Flipping journals to open: Rethinking publishing infrastructure in light of Lingua/Glossa case

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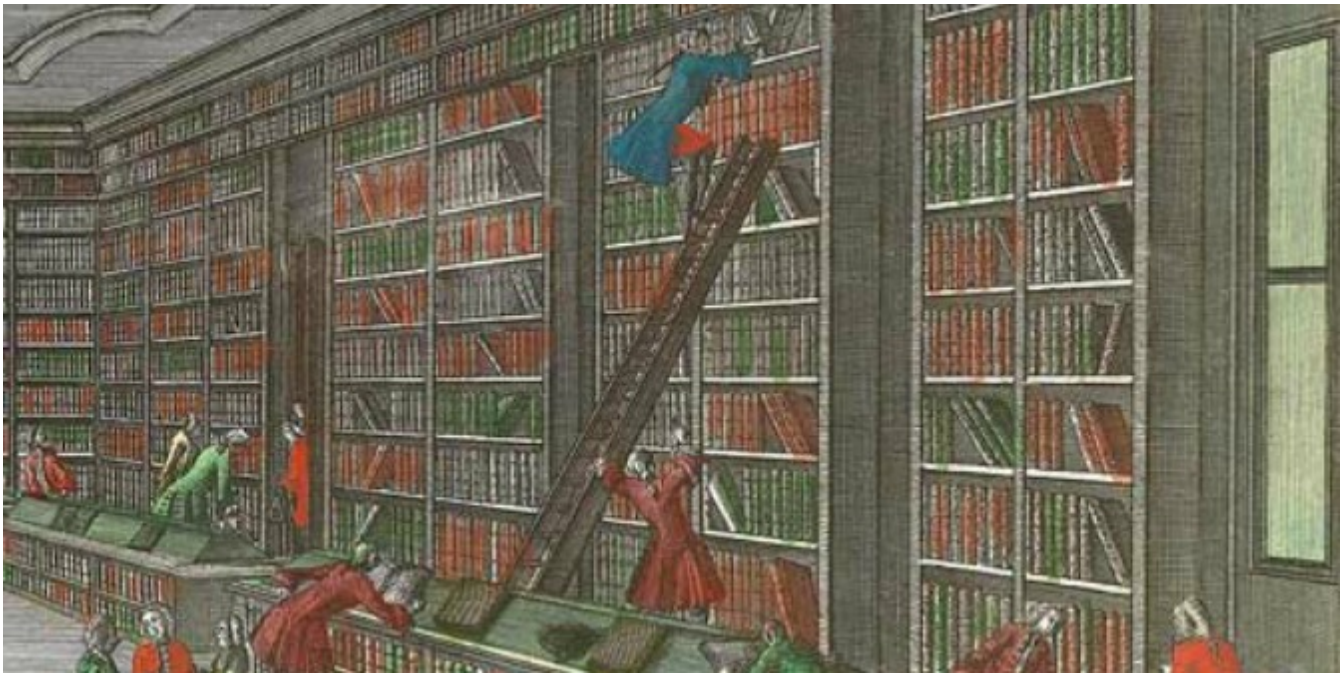
The resignation of the editorial board of an Elsevier-owned linguistics journal and its open access reorganization could get the ball rolling for other journals to follow suit. **Benedikt Fecher** *and* **Gert Wagner** *argue this case is a reminder that open access means more than just providing access to an article; it means rethinking the whole process of publishing. Open access also raises important questions about who owns the critical information infrastructure for online publishing.*

Two weeks ago, the entire editorial board of the journal *Lingua* quit and announced they would launch a new journal named *Glossa*. *Lingua*'s executive editor Johan Rooryck said the reason for the resignation was that Elsevier, which publishes *Lingua*, did not comply with the editors' request to turn the journal into an open access publication. *Lingua* has existed since 1949 and is among the top-3 linguistic journals on Google Scholar. The *Lingua/Glossa* case is a good opportunity to reflect upon our understanding of open access.

