Editorial

*Scholarly Journals and
the Flow of Information*

In a recent *Wall Street Journal* article, "Scholarly Journals' Premier Status Is Diluted by Web," Bernard Wysocki Jr. reports the latest episode in the increasingly contentious debate between professors, administrators, and academic publishers over subscription fees and electronic access to prestige print-only academic journals. According to Michael Eisen, a well-known computational biologist and a University of California Berkeley faculty member, high subscription fees for such journals are inhibiting scientific progress and giving a false impression to academics who think they have full access to up-to-the-moment research. His solution: Eliminate subscription fees and barriers to universal accessibility associated with prestige print-only journals. To help move things in this direction, Eisen cofounded a nonprofit startup called the Public Library of Science, which produces its own scholarly journals, in competition with established publishers, and is distributed free of charge online.

At bottom, Eisen's argument, which is gaining ground among academics in a variety of disciplines, is about who should control information and what it should cost. "For decades," as Wysocki observes, "traditional scholarly journals have held an exalted and lucrative position as arbiters of academic excellence, controlling what's published and made available to the wider community. These days, research is increasingly available on free university Web sites and through start-up outfits. Scholarly journals are finding their privileged position under attack."

The University of California system has become a hotbed of protest against the $5 billion global market for academic publishing. Individual faculty mem-

bers are competing against publishers by starting either free or inexpensive journals of their own. Wysocki reports: "Two UC scientists organized a worldwide boycott against a unit of Reed Elsevier—the Anglo-Dutch giant that publishes 1,800 periodicals—protesting its fees." Even the UC administration has entered the debate by urging scholars to deposit working papers and monographs into a free database in addition to submitting them elsewhere for publication.

As an interesting sidebar, Wysocki acknowledges the debate "comes at a time when it's easier than ever to find scholarly articles by using simple Internet tools such as Google. In late 2004, Google Inc., in Mountain View, California, launched Google Scholar, a free service that can search for peer-reviewed articles as well as theses, abstracts, and other scholarly material, much of it in scientific fields."

Traditional publishers counter Eisen's argument by stating that the expensive process of selecting and editing journals is a necessary filter to help scholars sift through vast amounts of research. Scholars disenchanted with the current state of affairs often fail to recall that commercial publishers such as Reed Elsevier and the Taylor & Francis Group shoulder the financial risks associated with starting new titles, which usually take many years to break even.

A similar dynamic is at work in the case of the *Journal of Markets & Morality*, as associate editor Jordan J. Ballor points out in his recent article, "Scholarship at the Crossroads: The *Journal of Markets & Morality* Case Study," *Journal of Scholarly Publishing* 36, no. 3 (April 2005): 145–65. "As a peer-reviewed scholarly journal published by an independent nonprofit educational institution, *JMM* maintains a unique position with respect to the importance of subscriptions. The costs associated with producing the journal are subsidized in part by the charitable donations of individuals and grants from philanthropic institutions. As a result, the solvency of the journal has never been directly tied to the income it generates, either through institutional or individual subscriptions" (p. 160). Publishers such as the ones mentioned above—like the Acton Institute, the *Journal of Markets & Morality*'s publisher—assume the financial burden tied up with the risk of starting and sustaining new academic periodicals.

If the previous paragraphs address matters pertaining to cost, what about the arguably more important issue of who should control scholarly information? Michael Eisen's answer to this question is not altogether clear. Certainly a radical and vocal contingent among the advocates of open-source publishing argue that the time-honored system of peer review, which is the foundation of

an academic publisher's prestige, must be dismantled to increase the flow and distribution of contemporary research.

Yet answers that call for the wholesale elimination of peer review are problematic for at least two important reasons. First, peer review is a function of academic quality control because it helps to weed out research that is erroneous, eccentric, methodologically deficient, insignificant, or sloppy. "The publisher's prestige derives from the rigorous system of peer review," relates Wysocki, "in which a journal's editorial board will select experts in a field to vet articles. At some top scholarly journals, less than 10 percent of submitted articles make it into publication." In many fields, given the proliferation of scholarly publishing organs in recent decades, the argument could be made that the problem is not with too little information but rather with too much. After all, what criteria should a scholar use in choosing between expensive competing publications to monitor in his or her field? Second, and related to the preceding point, Wysocki observes, "The peer review system lends authority to a scholar's work and has long been a springboard to academic advancement." This "authority" becomes especially important to a scholar who is concerned with making the most of the tenure review process.

Suffice it to say, an increasing number of scholars seem to think that publishing should operate like the Linux computer operating system, where programmers build on each other's work in an ongoing, collaborative project. As a concrete step in that direction, Wysocki mentions the creation of a database called arXiv that has become a repository of open-access scholarship for physicists. It is owned and operated by Cornell University and partially supported by the National Science Foundation. If Eisen had his way, something like that would be the norm throughout academia.

To see how the *Journal of Markets & Morality* balances the questions of cost and information control, read Jordan Ballor's article, which can be accessed online by visiting http://www.utpjournals.com/jour.ihtml?lp=jsp/Ballor.html.

—Stephen J. Grabill, Ph.D.