
The Electronic Society for Social Scientists: from journals as documents to journals as knowledge exchanges

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Keywords

Research, Internet, Publishing, Innovation

Abstract

The Electronic Society for Social Scientists (ELSSS) envisages a new concept of scholarly and scientific journal: conceived and managed by academics themselves; aimed at providing direct competition to high-priced commercial publications; based on a business model whereby subscription revenues cover the non-trivial cost of peer-review; designed to maximise research productivity; intended as a platform for scientific and scholarly debate. The ELSSS model conceives the peer-reviewed published article not at the final stage of the scholarly communication chain, but as an intermediate step, to be followed by Web-based interaction among self-selected networks of interested researchers. The paper suggests that the very concepts of "lending" and "document" need redefining in the case of the forthcoming generation academic-led journals.

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Interlending & Document Supply
Volume 30 · Number 4 · 2002 · pp. 178–182
© MCB UP Limited · ISSN 0264-1615
DOI 10.1108/02641610210452475

Introduction

As the ELectronic Society for Social Scientists (ELSSS) is a new concept, perhaps it may be useful to begin by distinguishing it from similar initiatives in scholarly communication:

- ELSSS is not a Learned Society publisher: even though ELSSS is supported, among others, by the Royal Economic Society and even though ELSSS is in the business of publishing academic journals, it is not a typical society publisher.
- ELSSS is not SPARC: even though ELSSS is supported, both informally and formally, by library associations, and it shares most of SPARC's aims, ELSSS it is not a SPARC-like organisation.
- ELSSS is not an online academic publisher: even though ELSSS is about to publish academic online journals, it is different from ventures like "bepress" or the *Economics Bulletin*.
- ELSSS is not an open access publisher: even though ELSSS was one of the initial signatories of the Budapest Open Access Initiative (BOAI) and supports the aim of open access, its journals are not "open access" in the full sense of the term.
- ELSSS is not an electronic journal software provider: even though ELSSS has produced an innovative software package for the editing, production, and distribution of academic journals, it does not regard itself as a software producer.

So what is ELSSS?

Background

ELSSS was launched in November 2000 as an innovative solution to the "serials crisis" – the rapid and substantial increase in journal subscriptions far in excess of library funding[1]. Organised by an economist at the University of St Andrews, with the help of IT and library colleagues, ELSSS aims to provide head-to-head competition to named high-price commercially-produced journals in the social sciences generally, and in economics specifically and initially. At the time of writing, June 2002, ELSSS has the academic support of over 1,000 research economists worldwide ranging from Nobel prize-winners to junior faculty. Thanks to



institutional and financial support from the Royal Economic Society, the University of St Andrews, and Scottish Enterprise Fife, ELSSS is about to launch its first batch of journals using its own ELSSS Publishing Template (EPT) – an integrated software package for the refereeing, editing, production, and distribution of high-quality research articles in economics and other social sciences.

The concept

The working hypothesis behind ELSSS is that by providing research economists with a credible alternative to named high-price journals, i.e. with an alternative that is at least as good as existing titles, the economics profession can “migrate” to more academic- and library-friendly journals.

The ELSSS recipe

In order to understand why ELSSS is organised the way it is and how it plans to change the very concept of “document supply”, it is necessary to review briefly some of the peculiarities of economics as an academic discipline, especially with reference to journal publishing.

A feature that distinguishes ELSSS from other and laudable initiatives is that ELSSS is not interested in merely adding to the number of existing journals, but rather in competing with and eventually replacing high-priced titles as leaders in their fields. Its recipe for achieving the necessary “instant reputation” is to reward all the key elements of the journal as a means of diffusing peer-reviewed high-quality research, chiefly authors, referees, editors[2]. We specify below what form these rewards take for referees, authors, and editors, while the direct effects of the ELSSS project on libraries will be considered later.

Referees

One of the peculiarities of economics as an academic discipline is that the pool of scrupulous and prompt referees is quite small compared to the universe of submissions. This, together with other factors, explains why the average submission-to-report time-lag ranges from four to 15 months, a lag that is unheard of, and would be unacceptable, in

other disciplines (e.g. chemistry, physics, etc.). To entice overworked referees to provide full and prompt reports, ELSSS will reward them not only with new forms of peer-recognition, but also with modest but not insignificant honoraria. It is remarkable that a discipline that relies so heavily on the efforts of a small group of reviewers currently has no mechanism for identifying and paying proper recognition to outstanding referees.

Editors

The appointment of world-class editors is a prerequisite to asserting the cast-iron commitment that ELSSS journals will publish only papers of the highest quality. Apart from offering stipends commensurate with the increasingly onerous task of editing a high-quality journal, ELSSS provides, through its EPT, a streamlined electronic mechanism that simplifies and automates much of the administrative burden of editing, and generally makes the job of editor more interesting.

