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## Back Talk--The Great Flip

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# Back Talk — The Great Flip

Column Editors: **Ann Okerson** (Advisor on Electronic Resources Strategy, Center for Research Libraries)  
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I've never mastered flipping pancakes or eggs, so the thought of flipping an entire classroom is terrifying. But now the *mot du jour* is "flipping the model" for journal article publishing. The flipping discourse has moved into the library and information space.

How did we get to the age of flipping? Most librarians who've worked near serials have heard or given "The Talk." You know how it goes: 17th century scientists invented the journal; the 1950s post-war boom innovated the commercially published scientific journal (a miracle of quick, cheap, and easy access in its time); late 20th century bloat brought about awareness of the serials pricing crisis (where I came in, writing a report for **ARL** in the late 1980s); then the Internet brought the e-journal; and quickly thereafter the Big Deal; and just as quickly thereafter the ideal of Open Access.

If ten years ago Open Access was for idealists, now it's mainstream. How do we get there, at a greatly increased pace, is today's question. These days, we have many OA business modes and models, for example the article processing charge (APC), institutional subsidization, freemium, green, and numerous variants. With a lot of setup and outreach work, the modest-sized but interesting **SCOAP<sup>3</sup>** project (high energy physics)<sup>1</sup> has broken ground in flipping those subscriptions to an APC model.

Recently, analytical work of the **Max Planck Institute**<sup>2</sup> and others has raised the profile of "flipping." **Ralf Schimmer** *et al.* reason that there is enough money in the scholarly publishing system, via subscriptions and other funds, to pay APCs — and possibly save some money. The idea heated up at an invitational meeting of the December 2015 **Berlin 12 Open Access Conference**,<sup>3</sup> which produced an *Expression of Interest* document "that aims to induce the swift, smooth and scholarly-oriented transformation of today's scholarly journals from subscription to open access publishing . . . [We] are pursuing the large-scale implementation of free online ac-

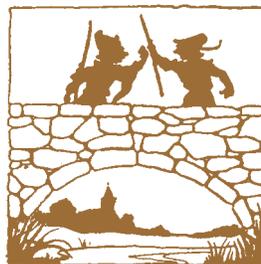
cess to, and largely unrestricted use and re-use of scholarly research articles."<sup>4</sup>

The Berlin proposal has generated numerous comments and discussions. European organizations and institutions were quick to support it, with 46 signatories as of 30 April 2016. However, recently, **ARL** staff, via an unpublished briefing paper<sup>5</sup>, expressed numerous concerns from the U.S. side. In turn, **Jeff Mackie-Mason**, economist and university librarian at **UC Berkeley**, wrote in his blog expressing "skepticism or downright opposition" to these concerns. He stated that many are unsupported "by either facts or simple economic principles."<sup>6</sup>

Hmm, well, how would it work? These days, "flip" (in journals publishing) points to a particular kind of change, from subscription to APC. What's flippy is this: The premise so far has been that publishing is for the benefit of readers, and thus readers (or their libraries) should pay for subscriptions. Instead, we may assume that published articles are as much for the benefit of authors, many of whom are grant funded, and so those (funded) authors should pay the costs of publishing their articles, which become OA immediately at time of publication.

Still, the scholarly journal business is a distinctive one. The transaction for both authors and for users is of high value. Who benefits most? There can't be a single answer to that question. The same article in the same journal may be breathtakingly valuable to the author (if the article helps her to win the **Nobel Prize**) and radically valuable to the reader (if the idea it triggers produces new work that earns *another Nobel Prize*). Not many articles come within a thousand miles of the **Nobel Prize** ceremony, but the example captures just a bit of the highly irregular, asymmetrical, unpredictable value transfer that happens when fresh new knowledge "goes public."

Two aspects of a flipped model are key. The first, theoretical one is that we can change the value proposition and concentrate further responsibility for the scholarly publishing system into the hands of the institutions that do research (via their authors). The second is that changing that proposition will not be easy. Short of a magical Kumbaya moment that has the research, publishing, and library worlds singing in perfect harmony (see the old **Coca-Cola** ads<sup>7</sup>), there must be a period when old and new models coexist — the gymnast moment when the feet have long since left the ground and lost the ability to be helpful, but the hands aren't yet in a position to offer support if something goes wrong. We have to hope we don't break what we started with, nor break the bank.



All that sounds scary. But our experience with the **SCOAP<sup>3</sup>** project (today's sustained example of flipping success and cost savings) convinces me that if we take bite-sized chunks, we can by this means advance OA, at least in certain funded scientific disciplines. Much more importantly, if we can build discourse between author, publisher, and library representatives, we can take the possibility a long way. This is where publisher-bashing doesn't help. If we think we will negotiate with someone, excoriating them publicly doesn't make them more open-minded or more trusting. Real success in the OA movement will come when and where an outbreak of trust occurs.

What happens after the gymnast makes the great landing and glides into the next move? By then, unanticipated consequences can emerge. What might we anticipate if we attempt to flip a number of key journals? There could be downsides — search online for negatives posted by various critics. For example, flipping is an imperfect idea, doesn't work for all research/scholarly fields, too complicated, not radical enough, requires further study, and so on.

