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# 'Twelve Years Later: Second ASSAf report on Research Publishing in and from South Africa (2018)': Some issues arising

Responding to the extraordinary challenges facing publication in the digital age is the holistic view taken by the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf) on threats and opportunities that characterise this conjuncture. *Twelve Years Later*, researched by Wieland Gevers, Robin Crewe and Susan Veldsman on national publishing strategies, provides the 'nuts 'n bolts' that every researcher should know in order to navigate the changing environment.<sup>1</sup>

The Report examines both past and present. The first chapter reviews ASSAf's 2006 report.<sup>2</sup> Chapter 2 revisits the 2009 report on books. Chapter 3 details ASSAf's Scholarly Publishing Programme between 2007 and 2018. How to enhance access of South African authors to global commercial publishers is discussed in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 deals with journal and book publishing, and Chapter 6 examines pitfalls and threats to good publishing practices. Outstanding problems are highlighted in Chapter 7. Chapter 8 offers recommendations. Appendices (45 pp) tabulate the hard data on which the study draws. These data showcase close correlations between the ASSAf qualitative evaluations and Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) decisions. Significantly, ASSAf ratings and reviews of publishers closely align with the international Socio-economic and Natural Sciences of the Environment (SENSE) and the Norwegian Register for Scientific Journals, Series and Publishers ratings.

The 2018 Report offers a detailed history useful for individual university policy planning, and implementation of monitoring mechanisms, and explains accreditation decisions.

A basic cost-benefit analysis of the publication incentive system administered by DHET identifies residual problems. Notwithstanding these (see below), the statistics tabulated in Appendices by the Centre for Research, Evaluation, Science and Technology (CREST) at Stellenbosch University reveals that DHET has been very effective in encouraging publication. It has also acted as an inhibiting factor in author choice of predatory journals, although many thousands of articles still slipped through.<sup>3</sup>

A nuanced analysis of the usefulness or otherwise of impact factors, and the differences that exist between books and journals and high-citation and low-citation disciplines, is provided (pp 4, 18). This section cautions the current moves by some universities that apply impact factors to rank internal disbursements of publication incentives.

As the well-written Report is easily available, I now engage some of the Report's assumptions in the interests of further discussion. Thus, before moving to the Report's preference for SciELO, the Scientific Electronic Library Online, the pros and cons between traditional and open access (OA) routes are debated.

The traditional journal publishing route, managed by international firms, is questioned in the Report for high gatekeeping by a limited group of stable journals per subject field. This gatekeeping has, however, secured high-value benefits regarding academic quality, services, and widened author impact. The traditional publishing model helps to assure quality, but the Report observes that it also restricts output and raises price. In contrast, OA enables greater quantity and zero price for readers. The OA pay-to-publish approach, however, does generate information costs due to the high number of journals with varying levels of quality (p. 133). A recurring lament relates to unacceptably high subscription costs levied by the traditional route to libraries (with Elsevier being the exemplar). An additional cost that is often forgotten in criticisms of journal publishing companies, however, is the recent levying of VAT on digital materials, which contributes to precipitous cost escalations (p. 49).

The traditional model provides incentives for quality through scholarly associations that manage journals and own copyrights. The advent of OA created new possibilities for for-profit publishers and introduced the potential for imperfect information and fraud. A for-profit OA business incentivises the acceptance of articles without regard to quality or accuracy.<sup>4</sup> Not discussed by the Report, although buried within the statistics listed in the Appendices, are journals not linked to disciplinary associations or the corporate sector, but which are rather associated with universities and independent publishing collectives.

In comparison with the traditional model, less stability exists among OA journals in that they are 'free', lack a subscription base, and can move quickly in and out of the market, thus rendering them unstable as an information source. This pay-to-publish model places the cost burden on authors, while upfront payment may incentivise journals to publish more manuscripts, merely to attract increased income. This conflict leads to quality concerns and to the allure of predatory journals as is indicated in some local instances in the Report (Chapter 5).

In short, the traditional publishing model assures quality but restricts output and raises the price. The state-supported SciELO project, however, aims to maximise the net benefit of technological change by taking advantage of the efficiency offered by OA while preventing the market failures that result when shifting from the traditional model. This requires that journals minimise costs, provide optimal quantity (i.e. increase output and access to that output), and lower the price, while maintaining quality. Ultimately, all parties involved in scholarly publishing (e.g. associations, academia, publishers, accrediting bodies, libraries, authors) will need to respond to such transformations of the scholarly publishing market.