Authors

To attract the highest quality of submissions, ELSSS must match, and indeed better, the service currently provided by established high-price journals. More specifically, ELSSS does this by offering:

- the strictest form of quality control: only submissions that at least match, and indeed exceed, the quality threshold of ELSSS’s direct high-price competitors will be accepted for publication;
- a substantially shorter submission-to-decision time-lag
- a much wider readership and hence higher impact: because ELSSS journals are priced to recover peer-review costs and do not include any allowance for exorbitant profits, they are substantially cheaper than commercial rivals and thus affordable by a much larger subscriber base. Moreover, all ELSSS journals will be free to all libraries and non-commercial research centres in developing and transition countries (for additional details, see section headed “Whither ‘lending?’”);
- the opportunity to interact with fellow academics in ways not offered by high-priced journals (for more details, see next section).

Beyond journal content as "document"

Given the title of this journal, it may be surprising that one of ELSSS' aims is to take journal content well beyond the "document" and into the "interactive communication" stage. The status quo is that a typical economics article is published between 18 and 48 months from initial submission, and therefore, by the time it is read, it is almost certainly obsolete in terms of frontier research. Thus, it makes sense to consider it as the final stage of the scholarly communication route, i.e. as a document to be archived as a matter of record and not as "live" knowledge, capable of stimulating scientific debate at the time of publication.

In contrast, articles accepted for publications in ELSSS journals can be regarded as being an intermediate stage in the scholarly communication process in that, having passed the peer-review test, they are available to a wide readership to comment on, and interact with, at the time of publication. The EPT has a number of novel features that facilitate and foster scientific debate on the research material published in its journals. These range from basic e-mail exchanges to more sophisticated forms of discussion platforms. One interesting feature of this interactivity section is that readers can build up a post-publication evaluation profile for each article, both indirectly through hits and downloads, and directly by means of a report form that allows them to rank the article according to a number of criteria.

Of course, we consider robust archiving to be an essential element of ELSSS as a publishing entity. Indeed, one of the main reasons why ELSSS journals will be available in print form (apart from hard-copy being regarded as a signal of journal quality) is that paper is still a very robust archiving medium. ELSSS will also participate in various projects to define and implement reliable standards for online archiving.

In the case of ELSSS journals, defining the meaning of "document" is made more complicated by the fact that not only are non-print exchanges (Web-based interaction) an integral part of the chain of scholarly communication, but also additional "layers" of research material are supplied. In addition to the standard "print" article, the online version of ELSSS journals offer the reader a choice of "layers", ranging from short

abstracts through an intelligent synopsis to extended versions of the print article that include additional material (appendices, datasets, links to other relevant papers by the authors, etc.). All these additional layers are available (at no extra cost) to all legitimate users of the subscribing institutions.

The vision of the "academic journal" that underlies the ELSSS concept is both very old and very new: by viewing journals as a means of knowledge certification and exchange, ELSSS follows the tradition started in 1665 by Oldenburg and the *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London*[3]. By making full use of the possibilities offered by the Web, ELSSS "journals" will allow scholars and scientists to communicate on a world-wide basis (if required, in real time) both in open and closed communities of interested researchers.

Whither "lending"?

We wish to pose the intriguing question whether ELSSS journals need to be lent at all. As suggested in the previous section, print articles (the objects to be lent) constitute only a part – albeit an important one – of the overall content of ELSSS online journals and therefore readers that access ELSSS journals via a standard interlibrary loan would miss out on important additional material and would not be able to interact with the academic community.

There is a more radical reason why we believe that the whole concept of document supply applies to high-price paper-based material and not to the new journal concept developed by ELSSS, a reason related to the notion of fair access.

For open-access journals, the issue of lending is immaterial, but ELSSS journals have to recoup relatively high costs of peer-review and therefore cannot be open access in the full sense of the term. However, ELSSS journals will be open access for those readers least able to afford the modest cost of subscriptions, namely those located in a developing or transition country, as any educational and non-commercial organisations in these countries will be allowed free and unrestricted access to the full functionality of ELSSS journals.

Therefore the potential "market" for interlibrary lending is limited to institutions in

the developed world. By definition, research published in ELSSS journals will be of the highest quality (or it would not be accepted at all) and this will create a dilemma for serials librarians in university and research libraries in the developed world. On the one hand, librarians would want their readers to access high-quality research and the other services provided by ELSSS journals; on the other hand, libraries cannot be expected to discontinue immediately subscriptions to established high-priced journals in favour of new rivals, even though the latter are of equal or higher quality.

It is at this crucial stage that librarians can use their expertise either to implement the obvious solution to the problem (if they themselves are responsible for serials purchasing decisions) or to suggest it to the academics in charge of serials budgets.

