

The Current State of Journals Publishing in the Humanities

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Giltza-Hitzak: Wiley-Blackwell. Aldizkarien argitalpena. Humanitateak. Zientzia elkarteak. Aldizkari akademikoak. Online banatzea.

Este informe da un breve repaso a algunas cuestiones clave relativas al estado actual de la publicación de revistas sobre humanidades y, en concreto, a la publicación online de revistas científicas, al trabajo de colaboración realizado de forma conjunta por editores académicos profesionales, sociedades de estudios y editores de revistas científicas. También realiza un repaso de los retos actuales y posibles amenazas a las que se enfrentan las revistas científicas de humanidades, planteados por el ranking de revistas, por el acceso abierto y por los archivos institucionales gratuitos de contenido académico.

Palabras Clave: Wiley-Blackwell. Edición de revistas. Humanidades. Sociedades científicas. Revistas académicas. Entrega Online.

Ce rapport fait un bref examen de quelques questions clés relatives à l'état actuel de la publication de revues sur les humanités et, concrètement, de la publication Online de revues scientifiques, du travail de collaboration réalisé en commun par des éditeurs académiques professionnels, des sociétés d'études et des éditeurs de revues scientifiques. Ce rapport examine également les défis actuels et les éventuelles menaces auxquels sont confrontées les revues scientifiques d'humanités, posés par le classement des revues, par l'accès ouvert et par les archives institutionnelles gratuites de contenu académique.

Mots Clés: Wiley-Blackwell. Edition de revues. Humanités. Sociétés scientifiques. Revues académiques. Distribution Online.

These days, journals publishing is perhaps the fastest-moving, most challenging area of the academic publishing industry, and what better opportunity could there be to reflect on the current state of journals publishing than in the centenary year of the *Revista Internacional de los Estudios Vascos*. I feel very privileged to have been invited to present, and then publish, my paper by Eusko Ikaskuntza.

Journals publishing is a now complex business, so in this paper I endeavour to concentrate on just a few key, topical aspects of the subject, with special reference to the humanities, which is my area of expertise. Although many current trends and practices come to us via scientific and medical publishing, there are many issues that are specifically pertinent to the humanities, and to some extent the social sciences, which require careful thought and discussion – namely: online publication of scholarly journals, and the challenges, and perhaps threats, posed by journal ranking, open access, and free institutional repositories of scholarly content.

You may not agree with everything in this paper, but in times of change and development it is always important to open up debate and exchange views, such that we may all learn from each other's experience, and together aspire to work towards a better mutual understanding and a successful future.

After all, surely, we are all working to one worthwhile goal: the widest possible dissemination, recognition, and understanding of our work and our diverse intellectual positions through the publication of scholarly research.

It is fair to say that there has been more change in journals publishing in the last ten years than at practically any point since the publication of what was arguably the world's first, peer-reviewed academic journal, *Transactions of the Royal Society*, which was founded in 1665. From then, until the mid 1990s, journals were generally print-only publications, which you hoped would regularly come through your letterbox when they were due.

However, the arrival of the internet and the rapid development of electronic coding and typesetting packages, and subsequently, investment in sophisticated online delivery platforms by publishers, changed all that, such that it is now almost *de rigueur* for an academic print journal also to be available online; and, increasingly, journals are becoming available online-only, with no print counterpart.

Further, for acquisitions librarians in academic institutions, who are worried about their budgets, having a journal online means that they often no longer need to subscribe to multiple copies of a journal – such as a faculty copy and a main library copy – but instead can take just the single subscription, because, with online delivery, everyone within that institution can access the journal content from their desktop or library computer. I am not saying that this is an ideal situation, but it is the way many institutional journal subscriptions are going.

This shift in purchasing trends by libraries, from taking print journals to online-only, is growing year on year, such that, in five years' time, even in the humanities, it is possible that at least 50% of all institutional journal subscriptions will be online-only. We can be thankful that there is a long way to go before the elimination of print, but online journal delivery is now an integral part of the dissemination of high-level research to the global academy.