However, the SciELO platform is just one model – other OA models include institutional repositories, Open Journal Systems, and delayed open access (although the Report has its doubts on this front [p. 127]). The main challenge of a project like SciELO is to develop an internally sustainable business model – as implied in one passing remark (p. 40). SciELO is dependent on public funding and government priorities may change without long-term guarantees. To a large

extent, SciELO is less a journal publisher than it is an aggregator – SciELO provides a platform for many journals. The question, then, is how much value is added when browsers are required to access articles through the journal's own website maintained at the journal's own expense? Publicly funded OA journals cannot easily compete with larger commercial publishing channels that continuously optimise metrics, redesign journal web pages for ease of access, and apply new technologies immediately they become available. Such firms also apply marketing strategies that leverage the full range of articles published.

The Report asserts that: 'global visibility of local journals can undoubtedly best be optimised by open access publication' (p. 132). While it is possible that an OA citation advantage exists over traditional publishing, its magnitude is (currently) small. Other benefits of publishing OA include increased downloads, especially by non-academic readers, but claiming a citation advantage for OA is not based on reliable evidence.<sup>5</sup> Many studies on OA are observational, and evidence a strong self-selection effect that is difficult to measure. Authors may choose to make their best work OA, and, if so, they are more likely to be located at well-funded institutions in the North Atlantic. This means that the population of OA articles observed may be more citable than the non-open access articles for reasons unrelated to their accessibility. For example, when newly accepted articles in 36 physiology journals were randomly assigned to a 'treatment' group and published open access, or a control group and published on a subscription basis, no OA citation advantage was found over a 3-year period, although the OA articles did receive significantly more downloads than did the non-OA articles. As Davis concludes, "the real beneficiaries of open access publishing may not be the research community but communities of practice that consume, but rarely contribute to, the corpus of literature"<sup>6</sup>. That is, the likely readers – professionals – are not necessarily other researchers. Unlike university performance indicators that assume an incestuous hermeneutic in-group self-referentiality, the authors of the ASSAf Report sensibly argue that 'readers' are constituted as the key wider targets of publication. That is, readers and how they apply published studies in their respective professional sectors are actually more important than are citation listings.

The largest journals companies are adopting hybrid approaches by offering select OA options (delayed OA/embargo options, discounts for Africa, etc.). A cautious approach would adopt either a hybrid approach, or a criteria-specific approach and prefer OA journals publishing only. The SciELO platform is not yet an OA market leader, and an analysis of its metrics between 2007 and 2016 reveals that while Chile and South Africa's use of SciELO is on an upward curve, Brazil, Mexico, Argentina and Colombia's memberships curve downwards from 2014 onwards. Furthermore, SciELO is regionally/language-biased in terms of its impact and reach.

The issue is not whether SciELO is the only model to be supported, but rather that the principles and goals of wider access, better distribution, and visibility for African research are appropriately leveraged across all publishing models and sites.

## Other models

Subvention presses, like author-pays OA publishers, consider their main customer to be the author rather than readers. The Report does list some subvention book presses and practices that might become a feature of publishing, but it does not discuss the implications of pay-to-publish over traditional publishing economics where the publisher invests capital and takes the risk.

The funding gap in the journals and book publishing value chains remains unaddressed, save for a few comments in the Report. Universities and authors are cash cows for under-funded journals and financially strapped presses. The weak link in the value chain is the lack of state funding for journals that enable the DHET system. Implicitly, the Report addresses rent-seeking activity on the part of authors but not by universities who put their staff under extreme pressure to publish.<sup>7</sup> The Report states that 'The financial viability of journals should be guaranteed through a reliable and sustainable set of revenue streams' (p. 3), but it does not explicitly tie the DHET incentive into one of these streams (which journals try to secure through article processing charges). The journals recognised but

not funded by DHET carry the cost of the whole system, regardless of whether they are on SciELO. As a funded operation, digital development of the *South African Journal of Science*, for example, required expanded capacity in the form of a digital publishing administrator (p. 38). Also, the imposition of a tax on electronic services and worsening exchange rates have affected the journal (p. 39).

The UNISA Press – Taylor & Francis partnership model is assumed by ASSAf to be 'commercial'. This partnership arose during the mid-1990s as a developmental project initiated by the South African National Research Foundation and UNISA Press with the British predecessor to Taylor & Francis, Carfax, then a new specialist journal publisher. The objective was a viable business model that would integrate a selection of appropriate South African journals into the international scene while retaining their DHET accreditation; this collaboration has proven very successful across a range of journals and disciplines.

That said, many opportunistic commercial operations – whose modus operandi have been to rapaciously milk the DHET incentives – are identified in the Report. Perhaps – no matter the author or discipline – publication incentives might be capped to, say, 10, annually, thus putting a brake on the expansionary rent-seeking behaviour of the authors/editors (Section 2.3, p.33). A cap might also reduce opportunistic publishing, especially in the cash cow local journals identified by CREST's statistical surveys. Top researchers in high volume disciplines will continue to publish over and above this cap as there are intrinsic rewards to be gained over and above the DHET incentive.