If the newcomer (i.e. an ELSSS journal or similar) is treated as just another title, the chances of establishing a large subscriber base quickly will be small, because of the inevitable inertia involved in changing serials portfolios arrived at as a result of delicate balancing acts and compromises between academics themselves and/or between academics and librarians. However, if the subscriptions to the new journals are considered as a strategic investment, then the whole venture can succeed, with substantial benefits accruing to libraries, their users and to the research community generally. There are two main reasons why subscriptions to ELSSS journals ought to be assessed in terms of their long-term effects. The first, which is shared with any initiative that poses a credible threat to the monopolistic position of some commercial publishers, is that, as shown by data collected by SPARC, the mere existence of a viable alternative to high-priced journals forces their publishers not to increase their subscriptions charges as much as would have been the case without the new competitors. Indeed, the savings compared to the scenario when high-priced publications are unchallenged can fund the subscriptions to the newcomers. The second, more far-reaching reason why a subscription to ELSSS carries long-term benefits, is that as the EPT is available to any group of researchers who subscribe to the principles of fairness and high quality espoused by ELSSS, it can create a domino effect. After all, even the largest commercial publishers are

ultimately dependent on the willingness of researchers to provide their services as authors, referees, and editors at virtually no cost and to buy back their own work at inflated prices. By showing that academic-led alternatives are viable, ELSSS aims to alter the entire mechanism of academic publishing, by relegating publishers to an ancillary role (and a correspondingly small share of library budgets) and to restore the leading role of researchers as content providers, quality assessors, and champions of the fastest and most diffuse means of scholarly and scientific communication.

The decision not to support initiatives such as ELSSS may have far reaching, and perhaps unintended, consequences. All those institutions that do not want, or are unable, to share the cost of peer review incurred by low-cost journals effectively impose a cost on all other institutions, in the form of higher subscription costs. Notice that this argument only applies to low-cost journals and not to high-price ones. In fact, subscription charges for ELSSS journals are merely the means to recover peer-review costs; as the subscriber base increases, the charges decrease, unlike commercial publishers, whose journal subscription costs tend to increase as the title gains readership and reputation.

There is, however, an original way in which libraries subscribing to ELSSS journals can be "document suppliers". Subscription to ELSSS journals allows any legitimate user (staff, students, etc.) to print articles and other related material in various formats and in multiple copies, if required. This freedom to print should reduce (if not eliminate altogether) the demand for library-stored hard-copy journals. However, if libraries wish to keep volumes of ELSSS journals on their shelves, they can do so easily, as the entire printing process is devolved to them. As economics articles are devoid of expensive colour pictures/maps and are perfectly well served by a good-quality laser printer, libraries can produce at minimal cost the hard copy of ELSSS journals in the form and volume that best suit their needs, including large-print for visually-impaired readers, study packs, etc.

As to the increasingly popular trend to provide online access to individual articles through database and access providers, ELSSS takes the view that, in so far as most of these services are supplied on a for-profit

basis, this will inevitably lead, either directly or indirectly, to higher costs to readers and libraries. Economics as a discipline is rather better served because one of the most comprehensive databases is managed by a not-for-profit institution and electronic delivery, when available, can be obtained through academic-led project(s) such as RepEc[4].

The ELSSS appeal to traditional libraries

The last few years have seen a marked change in the attitude and behaviour of university and research libraries *vis-à-vis* the “serials crisis”: an increasing number of librarians have switched from being administrators of a flawed mechanism to active reformers of the system. Interlibrary lending and traditional document supply are superseded and replaced by database and knowledge flow management; physical storage by digital preservation; administration of shrinking serials collections by advocacy and active promotion of alternative means of scientific communication.

The hope that the advent of the Internet would usher a new era of free-flowing knowledge and that somehow would restore sanity to a deeply uncompetitive market has proved a false one, and indeed online access and other “electronic” facilities are used by commercial publishers to strengthen their stranglehold.

However, the efforts of librarians (ranging from establishing organisations such as

SPARC to building international coalitions of concerned libraries, from setting up dedicated task forces to running advocacy events) and of academics (with initiatives such as ELSSS, the BOAI, the Open Archives movement, the Public Library of Science, etc.) are beginning to change the academic publishing landscape.

Whether public-spiritedness and concern for fair and efficient scholarly communication will prevail over monopolistic practices that restrict the flow of knowledge, only time will tell.

Notes

- 1 The serial crisis – the sustained increase in journal subscription charges far in excess of increases in library budgets – is not confined to STM journals, but has affected social sciences, too. As the data available on the ELSSS Web site show (www.elss.org.uk, click on “The Problem”) some economics journals produced by the leading commercial publishers are substantially more expensive (up to seven times more expensive) and have been rising at a much faster rate than not-for-profit publications.
- 2 We are not suggesting here that reputation can be bought, but rather that a proper reward scheme (both pecuniary and non-pecuniary), combined with a credible commitment to high-quality research, can help a new journal establish its reputation much faster than would otherwise be the case.
- 3 In Oldenburg’s *Long Shadow: Librarians, Research Scientists, Publishers, and the Control of Scientific Publishing*, Guédon, available at: www.arl.org/arl/proceedings/138/guedon.html
- 4 For details see <http://repec.org>