Open access in a nutshell

Broadly speaking, open access means that research outputs, such as articles and data, are free of restrictions on access and free of restrictions on use. The call for open access for articles is often justified with the fact that essential parts of the scientific publishing process, for example writing an article and reviewing it, are completed by the scientific community. Nonetheless, most of the research—that is to large degree financed by public funds—is hidden behind paywalls. This situation is aggravated by the fact that libraries are increasingly struggling with high license fees for journals and debatable package deals, while publishing houses like Elsevier, Wiley or Springer are highly profitable. To put it provocatively: The costs to access research outputs is being paid twice by the taxpayers, for the researchers who produce articles and the libraries that purchase the articles. The discussion about open access is understandably heated.

Publishers argue, on the other hand, that revising articles and organising the publication process costs money. Moreover, their journals fulfill an important curation task in an increasingly confusing publication landscape. The latest report by the STM association counted 28,000 peer reviewed journals that publish more than 2.5 million articles per year. The report also states that the number of articles has continuously increased for more than two centuries. For researchers, it becomes more and more difficult to identify quality in the jungle of articles. Established journals provide orientation. This is certainly right.



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Research funders, research associations, institutes and universities alike have developed open access strategies, proving that the demand for open access is no longer an idealistic one. Just this month, representatives from the leading Austrian research organizations announced that all publications financed with public funds will be available online without restrictions by 2025. It is common sense by now that scientific output should be freely available online. With new online distribution channels, the traditional mediator role of scientific publishers has come under scrutiny as the *Lingua/Glossa* case shows.

Do we think open access far enough?

Looking at the mindset of many academic researchers and at initiatives undertaken by research organizations, one could question if our understanding of open access in the academic community goes far enough.

Often researchers believe that open access publications are of lower quality– a belief that is of course not justified but frequently perpetuated by established publishers. This is slightly paradoxical, since many publishing houses offer the golden road to open access. Here journals make their articles openly accessible immediately upon publication for a ransom, the so-called article processing charge, or APC. Some communities also offer renowned working paper series that are published under open access licenses online and without the traditional peer review.

The belief that publishing under an open access license is still a less prestigious way of publishing may be owed to the high number of dubious open access journals that have been mushrooming in the recent years. These ”predatory journals“ charge high publication fees to authors without providing the editorial and publishing services of legitimate journals. Researchers that do not deal with this topic are having troubles separating the wheat from the chaff. They stick with their well-known journals.

Looking at the open access initiatives undertaken by many research funders, one could get the impression that the job is done by establishing publishing funds. These funds can be used to cover the costs of golden open access. As an illustration: for *Lingua*, this opt-in for open access costs $1,800, which is average. Many golden open access models represent a redistribution of costs that is still to the detriment of academia. Publishing funds are indeed useful to make single articles from relevant journals available to everyone. They are, however, an insufficient response to the urging question of how the scientific community should manage the access to its outputs in an

increasingly digitized society.

It is for the researchers' conservatism on the one hand and the research organizations' passivity on the other hand that open access is rather a business model than a sustainable strategy to organize knowledge in the 21st century. Our understanding of open access in the scientific community is too short-sighted.

Open access and innovation

With increasing digitization, the way research is conducted, communicated and critiqued has changed. Open access also means rethinking the way the publishing process is organized and how quality can be identified.

One vivid example for a more digitally savvy way of publishing are mega journals such as PLOS ONE. PLOS ONE is more of a platform than a single journal. It is multidisciplinary, open access and has no limit for the number of articles it publishes. In fact, by number of articles, PLOS ONE is by far the biggest journal worldwide. Articles on PLOS ONE are published after a basic review for scientific soundness. The scientific community then evaluates an article through citations, but also through shares on Twitter and Facebook. Furthermore, PLOS ONE has a far-reaching data availability policy and shows how often data has been used on figshare, an online data repository. Even though PLOS ONE has no limit for the number of articles it publishes in a month and is rather focused on article-based metrics, it has quite an impressive impact factor. PLOS ONE is financed by article processing charges. Established publishing houses are also investing in the mega journal model, for example O'Reilly with PeerJ or Macmillan with Scientific Reports.

