Ethical profits from publishing

The past decades have seen an enormous growth in the number of scientific journals. Many of these have been founded by scientific societies that believe that the interests of their community are best served by having a journal focused on their area of research. Society members, volunteering to act as editors and reviewers, set the standards for quality and thus ensure that the journal reflects the ambitions of the society. However, these volunteered services do not convert accepted manuscripts into printed journals, and so many societies rely on a commercial publishing house to take care of the printing and distribution. There seemed to be no further consequences—after all, they were not ‘for profit’. These societies relied on the professionalism of the publishers to get the sums right and market the journal gently. Sometimes, perhaps to their surprise, the journal not only satisfied the need to publish scientific works but also generated money for the societies’ activities.

With time, however, there has been a shift in the world of learned publications, with commercial publishers increasingly dominating the market and changing the primary goal from the communication of high-quality science to the generation of high-level profits. Recently, different groups have reacted to this change and tried to re-equilibrate the publication market. These efforts have taken different routes ranging from the library-led Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources Coalition (SPARC), which seeks to provide low-cost journals that compete directly against some exorbitantly priced established publications, to the recent focus on open-access journals in which authors pay a charge to offset the costs of processing and publishing their material. So far, there is no clear sign that the SPARC journals have succeeded

in their goal of replacing existing journals, apart from adding new titles to those already present in libraries. The open-access model is at too early a stage of implementation to make predictions about its economic viability. However, one major initiative is owned by a commercial ‘for-profit’ company, so it must see a way to reach the goal of open access within this new pricing scheme.

For EMBO, the irony of the new situation is clear. EMBO is not a ‘for profit’ organization but, of course, cannot afford to be a ‘for loss’ organization. Achieving the right balance between the two is quite complex. Clearly, starting a new journal involves not only effort, imagination and dedication, but also financial losses for several years before enough readers and librarians are convinced to include the journal in their ‘must-have’ list. Having lived through this period with *The EMBO Journal*, eventually the day came when it moved from the red ink—for *EMBO reports* it is still too early for this to happen. So for one journal we have the ‘embarrassment’ of being profitable and are therefore potential targets for the evangelists of open access who wish to ‘free the scientific literature’ from profiteering publishers.

But many measures have been put in place at the EMBO publications to ensure that within the prevailing business model we are acting ethically. Authors retain their copyright and the right to self-archive. Both journals are freely available after 12 months and are completely free without delay to scientists in the poorest countries of the world. In addition, we offer a high-quality service to the scientific community, using committed editors and experts from all over the world to ensure a top-class publication. Given this service—and all the extras added to the online version—I feel that if

we make a profit it is acceptable because we use this money exclusively for our community. The EMBO Women/Restart fellowships, EMBO lectures around the world, the EMBO Science & Society and World programmes and support for scientists from poor countries to participate in the EMBO practical courses are all paid for by the profit from our publications. This money also financed the early stages of E-BioSci and the EMBO Young Investigator Programme and continues to provide direct support to some of the scientists. Some of these actions are on a rather small scale but they are nonetheless important, not just for those who directly benefit but also as a symbol to other funding agencies. I strongly believe that this is an ethical way of making and using profits that also holds true for many other societies and their publications. This does not exclude considerations of an open-access model of publishing, but we must not forget that societies rely on their journals’ profits to pay for a variety of activities that benefit the scientific community.

Thus, when self-righteous scientists criticize the so-called ‘anachronistic model of publishing’ with the implication that it is driven solely by profit motives, they should bear in mind that there are many different ways to serve and support the scientific community. I hope that the benefits of society journals for the scientific community will be appreciated during these discussions. It is clear that many cornerstones of our scientific world would crumble if profits that are generated and used ethically were lost in the Messianic and ideologically driven movement to change abruptly the current business model for scientific publications.

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