

nature

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What price 'free'?

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Few imagined, as the Man in the Iron Mask lay in the Bastille, that the regime that put him there, the regime symbolized by that hideous bastion, could ever be shaken. The Berlin Wall stood with comparable austerity and terrifying darkness.

Both fell, and fell to mobs as surprised by their success as were the patrons of the old regimes. To hear the buzz, a new revolution is brewing against another dark power. The for-profit (and some of the society) publishers have held us prisoner long enough; information wants to be free, and its time has come.

Melodramatic visions make for exciting politics, but it is far from clear that contemporary science needs the excitement. Old social and cultural practices have grown up for reasons that are often far more complicated than they appear at first glance. We built universities with the goal of promoting knowledge and discovery, but created major college sports and unparalleled social mobility in the process. Likewise, we created scientific journals to make known the results of research, but in the process wound up with a highly nuanced system of validating careers and prestige. Established practices need to be dismantled thoughtfully. Abrupt revolution is most useful when the barbarity of the old order is clear, and no such thing is true today in scientific publishing.

We live in an information economy that has reached where it now is thanks to the many thoughtful steps taken by reasonable people in a market that is by some definitions as free as one is likely to find. Scientific and academic institutions have largely outsourced the laborious business of vetting, publishing and distributing the product of scientific research to a commercial enterprise that did not exist fifty years ago. The success of this vast publication system is best indicated by the achievements of the science research that has been done over this period. Few would argue that the required information is failing to reach those who are able to contribute if they have the necessary information.

Our concerns appear to be about other issues. For instance, scientific information is too expensive. How do we know this? Because the inflation in the price of many journals has largely outpaced the consumer price index ([see Figure](#)). Are we able to afford as much information as we need? The evidence either way is ambiguous, but on the whole there are no widespread stories of good work not getting done. Science marches on.

That said, we who work in educational institutions have long resented paying such high prices for scientific, technical, and medical (STM) information. Our pockets are not endlessly deep; in fact they seem to have become shallower each year, and our institutions have been containing and cutting costs for many years now. When libraries pay high STM subscription prices, they privilege scientific information at the expense of that from other disciplines.

I wrote a study in the late 1980s about the increases in serials prices, and there has since been little change in the level of these increases. Yet now, remarkably, the *argument du jour* is not that information should be less expensive, but that it should be free. As a sop to the existing system, advocates of the current models suggest that information can be priced for a while, but must be free soon afterwards. Six months from publication to liberation?

The model is attractive, but at the least slightly odd. What is the rationale for the delay? To give the publishers a chance to retrieve their costs as well as making a modest but reasonable profit? Well and good, but here is the rub: if the delay between publication and liberation is sufficiently short to satisfy the perceived needs of the moment, then many who now pay for the information will cease to do so. That means that the cost of providing the information will be borne by fewer customers.

In this scenario, two outcomes are possible. Either journals will go out of business -- effectively forcing sectors of the research community to find substitutes (presumably inexpensive ones) at short notice -- or prices will rise for the remaining customers.

And who will those remaining customers be? To be sure, there are a few wealthy research laboratories in the world which will pay any price for their journals. However, it is equally clear that there are more than a few wealthy and nearly-wealthy universities that will be compelled to stay in the game as a condition of holding their place in the competitive climate of science.

And for those institutions, my own surely included, this free information could be very expensive indeed. I am therefore convinced, for economic reasons above all, that it will be a long time before the liberation movement can expect to tear down the walls. It is a movement of the purest intention and the wisest strategic vision; no one can quarrel with the idea that the highest quality scientific information should be widely and freely available to all who can use it.

Scientists demand the broadest possible exposure for their own work and access to the work of others, particularly through the deployment of new information dissemination technologies. The library marketplace that pays for journal subscriptions likewise argues for the broadest access at the most affordable price. The promotion of science and the useful arts is the fundamental purpose for which copyright is enshrined in the US Constitution, and we would do well to remember from time to time to apply that criterion in judging the effectiveness of our publishing and collecting regimes.

Now we need time. Compulsory sharing is at best a paradox, and more likely a contradiction in terms. Schemes to drive publishers to stop publishing will find fifty ways to backfire, ways that we cannot now fully imagine. The idealism of the moment needs to express itself in a way commensurate with its own principles, by establishing dialogue, building community and giving standards and consensus time to develop.

The high risk of not taking more time is that we will lose something quickly and replace it slowly. We will lose a system of publication that undeniably succeeds in making the best work widely known quickly and preserves it for long-term use. The researcher in search of high-quality information does not need to lose productivity because he or she has to make a lurching adjustment and navigate a new communication system that has been hustled into place prematurely.

If we collaborate and conspire together -- researchers, publishers and librarians -- we will discover again what we already more than suspect, that good will and common purpose can prevail around these tables, even these long-contested tables. Extremist language and extremist imagery are out of place and have an obstructionist effect. If we can set aside extremism, I believe we can already see around us the elements of new forms of publication that are inspiring and encouraging. Individual scientific communities can and will migrate to innovative models of communication, not because of compulsion but because talented people on the inside have worked and given thought to finding effective ways to do what needs doing, and to do what needs doing better than it has been done before.



Ann Okerson has been Associate University Librarian at Yale since September 1995. She holds the portfolio for Collections Development & Management, and Technical Services. At Yale, much of her work involves making digital collections available to university users. She is internationally recognized and frequently consulted on the practicalities both of licencing digital information for academic use and of constructing consortia of libraries that can negotiate the best prices for academic users. Since early 1996, she has been leading a group of large academic research libraries, negotiating licences for electronic information, organizing them for negotiating purposes into NERL, the [NorthEast Research Libraries consortium](#), and working with them in the wider International Coalition of Library Consortia (ICOLC).

Her articles on serials pricing (1987) and on copyright (1992) have won American Library Association Best Article awards in the area of serials, acquisitions, and/or collections in both 1988 and 1993. The ALA named her Serials Librarian of the year in 1993. In 1999, she was named the winner of ALA's LITA/High Tech award.

Articles by Ann Okerson can be found at her [home page](#)