Mega journals take a form of research into account that is faster moving, increasingly multidisciplinary and whose impact is not necessarily accessible prior to a publication. The trimmed-down review allows for articles to be published faster than with the traditional review model. When it takes several years from the submission of an article to its publication, one can indeed question if the old review model is still zeitgeisty enough. In comparison to the established journal models, the review process at mega journals fulfills more of a scrutinizing than a curating role. One can indeed also look critically at the mega journal model; however, they do at least try to shake the dust off of the book age by implementing new and faster mechanisms to identify quality. They are furthermore a home for research that cannot be fit into a single discipline, which is important in times when research problems are increasingly multidisciplinary and require collaborative effort.

PLOS ONE and the other mega journals do not understand open access solely as the access to articles; they understand open access also as a way publishing can be organized and presented in a digital age.

Open access and infrastructure

The market for scientific publishing is undergoing a similar process as other industries did with digitization, such as the newspaper or music industry. Old players position themselves anew (e.g., newspapers test new content formats and payment models), new players emerge (e.g., clickbait-journalism) and less strong players disappear (e.g., "print crisis"). In the realignment of market players for scientific publishing, academia has to be careful not to come out empty-handed.

Looking at the innovative players in online publishing, one can see that many have a commercial background. In an interview with irights, Lambert Heller from the Open Science Lab of the German National Library of Science and Technology pointed to the market power of startups and traditional publishers that invest cleverly in digital information infrastructure. This, according to Heller, applies not only to online journals but also to social networks for researchers, such as Researchgate and academia.edu, reference managers such as Mendeley, and code and data repositories such as figshare and github. The historian Philip Mirowski even sees a "neoliberal project" in the overall development. With respect to the formation of new players in the market for scientific publishing, Lambert Heller poses the question: how free does academia want its operation system to be?

One does not have to go as far as to describe the development in online publishing as a purely neoliberal project.

What is true, however, is that many critical nodes in the digital information infrastructure are already occupied by commercial players. Of course, this is not necessarily a bad thing. However, past experiences, including the unhealthy dependence on publishers such as Elsevier, should make academics take an even more critical stance. In this regard, open access is also a question of who owns the critical information infrastructure for online publishing or —put differently—which parts of its value creation academia wants to outsource this time. If there is a reorganization of the market for scientific publishing, why should academia not play a more prominent role?

Lingua/Glossa as a role model for others?

This is where the case *Lingua/Glossa* comes into play again. The resignation of *Lingua*'s editorial board and its reorganization in the to-be-founded journal *Glossa* could get the ball rolling, and other journals could follow the example.

The outlook for *Glossa* is good. For the first five years, the journal will be completely free for readers and authors thanks to funding from the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research and the Association of Dutch Universities (btw: the German Research Association also supports the launch of open access journals). According to Rooryck, the article processing charge for gold open access will then not be higher than 400€. If that holds true, the APCs will be reduced significantly compared to the $1,800 at *Lingua*. The organization of content—from the production of articles, to the peer review, to the publication—remains in the hands of academia. Perhaps equally important is the fact that the former editorial board of *Lingua* will regroup in the new journal *Glossa*. One of the biggest issues for new journals is to build up a reputation. At *Glossa*, the good reputation is there from the outset.

This combination of public funding, low APCs, self-organization and community backing already seems a promising model for open access. If not a call for rebellion, the *Lingua/Glossa* case shows at least quite plainly that the negotiations about the costs of access are reopened. It also reminds us that open access means more than just the access to an article; it means rethinking the whole process of publishing. The scientific community now has the chance to (at least to some extent) free itself from its path dependence and to rethink publishing in a digital society. *Glossa* could lead by example.

Btw, "Lingua" means tongue in Latin. "Glossa" means tongue in ancient Greek. In Glossa's case, one could say the naming is meant symbolically.

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