

Reclaiming What We Own: Expanding Competition in Scholarly Publishing

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*The author is founder and editor of **Evolutionary Ecology Research**, created in response to the escalating cost of a Wolters Kluwer journal that he also founded and edited. The following is excerpted from a longer address delivered to the Ninth Conference of the Association of College & Research Libraries held last April in Detroit.*

Several commercial publishers have so emphasized the maximization of profit that they have restricted the flow of knowledge. In so doing, they have exiled themselves from the academic enterprise. If they actually produced that knowledge, maybe we could forgive them. But library clients actually produce it, and taxpayers pay for almost all of it.

Placing blame won't help. We are here both to take back the hijacked cargo and to protect it from future raids. To that end, I want to contribute the story of *Evolutionary Ecology* and *Evolutionary Ecology Research*. I believe that our story has two kinds of value. It illustrates much of the problem and it can illuminate a great deal of what needs to be done to solve it for good.

In late 1984, I began working with a fine English commercial publisher to create a new biology journal. Chapman & Hall was Charles Dickens's publisher, and Anthony Trollope's too. It had 150 years of proud accomplishments to its credit. And it was acutely aware of its dual role as profit-maker *and* disseminator of knowledge and of culture. I never signed an agreement with Chapman & Hall—our relationship was based entirely on old-fashioned trust.

Evolutionary Ecology started as a Smythe-sewn quarterly of three signatures each issue. Libraries paid \$100 a year and individuals, \$35.

Then in 1987, Chapman & Hall suffered a hostile stock takeover at the hands of International Thomson Corporation (ITC). ITC paid threefold what others thought Chapman & Hall stock was worth. Why? Because they priced the stock based on what they planned to charge for Chapman & Hall publications, not on what C&H charged. And ITC planned to charge a lot more! My honeymoon with Chapman & Hall was over.

Prices soon began to rise. Yes, the journal grew in size. But the sewn-signature binding was replaced by the much cheaper perfect binding. And there were other signs of cost cutting. Skilled employees left and were replaced by tyros who made a lot of mistakes. Then, these were replaced by independent contractors. Chapman & Hall did not have to pay them any benefits nor even to provide them any desk space. I would send the manuscripts to a copyeditor who did not even live in London, let alone work for Chapman & Hall. That person handled further communication with authors and with the typesetters (who worked in Bombay) and a printer (whose plant was in Wales). After printing, journals went to a mailing house with international offices. All Chapman & Hall did was collect and dispense the money. Your money. There was no risk because, as you well know, subscribers pay in advance.

Much later I discovered that ITC kept most of that money for themselves. For example, in 1998, our journal had some 400 subscribers worldwide. All costs of producing and distributing the journal amounted to less than \$80,000. But subscription revenues were somewhere between \$250,000 and \$300,000. Chapman & Hall never shared this information with me; I had to do a little research to obtain my estimates. But I assure you, they are pretty close to the money!

For a decade, prices are rising and I am squealing my little head off. I doubt that it did much good, although I like to think I may have minimized the inflation of our journal's prices at least a bit. Basically however, I was powerless, absorbing lame excuses one after another. "Paper costs are up, mailing is up; typesetting costs more; *EE* has more pages per year." All of these things were true, but they had little to do with the price increases. The truth rather lay in the unrestrained greed of profiteers who knew they had us all locked in. How else can you explain a 275% markup on goods paid for in advance?

And the publishers say they add value! Horse-droppings. We add the value, you and I do. We add it as taxpayers. We add it with our hard scholarly labor and our dearly won library budgets that add the final element to value—access. We add the value. We supply the raw material. We pay the copyeditors, the typesetters, the printer, and the mailer. They merely handle the money. And they have been taking much more than a fair share at a 275% markup. That's the same as a 73.3% profit margin. Would you deal with a moneychanger who demanded almost 75 cents of every dollar that you asked him to change into pounds sterling?

Then, a year ago, the sky fell in. ITC sold Chapman & Hall to Wolters Kluwer. My dream of lower prices changed from fantasy to foolishness. There was every reason to expect further price inflation.

I had had enough. My editors had had enough. We pleaded: Sell us to a university press. Please sell us. But Kluwer refused. So, guided through the uncharted desert by our fiery attorney—a pillar of the community—we girded our loins, put sandals on our feet, took up our staffs and set out for the Sea of Red Ink. We left the established journal to found a competing journal that is an affordable alternative: *Evolutionary Ecology Research*.

Kluwer could not believe it at first. But, once they did, they expressed a certain amount of displeasure. How could I blame them? I think they bought the Brooklyn Bridge. They apparently believed they would acquire me, my editorial board, and all the backlog of unprocessed manuscripts on which we had worked so hard. Our lawyers did not agree. Neither did our authors. About 90% decided to submit their manuscripts to *EER* rather than to *EE*. We have to find a way to tell this part of the story to all academics. And we will. Publishers now claim far more rights than they actually have. And most academics simply believe them.

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Foment freedom! I must tell you that academics have no idea what's going on. They do not know what libraries are going through just now. They have no sense of what a publisher does or how inexpensive it is to do it. They don't even know about their own rights and privileges. When it comes to publishing, they are an uninformed herd, fed, milked, and slaughtered at will. And happy to be of service!

At first, you might feel daunted by the size of this herd. But we need not start with the hundreds of thousands of yeoman academics who produce the manuscripts. We can target a much, much smaller group, the several thousand editors who work alongside a few commercial publishers. Getting to them will not be so tough—their names are already published in the journals they edit, and their snail- and e-mail addresses won't be that difficult to compile. They need to learn what is going on and how they can protect their authors and their professions from the restricted flow of information that now plagues us.

All this can amount to a homeostatic system. In other words it can regulate itself. Now, in a sense, we already have a homeostatic system. But it is one that admits only stockholders as stakeholders. The devil with dissemination. Forget about scholarship and the world of the intellect. To blazes with the public's right to access the information they have paid to create. Build profit. Make as much money as you can!

Every paper is a virtual monopoly and if you can find a way to own it, you can charge whatever the libraries can bear to pay. If some publishing house still allows any of the outmoded values into its pricing system, terrific, it is a target of opportunity. Buy it and get prices up to where they can be. Taking full advantage is not illegal. It is simply good business.

The homeostatic system implicit in *our* remarks is more complex and varied in its goals. It admits many stakeholders and sets up a checks-and-balances scheme to see that all are served. It views academic publishing as a partnership among editors, authors, publishers, libraries, and the public at large. We must make it the ethical alternative. Then we must pursue a three-C's policy toward those publishers who refuse to cooperate with it: chastise them, castigate them, and censure them. Make it clear to academics that these publishers are ethically suspect and that it is consequently ethically dubious to publish anything with them, or to edit their manuscripts or to review for them.

Thank you all again for all you have been doing. Not just for *EER*, but for all your steady support of scholarship over the generations.

In the complete paper, Dr. Rosenzweig gives his views on the burden of Internet-only subscriptions, at least until concerns about archiving are addressed and journal authors have made an "emotional adjustment" to Internet-only journals. The full address is posted to the ARL website at <<http://www.arl.org/sparc/rosenzweig.html>>.

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