CONTAT / Gremillet — Publish

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Publish: Whatever the Price? A Cost Structure Study for French Journals Publishing in Humanities and Social Sciences (HSS)

Contat, O. and Gremillet, A.-S.

In 2009 the French Ministry of Higher Education and Research created a facility, the Digital Scientific Library (Bibliothèque Scientifique Numérique[BSN]), to provide national-level support for the scientific and technical information sector and to inform on a variety of issues. A part of the work of BSN is focused on the various aspects of the publishing process, considering good practice policies and direct and indirect costs related to the activity.

This article presents the BSN as an emerging facility and, more specifically, describes the protocol and results from a survey implemented by the ‘publishing’ group focused on the costs associated with publishing in human and social sciences from the perspective of actors actively involved in developing editorial added-value.

**The Digital Scientific Library, a Facility for French Public Digital SciencesResearch Institutions**

Publishing articles in scientific journals is expensive for French public institutions for a number of reasons, from financing the editorial process and production, to purchasing libraries and providing access to researchers. The issue of making publicly funded scientific publications available in Open Access form has increasingly become the subject of heated debates.1

In addition, since 2012 and with the long-term perspective of Horizon 2020, national and European financial institutions have both included in their recommendations the use of Open Access publication (recommendations by the European Commission in July 2012 and the Horizon 2020 December 2013 release), and the French Ministry of Higher Education and Research clearly positioned itself on the subject with its declaration in 2013, ‘Scientific information is a common asset that must be available to all’ (Fioraso, 2013). Among the priority actions outlined by the Ministry of Research to achieve this goal are the following three proposals: to develop *Green Open Access*, to provide support for *Gold Open Access*, and to promote the development of a third road emphasizing innovation and sustainability.

The BSN publishing group is tasked with implementing scalable recommendations, adaptable to changes in the state of the art within the sector, editorial practices, usage, and market demands. The long-term objective of the group is to produce a sustainable scientific digital guide outlining:

• Best practices promoting innovative content use, dissemination, and preservation.

• Conditions for access to make the greatest number of research results available, ideally in Open Access form.

**The Survey of Editorial Costs for Humanities and Social Science Journals**

This survey, conducted by the BSN publishing group, is designed to collect the most recent information available representing a diverse range of situations related to editorial costs for research journals, for all disciplines, for a comprehensive and up-to-date assessment. The objective is to identify common parameters of different journals related to their operations and editorial financing and to provide a set of realistic and adaptable guideline recommendations for journals targeting Open Access publication. To achieve this, it is necessary to identify all manufacturing costs for scientific journals and differentiate shares of the public and private sectors in terms of financial support, contributing to increasing editorial value or providing support for production, dissemination, and distribution, for both printed and digital works. The main question is: What is the cost of producing a scientific article, and what is the cost to transition to Open Access?

The survey began with 10 qualitative interviews with journal managers or managing editors to produce detailed descriptions of the scientific and financial operations of their journals and to discuss how they viewed Open Access publishing (or issues related to the process of transitioning to Open Access). These first interviews allowed us to understand the stages of the editorial chain and provided information on the time and cost required for each necessary task within that chain for more than 15 journals. To complement and support these first results, a quantitative survey with 66 questions was then sent out, between July 2014 and November 2014, to 300 people working for university publishers or French research centres for which a part of their activity is dedicated to publishing double-blind peer-reviewed scientific journals. In the end, both cumulative surveys helped to collate results for 50 French humanities and social science academic journals.

**Conclusion and Discussion**

This work was commissioned by the publishing group at the Digital Scientific Library (BSN) joined in the process of observation and revaluation of balances by clarifying the French publishing landscape for sustainable academic publishing committed to the goal of making all scientific productions available through Open Access by the year 2020. However, up to now, very little has been known about the economics of scientific journals, and consequently, public policy makers lacked the necessary information needed to develop informed policies for publishing.

We want to emphasize that, despite what we see in some of the calculations and graphics presented, switching to Open Access with APC could not be calculated by substituting the cost per article, as the APC for an article is covered by public support. This would have made our analysis of scientific editorial production purely financial when the issues are much more complex.

This survey on publishing costs of HSS journals shows the following:

• Cost analysis is an unfamiliar prism of perspective for most public actors involved in producing journals. It was urgently needed, particularly in the context of reports with commercial publishers.

• Academic journal producers and research units develop all scientific content up to the stage of page layout within their public institutions before delivering it to a private publisher who handles distribution and commercial sales, with the revenues rarely returned to the public institution.

• Paying salaries for editorial work represents the most important cost involved in publishing articles in HSS journals.

• Costs paid for by the private publisher (printing, distribution) represent less than costs supported by public sector funds (salaries for editorial work).

• The role of the private publisher is often limited to managing distribution, particularly in the context of emerging digital production and distribution. This is not to reduce the usefulness or effectiveness of this function. To the contrary, we now know that the highest costs are spent in the earlier stages of the publishing process, and this cost—which is often hidden or ignored—shows that the state invests heavily in the process of publishing journals, which has a direct consequence: this investment must be recognized, and the state as an investor should be given rights to the production it finances.

• Cost distribution between public and private funding is essential to the relationship between the public sector and private operators.

• The need exists for a French or even European infrastructure to better coordinate public and private contributions.

• The issue of empowering researchers with technical skills in digital humanities elicited very different responses and merits further investigation in a follow-up study.

This survey did not examine purely scientific costs, such as issues of authors’ remuneration and work done by reviewers and editors overseen by researchers, but this issue was central to our discussions with journal managers. The first results of this survey will, hopefully, be a source of ideas and reflection for practical ways to approach Horizon 2020 in France and for prospects of further enlargement in Europe.

Our discussions with professionals in the industry showed us that issues surrounding scientific editorial production in humanities and social sciences in France are approximately on par with those in Spain and Portugal (Medici, 2014). It would appear that the necessary conditions have been met for building common foundations for good practice guidelines in Europe, and perhaps the future possibility of developing editorial costs within the Dariah infrastructure (Digital Research Infrastructure for the Arts and Humanities).

**Authors’ Note**

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**Note**

1. ‘We have seen the Open Access culture developing for several years; we now need to consider how this affects the economics of scientific publication’ (Chartron, 2006).

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