We are also seeing that many libraries are now wanting deeper online archives of humanities journals, which is understandable, of course, as the shelf life for most articles in these disciplines is much longer than for those in medicine and science. As a result, Wiley-Blackwell, like some of our major competitors, is currently undertaking a massive retro-digitization project, going back to the first issue of the first volume of hundreds of journals that we publish. This is a considerable contribution to scholarship, entirely in keeping with the democratization of the fruits of scholarly research which worldwide online publication now provides. These days, a researcher in India or Africa, South America or Eastern Europe, is much more likely to have access to the most recent, highest level journal scholarship, which until recently was the preserve of the hallowed institutions of the developed world, and, even then, often only in comparatively few, well-funded institutions.

The global dissemination of research could only have happened with the online revolution in academic publishing. Previously, with print only, it was not possible to disseminate as effectively and as widely the incredibly high amount of research now being published annually. This has meant that, as publishers, we have had to think creatively and collaboratively about our relationships with our clients: the academic librarians and their researchers and students who want access to the material we publish.

Thus, by the late 90s, most major journal publishers had started to provide some form of basic online delivery of their print journals, normally in the form of PDFs – that is, non-searchable, electronic facsimiles of the print version. Nowadays, there are multiple ways in which an institution may gain online access to the content of academic journals, such that the core market for a journal may be made up from a combination of sources or sales channels, including:

- Traditional subscriptions (be it print, print plus online, or online only);
- Library consortia sales – that is, where a number of academic institutions in a region, state, or country, group together to form a consortium to ensure that, in addition to whichever journals each institution takes individually through the traditional subscription route, as a group or consortium, and for a relatively small additional charge, they also have online access to the total number of journals to which the consortium subscribes or that a publisher has on its list;
- A lot of institutions now also subscribe to journals via licensed databases. Where a company, such as EBSCO for example, will sell an

aggregated collection of journal content from lots of different publishers, the content normally embargoed for a year or two;

- There are also single-issue article sales, sold on a pay-per-view basis;
- For developing countries, there are a number of philanthropic online sales programmes which provide journal content for free or at vastly reduced prices for institutions in those countries.

Online readership of journal articles is much higher than it is, or ever was, in print. Previously, if a journal had a subscription base of, about, 500 institutions worldwide, it was considered a well-read, mature journal, with a stable future. Now, with the advent of library consortia and other sales channels around the world, the majority taking only the online version of journals, we have seen phenomenal growth in online access and readership, and in the number of institutions now able to read current research articles has probably quadrupled for most of the journals which we publish – indeed, the latest content in an average Wiley-Blackwell-published journal will now be available in around 3,000 academic institutions around the world (and in thousands more through aggregated content providers). Importantly, many of these institutions receiving the latest research are in countries which previously took few, if any academic journals, with the result that many journals are now seeing a growth in submissions from academics in countries where previously they would not have expected to receive papers.

Surely, this increasing level of international communication and intellectual exchange is healthy for the future of scholarship. However, had journals not taken full advantage of the possibilities offered by electronic delivery of their content would they now be in such a healthy intellectual state?

I would argue that this has to be good for the journals, their learned societies, and researchers and the academy worldwide, and effective dissemination of scholarly research can only be done if it is combined with properly planned marketing campaigns and extensive sales networks undertaken on a global scale, good channels of communication and collaborative cooperation between publishers, journal editors, authors, and academic libraries, and, of course, published via a sophisticated online delivery platform. These are the areas where the value is added by professional, international publishers, such as Wiley-Blackwell. Such a diverse and complex infrastructure requires considerable, on-going investment: Online publishing, when it is done professionally and effectively, and on a global scale, cannot be done for free!

Online readership of journals is now also a major factor in de-selection decisions by librarians; the price of journals is still important, of course, but if a library is taking two very similar journals, one costing, for argument's sake, 100 Euros and the other 200 Euros, if the more expensive one is being read online at six times the rate of the cheaper one, then the more expensive journal is arguably much better value, and therefore less likely to be cancelled.

