

# UC Berkeley

## Berkeley Planning Journal

### Title

Insurgency in Academic Publishing

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9t301401>

### Journal

Berkeley Planning Journal, 25(1)

### Author

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### Publication Date

2012

### DOI

10.5070/BP325111859

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# Insurgency in Academic Publishing

**By Ruth Miller**

This year marked an important transition for the *Berkeley Planning Journal*: we are now an electronic, open access publication. Our new publication method of record is eScholarship, a service of the University of California. eScholarship allows us to publish our articles online, in an indexed publication, while granting our readers a wide range of rights to download, print, and share our author's work. We are part of a movement in academia in which many scholars are taking a closer look at the way access to their research is controlled.

## A Crumbling Ivory Tower

In January 2012, Timothy Gowers, a mathematician at Cambridge University, ignited an insurgency in academic publishing. In his private blog, Gowers publicly pledged to stop publishing or reviewing articles for any journal published by Elsevier. Amsterdam-based Elsevier publishes and distributes over 2,000 academic journals, and its business is based on charging fees to access, read, and share academic articles. Gowers argued that Elsevier's access fees are "so far above the average that it seems quite extraordinary that they can get away with it." Meanwhile, Elsevier reported a 36 percent profit on revenues of \$3.2 billion in 2010 (Lin 2012).

By May, nearly 12,000 researchers around the world joined the boycott of Elsevier. The movement developed its own website and an online manifesto, *The Cost of Knowledge*, which noted that for-profit publishers like Elsevier and Springer charge \$1.20 or more per page, while similar journals published by nonprofit universities or professional societies charge \$.13 to \$.65 per page. How quickly the spark of Gower's article found ample kindling in the academic community suggests many scholars have reservations about the traditional publishing model. Indeed, just a few years ago, the entire editorial boards of *Topology* and *K-Theory*, both mathematical journals, resigned in protest over restrictively high costs to their readers.

Publishers like Elsevier were founded to disseminate academic research. Academic journals, like the *BPJ*, solicit articles, coordinate a peer review process, and then contract with a publisher to disseminate the final content. The journal holds the copyright, but grants a publisher the right to redistribute. This right for redistribution, which is often exclusive, enables the publisher to cover its costs by charging libraries and others a subscription fee for journal access.

In the pre-Internet era, publishing was a cost-intensive business, involving skilled labor and large machines for typesetting, printing, and shipping. As publishing has become a desktop activity, these high costs are no longer necessary. Research may now be disseminated online directly by an author or a journal, for free. As stated in the *Knowledge* manifesto, academic publishing has become “a system in which commercial publishers make profits based on the free labor of mathematicians and subscription fees from their institutions’ libraries, for a service that has become largely unnecessary.”

Increasingly, accomplished researchers like Gowers are turning to the Internet to give their work away for free. “But proprietorship!” one might argue. “We can’t just give our work away for free!” Authors are given modest payments for their work under the traditional publication system, and it can be lucrative for the owners of significant findings. Yet once an author transfers the exclusive right to redistribute an article to a publisher, even the author cannot legally access their own work without paying a fee. These rules are rarely enforced, but technically, professors must pay to share their own article with their students. Inevitably, the publisher’s monopoly forces universities to pay in order to regain access to their own information—often knowledge that was created with taxpayer funding.

This perception of costly peer-reviewed journals as the sole guardians of knowledge is antiquated. Certainly, the peer-review process is one reliable indicator of quality, but these traditional publishers are not the only means of purveying peer-reviewed work.

Though the opportunity to self-publish is universally available, many researchers prefer to publish in the high-cost academic journals distributed by Elsevier and others. Academia often judges the quality of research by the prestige of the journal that publishes it. An author’s work is 36 to 200 percent more likely to be cited if it is available online (Hill 2012), but online publishing is not yet regarded as serious enough to establish an academic career. This bias to tradition gives publishers an effective monopoly. The scholarly community depends upon the ability to disseminate research and read that of others, and so researchers and librarians decry high subscription fees to be a necessary evil.

Research is more than simply citations and profit. Research can inspire and engage beyond academia. Even research that isn’t widely practical has a place in public discourse: consider the public fascination over the Higgs boson particle accelerator. Quality research has respect in our society, and many researchers feel an obligation to share a snippet of their triumphs, discoveries, and radical theories with the public.

For urban planners, public access to our work is particularly important. Our research concerns the public realm and the built environment, and our words support individuals that are actively working to improve lives. The current restrictive pricing system suggests that only people in well-heeled academic institutions can meaningfully contribute to the academic discourse. This is simply untrue. With increasing frequency, researchers and professionals are engaging in dialogue online, for free, in front of an unrestricted audience. Among many others, the popular and respected Atlantic Cities blog offers high quality, daily content about the built environment from industry professionals for a less formal audience.

In the parlance of our times, companies like Elsevier represent the much-derided "1%." Their steep success does not damn the entire industry, but it does suggest that the rewards for research are not being distributed equitably. It is thus worth exploring more equitable and progressive means of disseminating academic research.

## Introducing Open Access

Though we are living in a period of rising class-consciousness, and the Elsevier boycott is gaining strength (*The Economist* called it the "Academic Spring," suggesting a connection to the political revolutions of last year's Arab Spring), the barriers to academic publishing are not a new phenomenon. The phrase "ivory tower" as a symbol of intellectual aloofness was coined by a French poet in 1837, and is still largely applicable today.

