



The story of ELSSS

*A new model of partnership between
academics and libraries*

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ABSTRACT

Taking the history of ELSSS as its starting point, the paper suggests that a possible solution out of the "serials crisis" can be afforded by a new type of partnership between academics and librarians. The paper argues that whereas the long-term prospects for scholarly communication are potentially very promising, the short-term future is bleak unless the stranglehold of academic research output by commercial publishers is broken.

The paper compares recent initiatives in economics aimed at providing effective competition in the academic journal market and identifies some key conditions for success:

1. Extensive grass-roots support and effective media campaign;
2. Institutional backing;
3. Appropriate business model;
4. Innovative use of the Web;
5. Fostering of partnership with libraries world-wide.

The underlying theme of the paper is the need for *direct* and *concerted* action by academics, librarians, and governmental agencies to promote scholarly communication and defend it from the ever more intrusive (and expensive!) attacks by commercial interests.

1. Introduction

When I explained to my then 12 years old son why his dad was spending so much time on this ELSSS thing, he came up with the analogy between academic journal publishing and a bizarre restaurant where customers have to bring their own food, cook it, sample it, put the best dishes on the menu, and then wait a long time for a grubby waiter who serves it back to them and, adding insult to injury, finally lands them with an exorbitant bill.

Although my son's analogy is painfully accurate, it misses out two very important elements in the chain of scholarly communication: the University Library on one side, and the Web on the other. To continue with the analogy, the waiter is really on the side of the customers and not only is he sorry to be forced to give them such a bad deal, but also he is keen to point out that just round the corner there is a cybercafe only too willing to provide a superior service at a much lower cost.

Today I should like to use the history of ELSSS as an illustration of the potential offered by a new relationship between academics and libraries, and perhaps to offer a few suggestions on how to strengthen the partnership between the two for the benefit of the academic and student community.

In what follows, I shall confine my remarks and suggestions to my own discipline – economics – even though I believe that they can be extended to other fields (but definitely not to all of them). In view of the specialism of this audience, I shall refrain both from rehearsing the causes of the “serials crisis” and from providing statistics attesting to the gravity of the problem.

In the words of the song, I wish to accentuate the positive and concentrate on solutions rather than on obstacles and difficulties.

2. New solutions to an old problem: experiences from economics

I shall focus on three recent attempts to provide a solution to the journals crisis in economics. These three initiatives provide the material for an interesting case-study in so far as by analysing their similarities and differences it may be possible to derive some general principles. The three initiatives I shall be examining are: the *Economics Bulletin*, bepress, and, of course, ELSSS.

2.1 The *Economics Bulletin*

This electronic-only journal was launched over one year ago by two well-respected economists, Professors Myrna Wooders (U. of Warwick) and John Conley (U. of Illinois at Champaign) as a direct competitor to the extravagantly expensive Elsevier's *Economics Letters*. It is a free e-journal, with institutional support from the Library of the University of Illinois. Considering that its marketing campaign was almost exclusively by word-of-mouth and that it took on a long-established journal with a prestigious editorial team, the achievements of the *Economics Bulletin* have not been inconsiderable. From April 2001 to December 2001 it has published 57 articles (compared to the 180 published in the same period in *Economics Letters*), with an impressive average submission-to-acceptance/publication lag of less than three weeks.

In my view, the *Economics Bulletin* highlights both the advantages and the limitations of a small-budget initiative driven almost exclusively by the enthusiastic motivation of a small group of “academic innovators”.

The three main advantages are:

- (i) free access
- (ii) the speed at which a well thought-out academic journal can be set up and distributed; and
- (iii) the lack of pressing financial concerns, so that, *provided the credibility of the journal is maintained*, it can engage in a prolonged “war of attrition” with its commercial rivals, building up gradually its reputation and prestige.

On the other hand, any initiative that relies almost exclusively on enthusiasm and an initial pool of goodwill (with no matching budget) suffers from a number of drawbacks:

- (a) both the quality and quantity of submissions inevitably cannot match those of established incumbents thereby increasing the risk that the newcomer is perceived as a lower-prestige publication;
- (b) while the addition of a free journal cannot but be welcome by academics and librarians alike, it does not necessarily offer a solution to the journals crisis, in so far as, by not providing a *direct alternative* to commercially published journals, it does not relax the library’s budget constraint;
- (c) under current citation-tracking rules, the lack of hard copy combined with the irregular publication of articles (which are distributed as soon as they are favourably peer-reviewed) means that articles may not be included in the main citation databases, resulting in zero impact;
- (d) by providing an electronic journal with necessarily fairly rudimentary features (due to the lack of the financial resources required to produce advanced electronic capabilities), small-budget journals cannot speed up the mass conversion by academics from hard-copy to (fully featured) electronic publications;
- (e) enthusiasm is certainly a necessary condition for starting a journal – whether it is sufficient to sustain it in the long run it is open to doubt.

