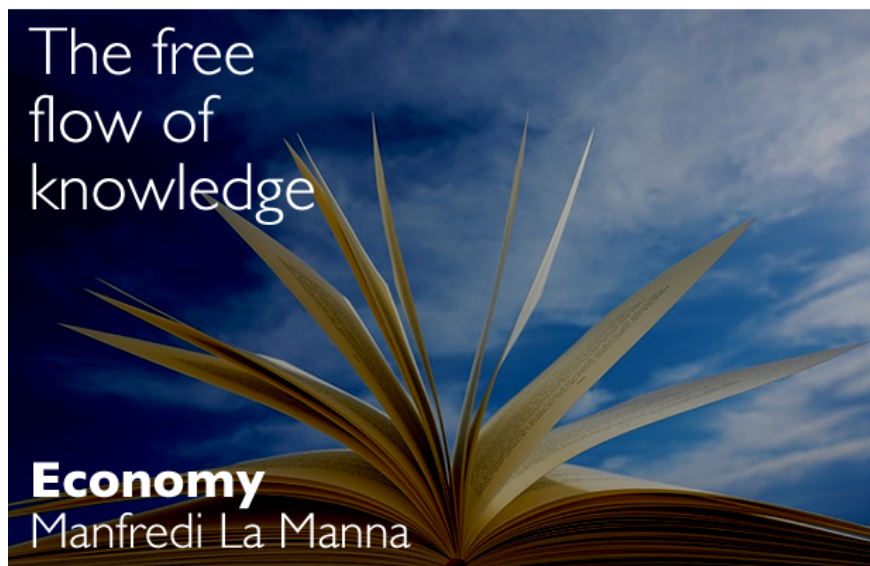


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Imagine a restaurant where patrons have to bring their own ingredients, cook them with their own recipes, judge the final dishes and serve only the very best, but not before having paid the restaurant's owner a bill of thousands of pounds per dish. The establishment is so popular that there are long queues at the entrance and in fact many potential customers are prevented from even patronising it.

Crazy, no? What I have just described is the business model underlying the worldwide mechanism for the production and diffusion of knowledge as contained in peer-reviewed research articles.

It is impossible to underestimate the importance of peer review for the very existence, and progress, of science and of knowledge more generally. Peer review is the process whereby the scientific community certifies the priority, originality and validity of new knowledge, thereby providing the necessary incentives for scholars to produce it in the first place.

Ever since 1665, when Henry Oldenburgh published *The Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London* (the first ever academic journal), the production of new knowledge follows basically the same steps:

1. Scholar sends manuscript of new work to editor of journal;
2. Editor forwards manuscript to several peers with expertise in the field of the new work ('referees');
3. Referees, whose identity is not disclosed to author, return manuscript to editor with either their suggestions for improvement or their damning comments in terms of novelty, relevance, truth, etc;



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*Chip War*: a timely publication

## POLITICS ([AlastairOsborne638a.htn](#)) ([Cafe597A.html](#))Alastair Osborne

'Labour hold' doesn't begin to tell the st

4. Editor returns manuscript to author with referees' reports either accepting it for publication or requiring further changes/improvements, or rejecting as not good/relevant enough for publication. If resubmission is required, process starts again from step 1.

It is critical to understand that each of the steps described above, namely, the production of a new piece of research, the refereeing thereof, and the editor's final judgement, are undertaken with no monetary recompense whatsoever. To repeat: authors, referees, and editors do their work for free. Hence the analogy with the patrons of the imaginary restaurant in the opening paragraph.

Enter the academic publishers. These fall broadly into two categories: non-profit (mainly owned/managed by learned/professional societies) and commercial.

The commercial sector is dominated by a colossus: in 2019, RELX (the parent company of Elsevier) published over 2,600 academic journals with revenues of \$9.8bn, with an eye-watering profit rate of 34%. (Elsevier is the restaurant's owner.) Readers of **last week's article** ([ManfrediLaManna637a.html](#)) will immediately recognise RELX as a corporation with a huge amount of market power (= ability to charge prices vastly in excess of their competitive level).

Who is paying these exorbitant prices that, in the words of a former hedge fund manager I met last week, make RELX the cash cow per excellence, the darling of investment managers? The answer is you, dear reader (as long as you pay taxes). The captive market for academic journals are university and research libraries who have to provide access to peer-reviewed knowledge to their researchers. I wish I could provide you with the precise figure, but, as is often the case with large dominant corporations, the annual amount that British universities pay RELX for the privilege of accessing articles that their own staff had written and refereed for free is a closely guarded secret, very conservatively estimated at over £100m.

