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Opening up Access to Research

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A Film Review of *Paywall: the Business of Scholarship*, directed and produced by Jason Schmitt, 2018

How often do you encounter a paywall? You know what I mean: it's that moment when you discover that the online journal article you're trying to read is not available through your institution's subscription, and the publisher invites you to pay a fee—perhaps \$30 or \$40—to gain access. Depending on your institution's resources, this may happen more or less frequently to you, but I'm sure it has happened. And if you don't have an institutional affiliation, then you are well-placed to appreciate how frustrating it is for those patients, doctors and policy-makers—or keen amateur historians—who would like to read the latest research literature, but can't afford to do so. From these twin concerns—to help researchers work more efficiently, and to enable wider access to the results of research—the open access movement arose in the early years of this century.

Paywall is an hour-long documentary by Jason Schmitt, a professor of communication and media at Clarkson University in New York. It sets out to convince its viewers that the current system of academic journal publishing is both unfair and broken; and that the open access movement is not a cult of idealistic enthusiasts, but a viable and rational route to research efficiency, enhanced collaboration, innovation and global equity.

The film is essentially a series of talking heads, featuring many names that will be familiar to those who follow the debates about scholarly communications. The voices are not entirely male, white and north American, but that is the overall tone—and to a European audience growing accustomed to political support for open access, the film may feel somewhat behind-the-times.

The first fifteen minutes or so are particularly powerful: you would be hard put to watch them without being convinced that there is something wrong with the current system of limiting access to research by affiliation (or not) to those institutions sufficiently wealthy to pay the fees demanded by publishers. There are compelling testimonies from those who need access, but can't get it: from scholars in Nepal and Venezuela, from the US graduate student unable to access the scholarly literature while taking a break from his studies; and the husband unable to access the medical literature that would explain the treatment options for his sick wife.

The film is not shy about blaming publishers—and, in particular, Elsevier—for the current situation. It recounts the story of the rising cost of journal subscriptions and Big Deals over the last few decades; the steady or falling budgets of academic libraries over the same period, that have forced librarians to make difficult decisions about which journals to take; and the unfairness of certain firms achieving unusually high profit margins on the basis of raw materials authored and reviewed for free. It seeks to make these issues feel real for American audiences by presenting publishers' profits as money sucked out of the academic system, pushing up tuition fees for students and perhaps even forcing college closures.

The remaining three-quarters of an hour are devoted to demonstrating why more open access would be a good idea for researchers and for the wider public. It wanders through issues of research efficiency and collaboration; touches on academic concerns about the quality of open access journals; explains how complex copyright is for authors seeking to reuse their own work; wonders what lessons we should take from the widespread use of the (illegal) *SciHub* article-sharing website; and devotes at least ten minutes to the question of why Elsevier behaves the way it does (which essentially comes down to the different motivations of a commercial corporation versus a community of scholars interested in sharing their work).

What is missing from the film is a positive take-home message, or a specific proposal for action. I do not disagree with the message summed up in the closing (country western) lyrics: “What we create, we collectively own. Business took a collective good and locked it away.” But I fear that the emphasis on critiquing Elsevier means that many viewers will see that critique as the key message of the film, whereas I was hoping for advice on what to do next.

No one is going to mistake this for anything other than an effort at advocacy, but what we need advocacy for right now is less to convince us *that* open access should be our way forward, but to show us *how* it is possible to make that transition. Since the film was released, discussions in Europe and the UK about PlanS and its implementation have made very clear that the key question about open access is not so much “whether we should...,” but “how we can....” And for that, we will need a different film.