2.2. bepress

bepress is a commercial initiative based at the University of California Berkeley and is aimed at providing an advanced solution to the journals crisis.

I wish to stress that although bepress is a concept originally developed by academics, it is a *commercial* enterprise, backed by venture capital and thus constrained to evolve in ways that eventually will produce an economic return to its investors.

In order to understand the somewhat unusual business model underlying bepress, it is important to appreciate one peculiar feature of peer-review in economics, namely the extremely long lags between submission and receipt of referees’ reports (the submission-report lag) and between acceptance and publication (the acceptance – publication lag). Whereas in disciplines such as chemistry, an author can expect to receive reports on his/her submission within 4/5 weeks, in economics the submission-report lag can be anything between 3 to 15 *months*. This, coupled with long acceptance-publication lags (again anything between 9 and 15 months), makes many economics articles obsolete by the time they are published. The reasons for this anomaly are complex: the fact that until recently most editorships were unpaid and regarded as a

prestige responsibility to be discharged for the public good of the profession and to be carried out in addition to one's main functions of teaching and research may have contributed to establishing an ethos that regards long lags as acceptable. Another important factor is that the pool of conscientious *and* punctual referees is much smaller than the pool of potential authors, so that the onerous burden of refereeing is not spread evenly across economists.

bepress' solution is to create an "Authors and Reviewers" account, whereby an author either pays \$1000 for having his/her paper reviewed in a "conscientious" and timely (i.e., with a guaranteed report within 10 weeks) manner, or commits him/herself to reviewing three submissions by other authors (and, in the meantime, pays in a "collateral" of \$1,000).

Another distinctive feature of the bepress model is that submissions are "quality rated", i.e. the editors, on the basis of referees' reports and their own judgement, not only determine whether to publish a paper but also whether it merits publication either in their "highest-ranked" journal (*Frontiers in ..*), or in the high-ranked *Advances in ...* or in the middle-ranked *Contributions in ...* or in the lowest-ranked *Topics in ..*

bepress managed to obtain some press coverage before the launch of its journals (with an article in *The Economist* and a subsequent piece in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*) and since January 2001 has published two "founding" journals in economics plus a new journal in economic analysis and policy.¹

Can bepress be regarded as a success? Perhaps it is too early to say, but in view of the strength of its financial backers and of the strong institutional support from the University of California, bepress' output in the first year of operations is somewhat meagre, as can be seen from the following tables:

Journal of Theoretical Economics		
Type of Journal	Number of articles published	Comments
<i>Frontiers</i>	0	
<i>Advances</i>	5 (4)*	4 (3) by Editorial Board
<i>Contributions</i>	4 (2)*	1 by Editorial Board
<i>Topics</i>	2 (0)*	
Journal of Macroeconomics		
Type of Journal	Number of articles published	Comments
<i>Frontiers</i>	0	
<i>Advances</i>	10 (9)*	2 by Editorial Board 2 by Editors
<i>Contributions</i>	4 (2)*	
<i>Topics</i>	3 (0)*	

* Figures in brackets refer to the period Jan-Oct 2001.

¹ Interestingly, before the publication of their journals, bepress publicised a list of economists "most" of whom had "committed to submit papers" to the new journals. Over one year on only a small fraction of the academics in the list appears to have published in bepress journals.

Again, it is not wholly fair to judge an initiative from its very first year of operations, but it can be reasonably surmised that the arrival of bepress journals is unlikely to have induced many University librarians to cancel expensive subscriptions to commercially-published journals.

Moreover, whereas a lot of thought has gone into the mechanics and the economics of submission and refereeing, the electronic output generated by bepress is hardly innovative, consisting of PDF files with no added features. Again, as bepress journal issues do not appear to be published with a regular frequency, the content is unlikely to be indexed in the main citation databases, thereby depriving authors of citation impact.