Fortunately, our 21st century technology makes it easier to share information. Since 2007, anyone in the world can access the lecture notes, exams, and lecture videos from MIT's entire curriculum through OpenCourseWare for free. Other universities, including Stanford, Princeton, the University of Pennsylvania, and the University of Michigan have followed with their own massively open online courses, or "MOOCs" (Lewin 2012).

The notion that intellectual property can be free is as old as the idea of copyright itself (Rose 2012). Shakespeare is a central feature of every American public high school theater club largely because his works are widely accessible through the public domain.

When should information belong to the public domain? Information produced with public tax dollars, such as the Census or a county general plan, is typically shared at no cost because taxpayers effectively already paid to produce it. Much of the research at public institutions, like UC Berkeley, is supported by taxpayer-funded grants, fellowships, and operating budgets, and one could argue that this information should belong to the public domain as well.

Even without the requirement for public domain, many content creators dismiss the option to retain exclusive control over their work, preferring to allow unlimited access and sharing. Creative Commons, founded in 2001, challenges the idea that “All Rights Reserved” should be the default. Through a set of simple legal language, Creative Commons allows authors, writers, artists, developers, educators, legal scholars, and others to pick their own level of copyright. In essence, Creative Commons has allowed content creators to unbundle their creative rights. Today, hundreds of millions of Creative Commons licenses cover a wide variety of content. Given the option, these individuals chose wide accessibility as a higher priority than retaining absolute proprietorship.

The openness movement has spread to academic publishing, where it is called “open access.” According to the Directory of Open Access Journals, maintained by Lund University in Sweden, a journal must allow anyone “to read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to the full text” of its articles to qualify as open access. Lund lists hundreds of journals that follow these accessibility guidelines and use their free open access website template.

Open access publishing has benefits for authors. The research trade is largely defined by citations, and an author’s work is more likely to be cited if it is accessible to the public. This is intuitive—charging more for something reduces the number of people who can access it.

As city planners and scholars, we should welcome this movement toward the democratization of knowledge. Unlike capital-intensive research fields, such as genetics, planners trade in ideas about how our places should function. Planners work in universities, the private sector, government, and backyards. If the *BPJ* publishes an article on gerrymandering, wouldn’t we want an advocate in a small town to be able to reference those findings at a town hall meeting?

### ***The Berkeley Planning Journal’s Transition***

The *BPJ* quietly transitioned to the electronic, open access publisher eScholarship after Volume 24. Now available through open access, our article downloads have increased beyond our wildest expectations.

In the month of April 2012 alone, our article downloads tripled our total from the entire year of 2011. This rate is likely to increase; if it remains steady, we are on track to increase article downloads by 36 times by the end of 2012. Over 60 percent of our April 2012 downloads were from past volumes. Almost two-thirds of our readers now reach us through Google. Once our entire archive is digitized and available online for free, we

anticipate even more readers will find something relevant, provocative, and stimulating in the *BPJ*.

Our new website on eScholarship is a functional replacement for a printed book, but if content were no longer restricted to paper media, what else could be published? Think beyond high-resolution images and hyperlinks. This spring, a Masters student in our department submitted a video thesis. What other media will city planners use to share their work in the next decade? In order to support the creation and publication of new media content, the *BPJ* decided to develop a new, more interactive website. As the site's designer and developer, I had the privilege of facilitating our discussions about form and function, as we expanded the opportunities for both beyond our written page. It was a conversation I highly recommend for any publication.

We hope that by introducing new formats for publication, we will encourage planners to explore the full range of communicative methods available to them. Authors can now share text, audio, video, data, interactive applications, and nearly any other form of digital media at <http://ced.berkeley.edu/bpj>.

Freed from the constraint of printing a single annual volume, we are also excited to experiment with a less formal, but more frequent, blog. We have dubbed this experiment *Urban Fringe*, after the long-time *BPJ* section. We view this not as a departure from our mission to offer peer-reviewed research from emerging scholars, but as an opportunity to couple our academic work with a practitioner-oriented discussion. We look forward to welcoming new ideas and reader participation, especially from Masters students.

As excited as we are to go digital, the *BPJ* recognizes that some of our readers aren't quite ready to give up their printed books. A website cannot entirely replace the reassuring weight, crisp pages, and archival value of a physical book. A variety of emerging publishing services lessens the divide between the digital and printed product. We worked with Bound Book Scanning, a non-destructive book scanning service, to create electronic text-searchable PDF documents of the past volumes of the *BPJ*. Through Createspace, a print-on-demand service, we turned these PDFs into new books. Now we are proud to offer all 25 volumes of the *BPJ* for purchase on Amazon. Anyone can order a single copy of any of our volumes online, and it will be printed and delivered anywhere in the world.

## In Conclusion

Public universities, like the University of California, Berkeley, are founded on the belief that education is a right, not a privilege. New tools and

systems have already emerged to meet this expectation, and thousands of journals have enthusiastically embraced the change, but more work must be done. Careers hinge on publication in exclusive journals, and academia must grow to recognize the value of open access journals as a valid option.

Academia's reputation as a stodgy industry steeped in traditional print publications is being tested. The *BPJ* is proud to step into the digital frontier in this moment of transformation. We are proud to make our work more accessible to our peers and colleagues.

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