If one is prepared to find silver linings in the darkest of cloud, one might assume that, as the effective (if reluctant) ultimate funder of commercial publishers, one can access the research one has paid for. Suppose, for example, that your young son has a very rare form of paediatric cancer and that you wish to inform yourself of the latest advances in the field. The March 2019 issue of the *European Journal of Cancer* has an article on the very topic. Luckily, the EJC, like almost all academic journals, can be accessed online. And, in fact, the publishers (one Elsevier/RELX) will gladly provide you instantly with a PDF file, as soon as you fork out US \$35.95.

Enter Open Access (OA). Open Access is a concept that was first formalised and proposed to academics, policy-makers, and the general public as an achievable improvement for the whole of mankind in 2001 by the Budapest Open Access Initiative (sponsored by George Soros' Open Society Foundation). Full disclosure: I am one of the 16 signatories of the BOAI.

The aim of Open Access (OA) advocates is simple: all scientific, scholarly, and medical peer-reviewed research produced, refereed and edited for free by academics should be accessible at (virtually zero) cost to anyone, anywhere, anytime.

**SCIENCE** ([PhilipWelsby638a.html](#))  
([Cafe597A.html](#)) Philip D Welsby  
Is there alien life out there?

**CAFE** ([Cafe638A.html](#)) 1 ([Cafe638A.html](#))  
**SR Forum**  
Is goodness back in fashion?

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God bless us, everyone!



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BOAI's main aim was not to rectify the huge inefficiency created by dominant commercial publishers exploiting academics, universities and taxpayers. Many OA supporters are motivated by the knowledge apartheid that the current academic publishing system fosters and sustains. Knowledge apartheid is, admittedly, an emotive term, but the phenomenon it describes is nothing short of scandalous and morally repellent. Researchers and scholars working for an institution not wealthy enough to be able to afford the exorbitant prices charged by commercial publishers are effectively excluded from access to (peer-reviewed) knowledge.

The consequences of the 'paywalls' erected by Elsevier and others to protect their huge profits can be counted in deaths and diseases not prevented or cured, and in the shackling of the talents of researchers (mainly in the global south) deprived of the vital lymph of knowledge.

The Covid-19 pandemic has provided an interesting glimpse into a future with no paywalls. On 13 March 2020, Elsevier announced that it would temporarily remove the paywall surrounding all its journal articles and data related to the Covid-19 virus. This generous gesture (imagine the PR disaster if they had retained the paywall) was one of the contributing factors that allowed scientists from all over the world to collaborate and share knowledge, leading to a better understanding of the virus and the development of vaccines. We can only imagine the effects if all scientific knowledge were permanently made available to all.

Has any progress been made since the 2001 BOAI? If progress were to be measured by the proportion of peer-reviewed articles published by commercial corporations that are freely available to anyone anywhere, the percentage has definitely increased from zero in 2001 to a positive amount in 2021. The precise figure is very difficult to pin down but a generous estimate would be around 20%. A very dark shadow is cast by the way in which commercial publishers have implemented Open Access.

Enter APCs. Faced by a growing discontent among academics, universities and (some) policy-makers, publishers now offer potential authors the choice of making their articles 'Open Access' by paying an Article Publishing Charge (APC). Considering that most of the work is done for free by academics and the publication online is extremely cheap, this development should be welcome, were it not for the fact that publishers insist on 'revenue equivalence'. This Orwellian term refers to the practice of setting APCs not on the basis of the cost of publishing, but at a level that enables publishers to earn the same amount of profit if the articles were available on a subscription-only basis. This does not change the plight of potential authors in the global south who would not be able to fork out hundreds of US dollars for the privilege. Knowledge apartheid is maintained under a different name.

*Removing paywalls that surround taxpayer funded research will have real economic and social benefits.*

These are the words of the former Universities Minister David Willetts in July 2012. If even a Thatcherite No-Turning-Back poll tax supporter can see the advantages of Open Access, perhaps we can hope that the next governments, both in Holyrood and Westminster, will take decisive action to curb the market power of commercial academic publishers and promote the free flow of knowledge across the world.

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Andrews

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# Scotland's weekly current affairs magazine

## EDITORIAL

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**Founder**  
SR was established in 1995  
by Kenneth Roy

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