It is now increasingly common that journal articles will be delivered online in very sophisticated, fully-searchable text, rather than just static PDFs, with inter-linking between articles, and links to all major abstracting and indexing databases and other online search facilities. It is now possible to include supplementary material to the online version which, for humanities journals especially, it would have been impossible or prohibitively expensive to include in print, such as facsimiles of original manuscripts, extensive data analyses, colour illustrations, and music and film clips, for example.

Importantly, the major search engines, such as Google Scholar, for example, are now able to search the full text of the whole article, rather than just an abstract, the author's name, and the article title, increasing the likelihood that a researcher might actively or serendipitously come across a relevant paper via an online search, substantially increasing that article's potential readership and contribution to scholarship. With inter-linked articles, where references made by the author are linked to other journal articles and to multi-publisher databases, such as CrossRef, a researcher accessing a professionally-published online journal can now read at least the abstracts of the articles cited, and in many instances seamlessly access the full articles, if their institution also subscribes to those other journals, perhaps via a library consortium arrangement.

Online, pre-print, publication is another significant recent development, not least for newer scholars needing quickly to build up a publications list or seeking employment at a university, where the ability to present evidence of their published research could make the difference between success and failure in securing their first professional job. Indeed, some journals at Wiley-Blackwell which offer our pre-print service, Online Early, have already seen a steady increase in submissions from early career scholars, which every journal needs if it is to remain successful.

However, there are significant challenges to the current healthy state of journals publishing, which we would be ill advised to ignore, such as the spectre of journal ranking, institutional repositories of scholarly research, and the drive for free, open access to academic material.

Many readers of this paper will have seen the European Science Foundation's recently published list of international journal rankings; maybe you were interested or even perplexed by its results? For example, was the logic applied to the classification fair, accurate, and comprehensive enough, or indeed appropriate? Similarly, in the United Kingdom, there has also been a lot of press speculation about the exact nature of the so-called 'metrics exercise' which might shadow the next Research Assessment Exercise, the formal, periodic review process by which the research output of British-based academics is assessed for quality, and which constitutes the basis from which the level of research funding to their respective university departments is allocated. However, the possible introduction of a quantitative-based, rather than a qualitative-based, system of classification, perhaps based on the number of times a published article is subsequently cited by other

authors over a determined period, is arguably the sort of development which is alien to many in the humanities, and possibly invidious to some.

However, in almost all the medical, earth, and life sciences, and in many social sciences disciplines, such as economics and geography, journal ranking has been around for a long time, and where, frequently, a journal's ranking relative to others in its field will be an important factor in an academic's decision when choosing a journal in which she or he wishes to publish. The system of determining that ranking – such as that used by ISI Thomson, the acknowledged leaders in this field – has been established for many years and, in general, is widely accepted by those in disciplines which are extensively covered by the ranking. It is questionable, however, whether a system which looks only at the number of citations to other journal articles taken over a two-year period (the numerator), and given as a fraction of the total number of articles published by that journal over the same period (the denominator), can be used in the humanities. After all, in a typical journal article in the humanities, there are far fewer references to other journal articles, but many more references to primary source and monograph material. Also, the average life of humanities article is very much longer than for one in medicine and the sciences. Indeed, how often do we sometimes only get around to reading an important humanities article five or more years after it is published, and yet still find that research fresh and relevant, and how often do we return to well-known previously published work to find it still informs current debate?

In some instances where humanities journals are currently given a ranking it can be anomalous and misleading, partly for the reasons just mentioned, but also because the coverage of humanities journals is a lot less comprehensive than it is for the sciences (*circa* 8,000 vs. 1,800). We can be sure that ISI Thomson would be the first to acknowledge this, and to understand that, hitherto, such types of numerical analysis of research output have not formed part of the main judgement criteria for the majority of humanities scholars seeking to have their work published.

However, if a system of journal ranking is to be imposed in the humanities, and I feel sure that it will be in the next few years, then surely it is contingent upon academics, university departments, and learned societies to argue vociferously for that system to be accurate and to properly acknowledge the high quality and broad range of intellectual diversity, and the natural interdisciplinarity, which together are distinctive features of so much of the best humanities scholarship.

