

# Open International Relations: The Digital Commons and the Future of IR

Written by Paul Kirby

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## Open International Relations: The Digital Commons and the Future of IR

<https://www.e-ir.info/2015/11/16/open-international-relations-the-digital-commons-and-the-future-of-ir/>

PAUL KIRBY, NOV 16 2015

Academic publishing is flourishing, and everywhere in crisis.

More academic material (research, data, commentary, and critique) is being published in a greater range of journals and monographs than ever before, and at a constantly increasing pace. The aggregated intellectual curiosity of humanity can, in principle, access this knowledge with less effort than at any time in its history. When the academic journal was first invented, just over 350 years ago in London, only 1,000 copies were printed, exchanged among learned fellows by hand and distributed by horse and carriage. By the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the knowledge accumulated by the branches of the western academy was held in physical spaces called 'libraries', with numerous restrictions on who could access it, and indeed a great system of prejudice regulating who was thought capable of understanding it in the first place. As recently as a decade ago you still had to enter a library under your own motor power to browse physical journals, bundled on reinforced shelves, blue and green, their titles picked out in a spectrum of gold lettering.

Today, the objective barriers to codified knowledge have all but evaporated. Internet access is not yet universal, but billions of us are citizens of the digital age (some of you are 'digital natives'; others of us migrated here). Google Scholar is our Gutenberg Press, and Sharing our ideology. When considered in its historical context, progress in the *medium* of knowledge is awesome in the literal sense, that is to say, eliciting a sensation of awe. And yet the interaction of a global multitude of thinking persons falters. Knowledge is not free, either in the sense of beer or of speech. Harvard – an institution so wealthy that it is often described as a hedge fund with a university attached – cannot afford its subscriptions. Most libraries are tied to journal bundle deals and bereft of alternatives, since it is impossible to negotiate with multiple providers for the same article or title. Over 15,000 academics are boycotting Elsevier (a top science publisher) for its excessive pricing. Editors are decamping en masse to continue their work afresh under new journal titles.

All the major houses for IR (Wiley, Taylor & Francis and its subsidiary Routledge, Sage, Springer, Cambridge and Oxford University Presses), restrict access to journal articles. If, as a member of the public, you wanted to read a single recent piece in *International Organization* or the *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, for example, you would have to pay £20 for the pleasure. For *International Studies Quarterly*, it would be £25 (or £4 to 'rent' for 48 hours), for the *Journal of Genocide Research* also £25 (no rent option), and so on. The intelligent public, seeking perhaps to discover what research their taxes have funded lately, or curious for a long-form expert analysis, finds itself paywalled to the eyeballs.

The crucial feature – *the scandal* – of the really-existing journal system is that those who produce research are not paid for it by the publishers, and those who pay for the research cannot access it in return. Academics continue to submit manuscripts to these titles because they organise knowledge and package it under a recognised name that confers prestige. This is what makes people read certain journals, and why appearing in them advances an academic career. But where does the prestige come from? Not from the efficiency of the corporate publisher, but from peer-review, our least-worst system for establishing the validity of arguments and checking data. And peer-review is not something that academics are compensated for, but a service that they render for free. Academics work

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for universities, and their research is therefore financed by the general taxpayer, the student-consumer, the relevant research council, or some combination thereof. In other words, scholars provide journals with unpaid labour (writing the article), certified by further unpaid labour (peer review), constituting the value of a product (the article), which is then sold back to them and to students (library subscriptions) at oligopolistic prices (hence publisher profits).

And what profits! The so-called 'Big 3' houses (Reed Elsevier, Springer and John Wiley) make between 32% and 42% operating profit, a measure that is likely to *underestimate* the true scale of their income. Much of this is driven by science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) subjects, but social sciences and humanities add to the riches. A publisher like Sage, which both holds a number of prestigious IR titles and has a reputation for less avaricious market behaviour, makes around 20% operating profit on the same analysis. By another measure (net profit margins), the journal business generates massive returns on investment compared to other industries. Periodical publishers make over 50% net profit, whilst drug manufacturers can only muster 17%, brewers 20% and newspaper publishers (who you might think were the closest equivalent business) a paltry 2.5%. The annual profit figures for journal publishers run into *hundreds of millions* of pounds. Meanwhile, library subscription spending increases above inflation every single year. As one editorial team was driven to conclude: "Volunteered academic labor...is a far more lucrative platform for profit accumulation than fossil fuels, mineral resources, and international finance."

