscription costs levied by the publishers, whereby they enter into negotiations with each individual institution, which show a considerable variation in the subscription costs of each institution (**The Guardian, 2012**). This is something where publishers cannot be alone blamed and the institutions concealing or not revealing the negotiated prices with other sister institutions are equally responsible for it. Majority of the institutions do not believe in the idea of maintaining transparency, it doesn't bother them if others are paying heavily for what you paid very nominal.

Existential Threat to Libraries

The richness and resourcefulness of an academic and a research library all over the world is gauged by the research journals subscribed by it and the research information it provides to its clientele to promote further research in general and to boost institutional research growth in particular. But, the moment institutional library fails to provide necessary information support to its users, the library is deemed as sick, whereby its users begin to question its existence, no matter even if the sickness of the library is for budgetary reasons or some external factors directly responsible for

hampering the subscription of research information. The budgetary sickness faced by present day libraries is two pronged. One, the ever and fast escalating subscription cost of journals due to unregulated and monopolized market by the commercial publishers' has left libraries lurching, whereby libraries are unable to procure the required research information from publishers within the allocated budget. Second, the waning institutional budget affects its sub-institutions as well and library is one of prime sub-institutions which faces such budgetary impact and with the result library budgets continue to decline almost each year. So the course of modern day libraries is like almost going through the double edged sword, whereby ever escalating subscription costs and ever declining library budgets have posed an existential threat to these sub-institutions. The ever and fast inflating subscription costs have left libraries almost dehydrated, whereby information seekers not able to quench their information thirst, with the result libraries are not in a position to contribute to the institutional research growth hence are being questioned for their existence.

The Idea of Self-Sustenance

Commercialization of education has turned education sector into an industry, whereby the role of governments have more or less reduced as a subsidiary, while the private players, who made gradual inroads and are presently owning and regulating more than what governments are owning and regulating all across the world. The commercialization of education works on the idea of self-sustenance, with the result government is encouraging private sector to have its presence at all levels including education sector. Today one can find private universities, private colleges, private schools and what not where private players are not contributing and doing exception well. All this commercialization and privatization of education sector has turned out to be the game changer, whereby private institutions are turning out to be role model and trend setters. Although government is providing adequate funds to its sponsored institutions, but when it comes to competing interests, then these funds turn out to be meager, whereby government sponsored institutions are even labeled as poorly managed. It is being also argued that government sponsored institutions no more receive liberal funding and any cost cutting on the part of government equally affects the smaller sub-institutions of a larger system and libraries are first among such sub-institutions which get affected by this cost cutting.

Dynamics of Information Subscription

Previously it was research journal which was being subscribed by the institution or an individual, but with the digital publishing, publishers are

charging prices on the basis of each individual article downloaded. Similarly, academic and research institutes used to negotiate prices with publishers, while customizing a journal pack for their institution as per their requirement. These days' publishers have started offering subject specific databases to the institutions and those who want to customize database as per their requirement are charged higher prices.

Libraries As Publishing Houses

The only way to break the hegemony of commercial publishers is by reviving the traditional practice of in-house journal publishing by higher education institutions and libraries have got a much bigger role to play in this regard. Libraries apart from providing necessary research support to scientific and scholarly community by procuring and providing the required information have to also shape themselves as publishing houses of higher education institutions and have to be thereby directly involved with both creation and dissemination of information by way of publishing research journals. In a way libraries have to play a more proactive role by facilitating the journal publishing of each individual department, by providing all the necessary support in the shape of, manpower and other technical and technological support to departments to publish research journals. Research journals outsourced to commercial publishers by the higher education institutions need to be handed over to libraries for publication. It is a very well known fact that research journals published by individual teaching departments of university and other higher education institutions are published on non-profit basis, involving lot of manpower and is a very time consuming process, with the result, institutions are keener in outsourcing all such activities which involve lot of time and manpower. The people at the helm of higher education institutions have to understand that by publishing in-house research journals they will be able to do savings worth millions of dollars, as they will no more require spending money on subscription of journals, which otherwise they can have from institutions of similar interest on mutual sharing basis.

There is a need to understand that in the modern day IT driven world, the concept of online journals is more popular and so do information seekers and information creator prefer online journals both for accessing the published research information and publishing the research results. Needless to count the advantages which online publishing has over the offline or print journals. Even by demarcating a single large room in a University library building would cater to publishing all the institutional journals in online format with minimal human resource. Sharing published research information is equally an easy task whereby all the subscribing institutions can be granted access to online journals, thereby cutting down the burden of dispatching print journals to respective institutions through

post. Given the fact, libraries can maintain and sustain a network of their own, whereby they will be able to both publish the research journals and at the same time subscribe research journals from other publishing libraries for the use of their student and scholarly community.

The revival of in-house publishing of research journals will not only help to save the billions of dollars across the world spent on the subscription of research journals and paying APCs to the publishers but will also break the monopoly and hegemony of commercial publishers whereby they had been robbing the researcher for centuries of their hard work. Still more, researchers are the largest creators and the consumers of the research information, as such it augers well if the journal publishing sector is completely regulated by the research community itself. What is more pathetic about the practice of publishing journals by the commercial publishers is the way they charge exorbitantly from the researcher even for downloading their own published research paper.

Information Exchange and Resource Sharing

Libraries apart from publishing journals can play a very vital role in disseminate the published research information among information seekers from other institutions. The research journals published by other institutions in similar or other areas can be shared among each other by libraries mutually. Institutions not publishing their own research journals can subscribe journals of their interest published by other libraries by paying nominal charges, which will be unlike the commercial publishers who are charging exorbitantly from subscribing institutes. This way lot of public money can be saved and the libraries which otherwise seem to be turning irrelevant will become more relevant and can produce the finest research information, with all in-house expertise available. All the subject expertise required for publishing a research journal is generally provided by the academicians and other scientific community for free of cost to the commercial publishers, who in turn go all out to make their fortune by selling the free services lent by the scholarly community. Given the fact, both the in-house and outside subject expertise can be used by the institutions in publishing in-house journals with the help of library professionals and making same available free of cost to the scholarly community will help to save a lot of public money spent on the subscription of journals, which otherwise stands monopolized by the commercial publishers to suit their commercial interests. Research information published and exchanged so will help to overcome the loot caused by the commercial publishers, whereby subscription costs of research journals have gone beyond the capacity of even the richest libraries.

Conclusion

Twenty first century is the century which believes in the idea of survival of the fittest and the bigger question for modern day libraries is, are they fit enough to survive at their own and if not they have to work on their fitness, whereby challenges posed by the commercial publishers to these non-profit service oriented sub-institutions is to be dared. Hather Joseph, executive director of the scholarly publishing and academic resources coalition, a US based international library membership organization is of the view that there is a need to bring in the structural change and this change is to be brought by the producers and the consumers of the research information (**Sample, 2012**). Given the fact, the erstwhile role of publishing research journals by the higher education institutions needs to be reviewed and rekindled by taking libraries on board, which shall prove instrumental in giving a new lease of life to institutional journal publishing practice. The traditional journal publishing practice is to be fitted with a new jugular vein in the shape of Information Technology, which will not only smoothen the in-house journal publishing, but will also prove instrumental in its timely dissemination. The escalation in journal subscription costs and decline in library budgets have rendered libraries more or less to walk on a double edged sword and libraries have to survive this existential threat by turning challenges into opportunities and weakness into strength. The hegemony and monopolization of journal publishing market by the commercial publishers can only be defeated on the lines it has been created.

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