

# Guest Editorial : Open access publishing

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There may be truth in the old saying, ‘necessity is the mother of invention’. But sometimes it is hard to recognise necessity. For instance, when a small group of us were first pushing the idea of developing a new, free, online, open access, university press, one question we sometimes faced was ‘why?’. The sense in some disciplines was that there was no need for such a development – “things were fine as they are”. Moreover, sometimes we were told that free online academic publications could and would never catch on within some disciplines, such as medicine and the sciences. This is because such fields are predominantly structured by well-established, well-respected, well-funded and accordingly very expensive academic journals. Nonetheless, once we established Cardiff University Press as ‘diamond’ open access published, The British Student Doctor Journal quickly joined us.

The word ‘diamond’ in ‘diamond open access’ refers to the highest pinnacle of open access publishing. In diamond open access, there are no charges to either readers or authors. It is quite a rare model, because there are many costs involved in publishing – especially costs of time, commitment, professional expertise and technical knowhow. Someone has to bear these costs. So, while more academic publishers now offer content that is free online for readers, they often fund this by charging authors themselves for the privilege of publishing in their pages. Cardiff University Press does not do this, and nor does The British Student Doctor Journal and our other journals.

I regard such an orientation and a commitment as remarkable. When we were first proposing Cardiff University Press to various committees and groups around Cardiff University, we were on occasion laughed at and even somewhat scoffed by those working within from some fields. I never managed to establish the exact origins or orientations of such negative responses to the idea of Cardiff University Press. But I have a theory. This boils down to the mindsets fostered by the publishing models that structure different academic disciplines, and an inability or reluctance to imagine any alternative. After all, some disciplines, such as medicine and the sciences, are often dominated by large, well established and well-funded journals. And these venerable journals seem to serve scholars, researchers and practitioners well. So, why would anyone need to change things? Why innovate? Why invent? Why do anything different? What is the necessity?

To my mind, the reasons are principally ethical, although they are often economic, and sometimes abut with issues that are arguably political.

One of my own first questions has long been: why should academic research and other forms of scholarship be disseminated by commercial publishers for profit? If there are other means available to bypass commercial exchange, shouldn’t these means be explored?

Secondly, I have long felt that universities have an ethical obligation to communicate and connect up with other institutions and areas of culture and society. Notice that I did not say “service the needs of the knowledge economy” or anything that might imply that scholarship should be beholden principally (or at all) to economic

imperatives. Rather, I am simply saying: university researchers should be open to communicating as freely and openly as possible with the wider world, for any number of reasons and in any number of ways.

Beyond connecting with our own local communities (however ‘local’ and ‘community’ are defined), there are larger considerations too. For instance, although few among us may actually feel wealthy, we must remember the massive disparities in wealth distribution across societies and around the world. Those who work in a university in any country are likely to be comparatively better off than many other people in that same country. But there is also a hierarchy of wealth – if not an explicit ‘class’ system – across all aspects of university sectors, both nationally and internationally.

Put bluntly, some universities are considerably richer than others. This means that while some universities can pay for access to all kinds of expensive journals, others cannot. Moreover, richer universities can also pay for their staff to publish in the kinds of journals that increasingly require authors to pay for their articles to be published.

This is not the open access model used by Cardiff University Press. The model in which authors have to pay a charge risks entrenching a global class hierarchy of universities, in which research from less affluent institutions is effectively marginalised or even excluded. Rather than this, Cardiff University Press does something very different. We do not charge authors or readers to publish in our journals. Our aim is to be as open access as we possibly can, because we believe this is the best possible model for universities to adopt.

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The British Student Doctor Journal is admirably attuned to this ethos. At a time when there was no ‘need’ to orient itself along such ethical and community-focused lines, the editors chose open access. To me, this speaks directly to the highest principles not only of academic but also medical research integrity. It feels aligned with the founding ethos of the UK’s National Health Service, and with the very idea of the university’s fundamental obligations to establish and disseminate knowledge freely and openly. The very word ‘university’ derives from a Latin phrase meaning ‘community of teachers and scholars’. Like other open access academic journals, The British Student Doctor Journal is not merely ‘servicing the needs’ of such a community, but actually helping to invent and sustain it.

*Professor Bowman is Professor of Cultural Studies at the School of Journalism, Media and Culture at Cardiff University, as well as a founding member and current Chair of the Editorial Board of Cardiff University Press, the diamond open access publisher of The British Student Doctor Journal.*



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