## Editorial misconduct

The ASSAf critique of misconduct largely relates to 'unacceptable publication intensity' (p. 93–96), involving editors who publish only or mainly and excessively in their own journals and who exhibit or engage in cartel behaviour in which two or more individuals (sometimes also members of the editorial board) co-author repeatedly in the same journal (p. 93–96). ASSAf has been flagging this concern for a number of years. However, there are instances when editors of trustworthy innovative journals aim to facilitate paradigm shifts, for which editor or guest edited theme issues are perfectly positioned. Bona fide journals can also function to shape entire fields, with work enabled by their editors and their boards over medium-to-long periods of time. Flexibility is suggested in assessing such situations on a case-by-case basis. In this regard, the Report observes that mega online journals like *PLoS ONE* 'have dispensed with the requirements for novelty and notability and retained only that of methodological soundness as judged by peers' (p. 119–120). While such cascading reiteration might be useful in the medical sciences, for the social sciences *PLoS ONE* type journals become a conveyor belt: the principle of 'novel plus notable' or repetition with difference does not necessarily apply and quantity prevails over quality and conceptual innovation.

Editorial, author, and journal misconduct also includes author misdemeanours like 'ghost', 'gift' and 'sale' of authorships (p. 117–136). In my own experience, to these could be added editors who are bullied by authors to fast track submissions or to publish articles despite negative peer reviews. Also perplexing is the publishing of original manuscripts without any peer-reviewed recommended revisions, which occurs when editors fail to exercise due oversight.

## Residual problems

Chapter 7 on 'Problems Still Facing Scholarly Publishing' concludes that the 'research publishing system' has performed exceptionally well despite the incomplete reforms mooted in the 2006 report. As the 2018 Report concludes, 'economies-of-scale publishing houses are potentially major players in the rejuvenation of an over-large and somewhat static local journal publishing system' (p. 129). Included in the drivers of this has been the UNISA Press/NiSC/Medpharm/Taylor & Francis co-publishing model, which has elevated 50 local journals into the international arena. Extra capital and expertise have thereby been injected into journal development, in contrast to DHET that does not support journals (or presses) at all, but expects them nevertheless to enable massive publication incentive transfers to universities. Section

7.3 discusses DHET's reluctance to feed revenue into the journals themselves, partly because there are too many journals relative to the size of the national scholarly base but also because there are too many journals per discipline, and amalgamation is not occurring. The Report, as it should be, is aware of the negative outcomes of commercialisation, but mainly with regard to some local publishing houses that precipitously expand publication only to leverage article processing charges and to milk the DHET incentive. While subscription costs have increased, page charges have not expanded unduly with regard to the traditional international publishers that work with local journals either through UNISA Press, NiSC or bi-laterally.

The Report's conclusions elide this significant partnership in the publishing sector as being something of a troublesome 'add-on' to be rectified by drawing all South African journals to SciELO South Africa despite its relative lack of resources, while also shaking out under-performers. In an ideal world, SciELO could be an exemplar. The Report suggests that, with regard to pricing,

*high level negotiation with the multi-national mega-publishers of commercial journals needs to be taken forward with determination, either by the appropriate government department or by a consortium of institutions at their highest level. (p. 139)*

## Books and conference proceedings

Although the Report (p. 130) highlights that half of the top 20 book publishers of South African manuscripts are local, the larger pool of 368 reveals that overseas publishers are adding to the competition in the market for local scholarly presses, which also compete with trade and academic publishers that are widening the scope of what they publish. Between 2005 and 2014, 923 unique book titles were submitted by 323 unique publishers. The high number of competing book publishers (in relation to the size of the market) is hidden within the ASSAf report data as a concern pertaining to sustainability (p. 174–175).

Should OA book publishing be an aim? It is puzzling that SciELO South Africa has made no attempt to steer any books into this channel – yet it is recommended for all journals.

In all, the Report concedes that 11% of all subsidies paid originate from books and conference proceedings but it is not clear what the impact has been of the DHET's widening policy (of 2015) to enable reworked PhDs into books to earn book subsidies (apart from the 8.8% growth in output indicated). For conference proceedings, of the 3108 submitted for subsidy, only 1301 were successful.

## Conclusion

The Report prefers a single scholarly publishing model, but ASSAf is cautiously tolerant of a pluralist approach that leverages all available

options and resources, both locally and globally. These approaches might entail public, public–private and private partnerships and different business models that work for different journals and books, and, most crucially, work towards:

- restoring the objective of publishing for research integrity and social benefit rather than for authors primarily to 'game the system' (p. 121) for their institutions, and/or themselves;
- cautioning universities on narrow instrumental procedures like over-emphasising certain metrics that have built-in discrimination measurements that marginalise some disciplines over others (p. 132);
- restoring the value of quality over quantity; and
- facilitating effective publishing practices.

In short, this Report is a significant exercise in identifying objectives, policies and procedures, and how best to debate and then implement them in a rapidly changing publication environment. This Report should be prescribed reading for all researchers.

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