Defenders of the current system give three arguments in response. First, they point out that journals still have to be made by someone, and so have costs, from printing to server space to the drudgery of copy-editing. True, but the profits are *much* greater than the production costs, and cannot be justified by them. Second, some editors do get paid a stipend, and more importantly there are professional associations (such as the British International Studies Association) who receive income from their journals, which partly funds their activities (publishing revenue is said to make up a third of the ISA's revenues). Again true, but only for a very small number from the total journal pool. Moreover, dependent on the unproven assumption that there is no better way of organising the finances of the discipline than through handing over such great sums. Careful economic research instead shows that commercial publishers over-charge relative to not-for-profits, and are also much less efficient, costing up to ten times more for the same general quality of research. The market in ideas is thoroughly broken, and some reap the bounty of its failure.

The third argument is that it doesn't really matter that the knowledge isn't available to everyone, since only those within the academy want to read it anyway. To imagine that only IR students and staff (if even they!) are capable of understanding the discipline's output is preposterous arrogance. Elitist, this argument also radically underestimates the appetite for substantive research. The number of people in the world interested in international politics vastly outnumbers those who end up taking undergraduate degrees in it, who in turn greatly outnumber those who return for advanced degrees (those achieving Masters in turn dwarfing those who end up with a PhD), who in turn are a considerably larger group than those who become full-time Faculty, only some of whom will even work in institutions with access to the full range of IR journals. Many universities in the global south (and a non-trivial number in the global north) are in any case unable to access the publications students of wealthier institutions might take for granted. The odd act of charity notwithstanding, the consequences of the for-profit journal sector are globally uneven and regressive, consolidating the access of the already-powerful.

The alternative to corporate control, and the mode of scholarly communication adequate to our technical capacities and intellectual hunger, is *open access*. The open access movement emerged in the late 1990s, seizing upon the internet as a means to escape the closed publishing system. Open access articles are available online, immediately, free to the reader, and with little to no copyright restrictions. There is no other difference from regular journal papers (open access does not, for example, mean less stringent peer review). A few years ago, open access advocates appeared to have won the argument, gaining government support in many countries, including the UK, where something called 'green' open access became mandatory, meaning that UK academics now *have to* deposit their papers in digital collections open to the public to qualify for general government research funding. But the victory was something of a mirage. The papers can still be embargoed from the public for years (and almost always are), while accessing them involves navigating a complex and over-lapping system of repositories, each with their own various log-ins and request buttons, hosting various versions of the same paper, rather than simply clicking through the scholarly journal in which the work was first published. Not so much of a problem for academics who know the system well, but off-putting enough for the general public as much as for the journalist, policy-maker or citizen-

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activist.

In fact, the government was explicit that it did not want to 'disrupt' traditional publishers, who promptly captured open access revenues for themselves. Under the oft-misused label of 'gold' open access, the major corporate houses now charge *academics*, rather than the causal reader, to make their work accessible. If a professor wanted to make their paper in, say, *Ethics & International Affairs* fully open access at the point and moment of publication, it would today cost them £1,780. It is therefore not surprising that UK research councils paid out over £10 million in article processing fees in the first year of a policy requiring open access for research they funded. This was all money delivered to publishers *in addition* to the usual library income they receive. Because only some articles end up being 'gold' open access, libraries cannot cancel subscriptions without losing most of their coverage, while individual researchers and their departments spend new sums on processing fees (a practice known as 'double dipping'). In the absence of a revived open access project, the costs and barriers of academic journal publishing will continue to spread.

