

interview alicia wise

# The empire strikes back

Alicia Wise, the head of open-access publishing at Elsevier, tells **Adam Smith** why she thinks the concept of double dipping has become meaningless.

Open-access academic publishing, which has long posed a threat to traditional, subscription-based academic publishers, is here to stay. But after years of being on the back foot, Elsevier, one of those traditional publishers, is feeling bullish.

Many open-access advocates predicted that the introduction of article processing charges would lead to the demise of the subscription model. "That's not happening at all," says Alicia Wise, Elsevier's director of access and policy, who has led the publisher's journey through the growing open-access market for 4 years. "Elsevier is seeing growth in both models." Indeed, a recent survey by information scientists at the University of Sheffield found that the company was capturing 20 per cent of all APCs paid by 23 UK universities.

To Wise, it may seem like a long time since academics began to boycott Elsevier in 2012. Nearly 15,000 academics have pledged not to publish in or referee for Elsevier's journals, yet business, it seems, has not been affected. Even some investors are happy: the investment research firm Bernstein upgraded its rating of Elsevier's stock in September, saying that the threat posed by open access was diminishing.

Yet in many academic circles the anti-Elsevier rhetoric is stronger than ever. Tim Gowers, a mathematician at the University of Cambridge, is one academic who continues to stir up anger about Elsevier's profit of 39 per cent, or £826 million, on scientific, technical and medical publishing. Gowers was behind a freedom-of-information campaign this spring that found that Russell Group universities were spending more than £17m a year on the company's journals.

One of the main complaints is about double dipping, the term for publishers unfairly charging universities twice: once for subscriptions and once for APCs. Elsevier, however, claims it is not guilty of this, and Wise argues that the term itself is flawed. "I'm not exactly clear what that term means in conversation any more," she

says. "The concept has morphed a lot. Sometimes now you hear double dipping referring to two calls on a single library budget: one for subscriptions and one for APCs."

According to Wise, there is no connection between subscriptions and APCs: they are "decoupled". She says the money coming in through a journal subscription is used to pay for a particular number of articles, and that open-access articles in hybrid journals are additional to that. It is therefore

fair to charge APCs to cover the costs of those open articles, she says. In the words of a senior academic at a research-intensive university, however, "Publishers may not be charging for the same article twice, but universities feel they're paying for the same content twice."

Libraries are keen to keep the term double dipping alive because it has become powerful. Outside the negotiating room where librarians and publishers meet, the term provokes outrage—the kind of pressure that librarians need their negotiating partners to feel.

There may be disagreement on double dipping, but one issue that affects both parties is whether libraries can afford what publishers sell. Here, Elsevier may have secured a subtle victory: the conversation has moved on to how libraries can afford the different ways of funding publishing, rather than how their purchasing power can force publishers to move to open access.

Wise enjoys taking on the issue. "I trained as an anthropologist and I love different viewpoints," she says, adding that she's even happy to talk to people who wish to see commercial publishers put out of business. "They're examples of people we can listen to and talk to but who we aren't going to be partners with."

Wise and others involved claim that negotiations between publishers and libraries are going smoothly, yet in private there are reports of passionate rows. She acknowledges that people say different things in public and in private, and says "it's not good practice to comment on ongoing discussions". This is a reference to a *Research Fortnight* story that revealed how publishers Taylor & Francis and Wiley planned to offset subscription costs against APC income and suggested that others might follow [*RF 29/10/14, Cover*].

She agrees that continued growth for open access is inevitable, and even thinks a fully gold future, where articles will be made free to readers immediately on publication, with publishing costs paid for by the author or funder, is possible. In the meantime, Elsevier is working on a model for open-access books. "This makes the transition to open-access publishing in journals look easy by comparison," she says.

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