

Is the Increase in Cost for Subscribing to Academic Journals Justified?

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Post Url

<https://www.enago.com/academy/increase-cost-subscribing-academic-journals-justified/>

Academic journals are generally subscribed by individual subscribers (researchers, faculty, and industry professionals) as well as institutional subscribers (usually [libraries](#)). Recently, these subscribers have been increasingly frustrated with the increase in the cost of subscription for continuing their subscriptions to various journals. These prices have continued to rise, although the number of papers that are published is increasing year-on-year, and there has been a significant rise in the number of [open access journals](#) and publishers.

Boycotting Academic Journals

At the end of 2013, [Dr. Randy Schekman](#), one of three recipients of the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine in that year, announced in an interview with the [Guardian](#) that his laboratory would begin boycotting what he called “luxury journals”, and named three journals in particular: *Nature*, *Cell*, and *Science*. Dr. Schekman’s dissatisfaction with these journals centered on two specific issues. First, their [rejection rates](#) were kept artificially high in order to maintain a perceived exclusivity. For early-stage researchers, getting published in such “prestigious” journals significantly affects the nature of research and positions that they can apply for, but as Schekman pointed out, such “prestige” is artificially created.

Second, he mentioned that the academic community as a whole is responsible for the continued support it is giving to the metric of “[impact factor](#),” which he dismissed as a “deeply flawed measure.” This flawed “impact factor” only persists because institutions and grant funding agencies continue to attribute value to the quantity of publication over the [quality of the research](#) performed. As Dr. Schekman summarized:

“A paper can become highly cited because it is good science—or because it is eye-catching, provocative or wrong. Luxury-journal editors know this, so they accept papers that will make waves because they explore sexy subjects or make challenging claims. This influences the science that scientists do. It builds bubbles in fashionable fields

where researchers can make the bold claims these journals want, while discouraging other important work, such as replication studies.”

The Effect of Open Access

Critics attacked his article as being disingenuous as he served as the editor of *eLife*, an open access journal. Moreover, they expressed dismay that he would choose to leverage the media attention surrounding his Nobel Prize to undertake such an “attack” on the traditional publishing model. Although it is true that he would not qualify as the most objective commentator, many of his points are valid. However, within his article, the proposition that [Open Access \(OA\) publishing](#) solves all of these issues is overly optimistic. Transferring the cost from subscribers to authors who pay processing fees to have their work published does not, in itself, release the perceived stranglehold on producing good quality research. Journal editors, whether traditional or OA, must still face the business challenge of marketing their content to their readers. Traditional journals do this by adhering to the perception of exclusivity, and OA journals do it with promises of free access to vast troves of content.

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