2.3 ELSSS

ELSSS was launched in November 2000 with an act of faith – a single email message sent from St Andrews to thousands of economists world-wide. The message contained some startling facts about the crazy economics of academic journal publishing and a request to register an active interest in setting up new journals *in direct competition* with established high-price publications. The response has been phenomenal: there is no prestigious economics department anywhere in the world that does not include ELSSS supporters. The breadth of the support is also impressive: not only geographically (with over 25 countries represented), but more importantly across sub-disciplines and levels of seniority. Almost every field of economics is covered and supporters range from Nobel prize-winners to junior faculty. Media coverage has also been extensive, with articles appearing in *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *The Times Higher Education Supplement*, *The Independent*, *The Scotsman*, *The Sunday Herald*, and many more. Librarians worldwide seem to have taken to the ELSSS project, highlighting the initiative in their bulletins and lists. Last but no means least, financial and academic support has been provided by the Royal Economic Society, with additional financial support from Scottish Enterprise Fife.

In terms of technological innovation, ELSSS aims at producing a fully integrated software package that includes all the functions of a traditional academic journal (from submission to refereeing to editing to publishing – both in print and online) and more besides.

Consistently with its philosophy, the ELSSS Publishing Template (EPT) is being developed in close collaboration with potential users, so to match and enhance their requirements and needs. This process of inclusion will involve librarians, too, whose opinion and advice will be solicited as soon as the first draft blueprint is ready for diffusion. In my view it is both counterproductive and inefficient not to draw on the pool of relevant skills and expertise that librarians have accumulated over the years, and I hope that librarians world-wide will respond favourably and constructively to ELSSS's request for feedback on its "ideal journal" template.

Two points are worth stressing here:

- (i) the ELSSS approach is more flexible than both EB's and bepress' in so far as the ELSSS template can include both these publishing templates as special cases of its more general framework;
- (ii) ELSSS sees the EPT as part of its wider aim of improving scholarly communication not only by providing cheaper and faster journals, but also by revitalising the very role of journals in the post-Gutenberg era. In fact, the EPT includes

many levels of interactivity, between authors, referees, editors, readers (both specialised and not) aimed at restoring the role of academic journals as a catalyst for scientific debate, rather than mere repositories of knowledge.

The three attempts to improve scholarly communication in economics examined above can be summarised in the following table:

	<i>Economics Bulletin</i>	bepress	ELSSS
Institutional support	Moderate	High	High
Commercial support	None	Strong	None
Media campaign	None	Successful	Very successful
Academic grassroots support	Medium	Medium	Strong
Librarians' support	Local	Local	Growing
Electronic sophistication	Low	Moderate	High
Business model	Basic	Original	Aggressive
Effect on journals crisis	Negligible	Negligible	Potential strong
Flexibility	Low	Medium	High

3. What can we learn?

The fact that economists, who are by training and inclination averse to inefficiency and prone to offering solutions, have taken so long to wake up to the fact that (i) the academic journals market is a textbook example of monopolistic inefficiency; and (ii) on-line publishing may provide effective competition to commercial incumbents is painful evidence that identifying a problem and its solution is only a *necessary* condition for the problem to be solved. The key issue is **coordination**: if all academics (as authors, referees, and readers) decided to boycott high-price journals and to switch to academic-friendly publications and if all libraries discontinued their subscriptions to high-price journals and subscribed instead to cheaper, but equally prestigious, alternatives the “journals crisis” could be solved almost overnight. The problem, of course, is how to coordinate such a concerted move.

It is in this regard that ELSSS is sharply different from both EB and bepress: whereas the latter are intent on waging a war of slow attrition against the giant commercial publishers in the hope that economists world-wide will migrate to the new titles, ELSSS is predicated on the belief that only a frontal attack has a realistic chance of success. In other words, the ELSSS project is designed to provide from the very start a credible alternative to established (high-priced) prestige journals.

This explains why ELSSS is not pursuing either the free distribution route chosen by EB or the submission-review barter model of bepress and why, in addition to developing new online functionality for its journals, ELSSS will publish hard-copy regular issues (unlike EB and bepress).

The ELSSS recipe for establishing an instant reputation is based on the following ingredients:

1. **Refereeing**: instead of burdening potential authors with either a hefty submission fee or a commitment to referee a given number of papers (as in the bepress model), ELSSS will reward its pool of high-calibre referees with honoraria which, while not compensating them for the onerous and time-consuming task of reviewing, will

provide an effective incentive for the prompt return of comprehensive referee's reports. In addition to these pecuniary rewards, ELSSS will compensate its referees also in other novel ways (not wishing to give the game away to the opposition, perhaps I may be allowed to remain mysterious on this point).