What is IR's contribution to the open access movement? Almost nothing, arguable less than nothing. There is no IR equivalent of ArXiv – the hugely successful online repository favoured by physicists and mathematicians. Nor of PLOS – the gigantic open access mega-journal suite favoured by hard scientists, which sustains itself on low relative processing charges. Nor of Cultural Anthropology – a learned society journal gone fully open access. No experiment like the Open Library of the Humanities – a new platform-cum-mega-journal funded by a conglomerate of libraries. No appetite for something like Sociological Science – an open access journal with quick review times and low, means-tested article publishing costs. There are a handful of open access IR journals, like Ethics & Global Politics (not to be confused with *Ethics & International Affairs*), the Journal of Critical Globalisation Studies, and the Journal of Narrative Politics, run largely on goodwill, but they are sadly lacking a disciplinary presence. Publishing in them will not make a career, and is unlikely to impress hiring committees which have an eye to bankrupt measures of quality like the journal impact factor.

Worse still, the discipline of IR has missed opportunities to make itself more open and relevant, all the while fretting over its introversion and lack of relevance. Some of our responses to the open access movement have been sadly conservative and dismissive. New journals like the *European Journal of International Security* and the *Journal of Global Security Studies* are run on the standard closed model. Neither the leadership of the British International Studies Association nor the International Studies Association have followed the innovations carved out by colleagues in anthropology, sociology or STEM subjects. And young journals that position themselves as disrupting orthodoxy (such as *Critical Studies on Security*) have nevertheless emerged under the imprint of familiar publishing houses. While Editorial Boards in other disciplines are considering resignation and boycott to force change on the system, IR scholars are joining an ever-growing list of titles that promote business as usual. Closed journal publishing has become common sense: unquestioned despite its manifest failings. This is a trend: the revolution in the means of scholarly communication notwithstanding, the proportion of journals owned by the biggest corporations has actually increased over time.

Recognition of the problem – and sporadic attempts to deal with it – have instead come from below (E-IR's open access book series is one example of how things could be done differently). The ultimate horizon for an open International Relations is a break with the corporate publishing model, and a radical re-imagining of how research is presented and networked. The possibilities are genuinely exciting. Take a look at *Current Anthropology*. It is not just an established and prestigious journal. It is also, in its open access incarnation, beautiful to look at. And moreover supplements its peer-reviewed articles with interviews and multimedia (as in this recent piece on self-immolation protests in Tibet). For those sceptical about IR's place in the world, consider a similar project open to all showcasing research on the humanitarian impact of the Libyan intervention; struggles over the human right to housing; how to challenge the global arms trade; reform of the UN Security Council; the political thinking and organisation of neo-conservatism in the US; the causes of gender violence in civil war; or the survival of monarchies after the Arab Spring.

A systematic transformation of scholarly publishing is, of course, some way off. The doubtful will point to the costs of running a journal, the benefit to learned societies from existing revenue, and the difficulty of abolishing profiteering

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overnight. There are indeed numerous problems to be negotiated in transition. In the meantime, most journal editors in IR preside over a system that is costly, inefficient, and which creates unnecessary barriers both to scholarly communication and to the public understanding of social science. Initiatives elsewhere show that there is space now to do better, and a promising journal system to be built from those efforts in the future. It will require organisation, thought, collaboration and a modicum of courage. The project may not seem as important as the bloody material which the discipline takes as its topics of study (war, revolution, exploitation, power). But a truly open journal system is nothing less than the digital landscape on which exploration of those questions might flourish.

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## About the author:

**Paul Kirby** is a Lecturer in International Security in the School of Global Studies at the University of Sussex, where he researches and teaches on gender violence and the politics of war. Paul was previously a Co-Editor of the *European Journal of International Relations* (2014-2015) and *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* for Volume 39 (2010-2011), and has co-edited special issues of *International Feminist Journal of Politics* (2012) and *International Affairs* (March 2016). He is also Section Editor for Political Science and Political Theory for the *Open Library of the Humanities* and the author of this guide to open access in the social sciences. He has written about open access, a lot.