



UNCOVERING THE TRUE COST OF ACCESS

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This post is part of our [Open Access Week blog](#) series to highlight great work in Open Access communities around the world.



Large amounts of public money are spent on obtaining access to published research results, amounting to billions of dollars per year.

Despite the huge amounts of public money spent on allowing researchers to access the published results of taxpayer funded research [1], there is little fiscal transparency in the scholarly publishing market and frequent examples of secrecy, where companies or brokers insert [non-disclosure clauses](#) into contracts so the cost of subscriptions remains opaque. This prevents objective analysis of the market, prevents libraries negotiating effectively with publishers for fair prices and makes it hard to ascertain the economic consequences of open access policies.

This matters. Open access campaigners are striving to make research results openly and freely available to everyone in a sustainable and cost effective manner. Without detailed data on current subscription costs for closed content and the emerging cost of article processing charges ([APCs](#)) [2], it is very difficult to accurately model and plan this transition.



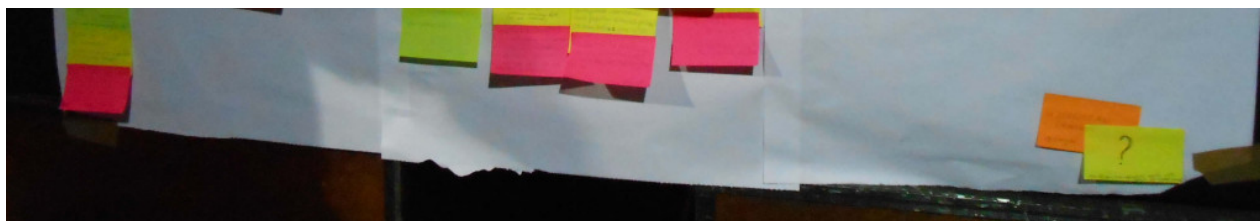
Library budgets are stretched and their role within institutions is changing, making high journal costs an increasing concern.

Specifically, there are concerns that in the intervening period, publishers may be benefiting from ‘double dipping’ – offering hybrid products which incur APCs for open access articles and subscription fees for all other content which could result in higher overall income. In a market where the profit margins of several major publishers run at **35-40%** and they exert monopolistic control over a large proportion of our accumulated scientific and scholarly knowledge, there is understandably a lot of anger and concern about the state and future of the market.

Over the past year, members of the Open Knowledge **open science** and **open access** working groups have joined many other advocates and concerned researchers, librarians and citizens in working tirelessly to gather information on the true cost of knowledge. Libraries do not routinely publish financial information at this level of granularity and may be constrained by contractual obligations, so the route chosen to obtain data in the UK has been Freedom of information act (FOI) requests. High profile mathematician and OA advocate Tim Gowers revealed that the cost at Elsevier journals at top universities. Two further **rounds of FOI requests** by librarian and OKFest attendee Stuart Lawson and Ben Meghreblan have given an **even broader overview** across five major publishers. This has been released as open data and efforts continue to enrich the **dataset**. **Working group members in Finland** and **Hong Kong** are working to obtain similar information for their countries and further inform open access advocacy and policy globally.

Subscription data only forms part of the industry picture. A data expedition at Oxford Open Science for Open Data Day 2014 tried to look into the business structure of academic publishers using Open Corporates and quickly encountered a high level of complexity so this area requires further work. In terms of APCs and costs to funders, the working groups contributed to a **highly successful crowdsourcing effort** led by Theo Andrew and Michelle Brook to validate and enrich the Wellcome Trust publication **dataset** for 2013-2014 with further information on journal type and cost, thus enabling a clearer view of the cost of hybrid journal publications for this particular funder and also illustrating compliance with open access policies.





Mapping open access globally at #OKFestOA. The session conclusion was that far more data is needed to present a truly global view.

This work only scratches the surface and anyone who could help in a global effort to uncover the cost of access to scholarly knowledge would be warmly welcomed and supported by those who have now built up experience in obtaining this information. If funders and institutions have datasets they could contribute this would also be a fantastic help.

Please sign up to the [wiki](#) page here and join the [related discussion forum](#) for support in making requests. We hope by Open Access Week 2015 we'll be posting a much more informative and comprehensive assessment of the cost of accessing scholarly knowledge!

Footnotes:

[1] A significant proportion of billions of dollars per year (estimated \$9.4 billion on scientific journals alone in 2011). See [STM report](#) (PDF – 6.3MB).

[2] An open access business model where fees are paid to publishers for the service of publishing an article, which is then free to users.

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