2. **Editing:** working on the assumption that the high-responsibility and time-consuming job of editing a major journal cannot be carried out in the long run on goodwill alone, ELSSS aims at rewarding editors with stipends that will attract and retain world-class economists. Moreover, by developing the EPT in close collaboration with editors, the package will streamline and rationalise the whole process of submission management, making the editor's job easier and more rewarding.
3. **Value to authors:** like EB and bepress, ELSSS journals will shorten dramatically the submission-to-acceptance lag, but unlike EB and bepress ELSSS will do so without having to rely on either permanent goodwill or a convoluted payment scheme. Unlike EB and bepress, ELSSS journals will be catalogued in the main citation databases, thereby providing authors with impact data (as well as other statistics). Again unlike EB and bepress, ELSSS journals will be both more traditional (in so far as they will be published in hard-copy) and more innovative (by providing an altogether new look-and-feel experience in their online format). Unlike EB and bepress, ELSSS will work in close contact with leading learned societies in economics as well as with prominent economists world-wide to gain credible endorsements of the quality and prestige of its journals. Finally, ELSSS journals, by publishing promptly high-quality research, will provide a natural platform for lively, informed, and fast scientific debate among interested academics world-wide.
4. **Value to readers:** the unique and novel format(s) of ELSSS journals will be adapted to a range of readers: specialists, general economists, economic and financial analysts, students, and (when appropriate) the general public. Again, the range of functionalities will be appropriate to the target readership.
5. **Value to libraries:** without the active support of University and Research Libraries world-wide the ELSSS project is unlike to succeed. But why should budget-constrained libraries wish to subscribe to a new portfolio of journals? I think there are two main reasons: first, by *not* subscribing to ELSSS journals libraries would be depriving the faculty and students in their institutions of access to first-rate research and its associated platform for debate. Secondly and more importantly, a subscription to ELSSS journals will carry long-term benefits over and above access to quality research; indeed it could be argued that the greatest benefit will be in terms of the effects on ELSSS' competitors, in so far as the emergence of credible and prestigious alternatives cannot but have a beneficial impact on the pricing policies of some well-known rapacious publishers. These will have to either reduce their subscriptions or, perhaps more likely in the shorter term, accept a haemorrhage of authors and referees and thus a degradation of their journals' quality, which, in turn, will allow astute librarians to discontinue their subscriptions without any reduction in the quality of research made available to their readers. In order to facilitate the transition from subscription to high-price for-profit journals to cheaper not-for-profit ones, ELSSS will offer a novel discount scheme to all libraries (of course, libraries in developing countries will access all ELSSS publications for free).

On the basis of the case study presented above it is possible, I believe, to draw some general conclusions on the new models of academic journal publishing.

A key distinction that has to be highlighted here is between the **short** and the **long run**. Being an economist, I am far more comfortable with predicting the distant future, as I will not be there to collect opprobrium for my failure, but it seems reasonable to assume that the long-term equilibrium must be one in which the price of distributed peer-reviewed research output will reflect (i.e., be very close to) the cost of peer-review plus the cost of distribution, both of which are small compared to the current prices charged by for-profit publishers. Thus, in terms of long-term trends, there is little to distinguish between the approaches taken by EB, bepress, and ELSSS, as they will all converge to the same pattern. However, unless appropriate steps are taken now, this rosy future can be so distant to become a mirage. Which brings me to the far thornier issue of the short run.

It seems self-evident to me that in order for any new model of academic publishing to alleviate the journals crisis, it must make an impact, either directly or indirectly, on the pricing policies of those publishers whose behaviour has caused the crisis in the first place. This is a task of gigantic proportions, as the Goliaths of academic journal publishing can rely on hundreds of millions of dollars of annual profits to fight off any newcomers. However, these giants may have feet of clay in so far as their empires are built on the assumption that the academic community is and will remain unable to provide credible alternatives to the current inefficient and unfair mechanism of academic publishing.

Things are changing (even though at an infuriatingly slow pace): there are now examples of successful “editorial migrations” where academics, exasperated with their for-profit publishers unwillingness to bring subscription prices down to reasonable levels, have resigned *en masse* and set up essentially the same journal with a different title and a new and academic-friendly publisher.

For direct, head-to-head alternatives to be successful it is crucial:

1. to mobilise the relevant community of consumers and producers of journals;
2. to obtain the backing of associations and learned societies;
3. to create wider awareness by launching a media campaign;
4. to obtain institutional support from the academic home of the project;
5. to set out clear and credible criteria committing the new publication(s) to high-quality research output
6. to match and indeed better the features (such as citation tracking, online access, and more) offered by for-profit journals;
7. last but no means least, to forge and sustain links with both individual librarians and libraries associations, as detailed in the next section.