How about some upsides? There certainly is enough money in the subscription system for libraries to experiment with this type of change. Via APCs, journals might compete even more for quality authors and articles. More aware of publication costs, at least some authors might become more (differently?) strategic about where they communicate the results of their work in possibly fewer articles. And if flipping to APCs were to bring some control over the Malthusian growth of journal publication — even a little — we might flatten the curves of growth of costs for formal publishing. The best fruits of research become openly available to all who would benefit.

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## Little Red Herrings from page 81

Couple all this with the downturn in students choosing a four-year degree and the picture gets very murky very quickly. While 18-22 year olds may still want to spend four or five...or six years pursuing a college degree, Mom and Dad may not want to pay for it. To be honest, not many of those 18-22 year olds may want to, either. With most students incurring a minimum of \$20,000 in debt on graduation (in many places nationwide it's much higher), some sort of apprenticeship looks more and more inviting, especially if it ends in a steady, even modestly well-paying job. In the Palmetto State the average college debt is \$29,163 with almost 60% of all graduates incurring that debt (<http://ticas.org/posd/map-state-data-2015>).

Meanwhile, the cost of scholarly communication continues to rise, open access slogs along going somewhere but where is unclear. Personnel costs mount, and healthcare costs are not only increasing, but so also is the burden to be shared by states and those covered. Then there is that factor no one talks about much anymore: the greying of the professoriate. Although it's true that many in the professoriate will work not only beyond age 65 but even beyond age 70, the eventual reality is that the huge numbers of faculty hired in 1960s and 1970s will step down. Whether we like it or not, that will open the door for many changes to occur. While we await that eventuality, state legislators, parents and taxpayers are calling on higher education, its practices and its practitioners, to give an account of their reasons for being.

Frankly, when it's all added up, the good news and the not so good news, even the most agnostic library lovers among us may be led to utter a cry to St. Jerome. 🐉

## Rumors from page 78

I know this is controversial and all that but I am fascinated by the initiative. (**Opening Up the Repository** by **Carl Straumsheim**). **University of Florida** and **Elsevier** are beginning a project to connect the university's repository of scholarly works to the **ScienceDirect** platform. Despite publishing thousands of articles a year, the visibility of the university's intellectual work was not good. According to **Judith C. Russell**, dean of **University Libraries UF** hasn't had a culture of authors depositing their articles in its institutional repository. Getting faculty to deposit articles in an IR is not easy. We are finding that out at the **College of Charleston**. **Judith C. Russell** will join us in Charleston at the **36th Charleston Conference** to discuss this innovative move. I can't wait to hear all about it! Stay tuned!  
<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2016/05/25/university-florida-elsevier-explore-interoperability-publishing-space>

Another of our speakers in Charleston is **Anja Smit** <H.P.A.Smit@uu.nl>, university librarian, **University of Utrecht**. She joined **Utrecht University** in 2010, after an international career of over 20 years in library management and library automation. Formerly she was a library director at two **Dutch Universities (Nijmegen and Maastricht)** and spent three years in the U.S. As an Executive Consultant for a non-profit library service organization she helped libraries on strategic and tactical planning, human resource management, facilities renovation, and other topics critical to library administrators. I first heard **Dr.Smit** speak in **Berlin at the 17th Fiesole Retreat**. Her topic was "*Thinking the Unthinkable, A Library Without a Collection.*"  
[http://libraries.casalini.it/retreat/retreat\\_2015.htm](http://libraries.casalini.it/retreat/retreat_2015.htm)

Another fantastic speaker is **Kalev Leetaru**, **Leetaru** co-founded a Web company in 1995, while still in middle school. His first product was a Web authoring suite. **Leetaru**'s undergraduate thesis at the University was a detailed history of the **University of Illinois**, and formed

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Recognizing one cannot well predict unintended consequences, reminds us that flipping the subscription model is ultimately another metaphor for a scholarly publishing system with deep roots and high-arching ramifications. But, if we can set aside our usual fretfulness and experiment on a path that can lead to wider access, restrained costs, and perhaps better research publication — in subject areas where it makes sense to do so — then shouldn't we should give the flipping proposal a shot? How could we not? 🐉

### Endnotes

1. Everything you ever wanted to know about the project: <https://scoop3.org/>.
2. **Ralf Schimmer, Kai Karin Geschuhn, and Andreas Vogler** (2015). "Disrupting the subscription journals' business model for the necessary large-scale transformation to open access." See: <http://hdl.handle.net/11858/00-001M-0000-0026-C274-7>.
3. For a summary, **Kathleen Shearer**, "Report on the Berlin 12 Open Access Conference," December 18, 2015. See: [www.arl.org/documents/publications/2015.12.18-Berlin12Report.pdf](http://www.arl.org/documents/publications/2015.12.18-Berlin12Report.pdf).
4. See: <http://openaccess.mpg.de/2172617/Expression-of-Interest>.
5. Referenced by **Jeff Mackie-Mason** in his blog post "Economic thoughts about gold open access," April 23, 2016. See: <http://madlibbing.berkeley.edu/>.
6. **Mackie-Mason**, *ibid*.
7. "I'd like to teach the world to sing," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ib-Qiykq-Q>.