Even in the absence of an agreed ranking system in the humanities, though, the best journals already remain the best, by virtue of rigorously maintaining high standards of scholarship, and publishing new research that is challenging and often ground-breaking, work that has that extra spark. The very best articles also frame that research within established paradigms of scholarship, and appeal to a range of potential audiences. It is no surprise that such articles continue to be referred to often decades after their original publication.

The best journal editors will also establish good networks, keep abreast of new research, hot topics, trends, and developments. Working collaboratively with their professional publisher, they ensure that their journals are responding well to the needs of the academy and remain accessible, but also will be willing to explore the frontiers of their discipline with new research; establishing new ground, whilst remaining part of the wider intellectual debate. They will want to ensure that their journal is publishing the highest possible percentage of the best papers from the most prestigious authors, whilst also keeping an eye out for the rising stars. It is the publisher's job to ensure the widest possible dissemination and readership of that scholarship, which is integral to every journal's continued success. Good journal editors will also put a lot of thought into the 'construction' of each issue, and endeavour to create a dialogue between papers, often between the work of established scholars and newer names. The best authors will think carefully about their audience, keeping their reader foremost in their mind – who and why would they be reading this article? It is this vitality which helps define the best scholarship, as is acknowledging the need to communicate to a wider audience and to posit questions, challenge and inform that audience and encourage debate.

This collaborative relationship between researchers, journal editors, learned societies, and publishers, all seeking to reach the widest possible global audience, is surely healthy for the future of scholarship. But it is arguable that this is a part of the debate which is not fully appreciated by those wishing to set up institutional electronic repositories, capturing the work of the academics in their institutions for themselves, rather than seeking a global audience for it. The very word, repository, perhaps suggests something static, inward-looking; a storeroom, a depot. The very opposite of the outward-looking, vibrantly successful systems of dissemination which are already established for journal research by professional academic publishers.

Another important factor is the 'value added' by the editorial process – the rejection of low quality work, the rigorous peer-review process, the working up of good research into a polished piece of scholarship, by the editor working with the author, something which is still undertaken by many of the best journal editors, especially in the humanities. Combine this with the professional copy-editing and proofreading, the technical marking up of copy for electronic dissemination, and the inter-linking of each piece of work to other work cited within it, provided by the professional academic publisher, and you have a refined, valuable piece of scholarship, often far removed from the piece which was originally submitted to the journal. Would work placed within the institutional repositories without these value-added processes be as refined and valuable, or would we see lower standards of scholarship emerging?

Free, open access to scholarship may be cited by those arguing for the establishment of institutional repositories, and publishers may be vilified as greedy capitalists seeking to make money out of the honest toil of the academy, and then selling it back to them at highly inflated prices. In disciplines where the average price of journals runs into thousands of Euros, and a high

percentage of the research published is funded by wealthy institutes and publicly-owned grant-awarding bodies, such as the Wellcome Foundation or the Medical Research Council, for example, and by medical and pharmaceutical companies, they may have a point. However, that argument is rather less tenable in the humanities, where there is relatively little funded research, where journals cost a fraction of those in science and medicine (on average, a humanities journal, for example published four times a year, probably costs around 300 Euros a year), and where the learned societies on whose behalf those journals are published normally rely heavily on the income they derive from their publications in order to carry out their good work in promoting and developing their disciplines. If those learned societies were unable to function at their current level, or at worst had to fold, what contribution to the future of scholarship has been achieved?

Despite these emerging challenges, my personal view is that the future is far from doom and gloom. Indeed, I retain hope that common sense will prevail, and that all the interested parties – authors, learned societies, professional academic publishers, and the purchasing institutions – will continue to work collaboratively to ensure good stewardship of the academic journal, enabling it to develop yet further, and continue its vital contribution to future dissemination of the highest quality scholarship on a global scale.

Finally, may I wish the *Revista Internacional de los Estudios Vascos* a very happy birthday. Milla esker, ez dakit euskera gehiago!