4. The way ahead

In the last ten years or so the job of University Librarian must have become an infuriating mixture of exciting new possibilities and increasing frustration at the difficulties imposed by the combination of tight budget allocations and escalating prices charged by a handful of oligopolistic commercial publishers. From my own, admittedly narrow, perspective, it would appear that librarians should add a new skill to their

armoury – academic coordination. Librarians are ideally placed to provide the necessary link between academics as both producers and consumers of (peer-reviewed) research on the one hand, and responsible publishers/associations on the other. In other words, I am advocating a more active role for University librarians, a switch from *administering* a publishing system that is depriving increasing numbers of staff and students of access to quality-controlled research output, to *reforming* the publication mechanism.

I myself am not a believer in grand schemes, but I have an unshakeable faith in the power of coordinated individual action. I am certain that, as soon as it realised that “things can get better”, many people in this room can formulate practical and effective ways for solving the “journals crisis” and more generally for freeing access to quality-certified research output. I am one of the least qualified people to offer advice to University librarians, but from the vantage point of my colossal ignorance, perhaps I can make a few random simple suggestions. For example:

- Information about cancellation of high-priced journals should be publicised widely, not only to strengthen the resolve of fellow librarians to follow suit, but more importantly to send a signal (a) to authors, referees, and editors that “their” over-priced journal is losing readership and impact and (b) to the editors, publishers, and would-be authors in more academic-friendly publications that a new potential readership is opening up;
- Librarians ought to use their superior knowledge of academic publishing to get academics working in their institutions acquainted with both the problems and the possible solutions in academic journal publishing. What I am suggesting is that instead of reacting passively to the next round of journal cancellations that the pricing policies of large commercial publishers will inevitably produce, librarians should actively propose solutions in direct collaboration with their academic colleagues.
- National and international libraries associations ought to appoint independent observers to whom individual libraries could report in confidence any “deals” offered by those publishers who promote “bundles” of titles and/or services. In turn, these observers ought to alert the librarian community if anti-competitive practices are being indulged in by any publisher.
- Librarians and academics ought to lobby *jointly* their funding bodies that special funds be set up with the specific purpose of kick-starting credible and direct alternatives to high-priced journals.
- More generally, national and international libraries associations ought to lobby national governments and international institutions, such as the European Union, to institute anti-trust investigations into the pricing of academic journals. The recent experience in the UK gives ground to a moderate degree of optimism. While on the one hand the Competition Commission inexplicably allowed the take-over of Harcourt by Reed Elsevier in spite of a nearly unanimous consensus among all contributors to its report that such a take-over would be against the public interest, on the other hand it instructed the Office of Fair Trading to investigate the market for scientific journals for possible anti-competitive practices. The OFT is expected to report in the near future and its deliberations, I hope, may mark a turning point in the uneven battle between librarians and academics on one side and some rapacious commercial publishers on the other.

I should like to conclude with a note of caution : while I firmly believe that initiatives such as ELSSS provide a viable solution to the journals crisis in fields such as economics, they may not be applicable all other disciplines. Vice versa, solutions that work in disciplines such as theoretical physics may not be exported to other scientific fields. There is no panacea in academic journal publishing and the mistaken belief to the contrary may be as pernicious as the pricing policies that have precipitated the current crisis.

One final word on **open access**: a common misconception about ELSSS (which funds the cost of **high-quality** peer review by means of subscription charges) is that it is incompatible with **free** access, as advocated by some self-archivers and supporters of author-fee.

This charge does not apply to ELSSS, for the following reasons:

1. all libraries and non-commercial research centres in developing and transition countries will have **full** and **free** access to ELSSS journals;
2. instant reputation for highest-quality peer-review involves real and fairly substantial costs that, in a discipline such as economics, can only be recouped via subscriptions rather than via author-charges;
3. the old way of thinking about subscriptions does not fit an academic-driven, not-for-profit venture like ELSSS; in fact, once it is understood that subscriptions are charged not to enrich shareholders and inefficient managers but instead to cover the cost of peer review, libraries that do **not** subscribe impose a cost (economists will say “a negative externality”) on to all subscribers, in the form of higher subscriptions than it would otherwise be the case.

P.S. I should be grateful for any comments, suggestions, criticisms. Please email me at: mlm@elsss.org.uk. Thank you.