

The Open Access interviews

Richard Poynder talks to Professor Carlos Brebbia

Scholarly publishing finds itself at a difficult transitional stage today. In response, some publishers have decided to [behave badly](#) — as evidenced by the actions of publisher lobbying organisations like [PRISM](#).

But as [Alma Swan](#) recently [pointed out](#) to me, most of this bad behaviour emanates from a small group of four or five large publishers, "not the hundreds and hundreds of publishers out there, most of whom are starting to understand that Open Access is the way of the future."

The problem for these other publishers, however, is that the behaviour of PRISM — along with the questionable [activities](#) of organisations like the Association of American Publishers ([AAP](#)), and the [apparent greed](#) of not-for-profit organisations like the American Chemical Society ([ACS](#)) — is tarring all publishers with the same brush, and making researchers understandably suspicious of anyone calling themselves a publisher.

This was demonstrated for me recently when I was passed an e-mail sent to a researcher by [Carlos Brebbia](#), the director of a small academic publishing company called [WIT Press](#), which produces two journals.

In line with WIT's new Open Access policy, the e-mail asked the researcher to pay a €50 per-page publication fee. Brebbia added, "I have checked our records and your institution has not yet subscribed. Will it be possible to request them to do so? It is cheaper to pay the subscription of €450/\$550 rather than the €50 per page."

The e-mail was passed to me as evidence that WIT Press was behaving unreasonably and, in the process, giving Open Access a bad name. So I contacted Brebbia and asked him about his journal publishing activities, and how he is adapting to a world in which, as he himself puts it, "Open Access is a reality."

The interview is below. I leave readers to reach their own conclusions.



Professor Carlos Brebbia

RP: I believe you have a number of businesses, including the [Wessex Institute of Technology](#). When and why did you start the [WIT Journals](#) business?

CB: Wessex Institute of Technology is not a business, but a post-graduate (Master and PhD) educational institution for research and training which carries out research supported by national and international organisations such as the EU, and organises different courses and conferences.

WIT Press is an academic publishing business which publishes material from the Institute as well as many other [books](#).

RP: When you say that the Wessex Institute is not a business, do you mean that it is a not-for-profit organisation?

CB: Wessex Institute of Technology is a not-for-profit organisation.

RP: You were an academic previously. Where were you based, and what were your research interests?

CB: I was, and still am, an academic as Director of the Wessex Institute of Technology. For a number of years, I was a member of the academic staff at [Southampton University](#), where I rose to the position of Reader before accepting a Professorship at the [University of California, Irvine](#).

After that, I founded the Wessex Institute of Technology — with the help of a group of colleagues from all over the world who shared my interest in setting up an independent institution to act as a link between academia and industry.

My research interests are in the field of computational methods in engineering and my name is associated with the creation of a new modelling method called [boundary elements](#).

RP: So you remain a researcher yourself?

CB: I do. I am the author of around 10 books dealing with the boundary elements technique — a method that has found many applications in industry, and which has led to the setting up of another of the companies with which I am associated. This company provides software and services to industry based on our method.

RP: What is the name of that company?

CB: The Company is called [BEASY](#). Its name stands for Boundary Element Analysis System and we are the world leaders in the boundary element field.

Two journals

RP: *Let's focus on the journal publishing business. How many journals does WIT currently publish, and what are your future plans in this area?*

CB: WIT Press currently publishes two Journals — [The International Journal on Sustainable Development & Planning](#), and [The International Journal on Design & Nature and Ecodynamics](#). We are not planning to launch any other titles in the near future.

The motivation behind them was to act as a focus for publications originating in research groups with which we have been associated for a long time.

RP: *You are attempting to serve a particular niche then?*

CB: Being academic publishers, we can afford to take a long strategic view of our business. For instance, we believe that it is important to build on our existing links and publications in the field of sustainability — an area in which WIT organises several important [international conferences](#).

Another area of interest is interpreting design in nature in scientific terms and how science and engineering can learn from nature.

We also have a strong commitment to ecological issues and, in particular, in 2004 our Institute launched the [Prigogine Medal](#) with the [University of Siena](#) — which has been given to some of the best scientists in the field of ecological systems; hence the name of the second journal, *Design & Nature and Ecodynamics*.

RP: *Do you provide both a print and an online edition of the journals?*

CB: Yes. We produce both printed and online editions of our journals.

RP: *How many (i) individual and (ii) institutional subscribers do you have for each journal?*

CB: We still have few subscribers.

RP: *And you would rather not share that information?*

CB: This type of information is confidential. We are pleased with the progress so far but it is still too early to have a clear picture.

RP: *Does the journal publishing business make a profit?*

CB: Our journal publishing does not make any profit and it will take a long time to break even, possibly five or more years. Journals are expensive to launch. As mentioned before, for us the venture has been motivated by our academic interests, although it is also proving an interesting testing ground for future publishing strategies.

RP: *Do all the papers WIT publishes go through the regular peer review process?*

CB: Our Journal papers go through the regular peer review process. Perhaps I should mention that throughout my career I have launched around 10 other international journals, now in the hands of a major publisher. I am still Editor-in-Chief of one of them and hence fully aware of the importance of maintaining the highest possible standards in this regard.

Optional fee

RP: *As I understand it there are two ways in which academics can publish with WIT: 1) by the traditional route, which involves paying page charges at a level of €50 per page; 2) By means of an author-side payment, which is also €50 per page. Is that correct?*

CB: Academics can publish with WIT in many different ways. We have a very active programme of books and monographs which is similar to that of other publishers, i.e. without any page charges.

The charges you mention (€50 per page) refer only to one of our journals (*The Journal on Sustainable Development and Planning*) and we expect them to be met by institutions rather than individual authors.

RP: *So you don't differentiate between Open Access fees and page charges?*

CB: Correct. With Open Access there is just one fee which includes three copies of the journal, off prints and Open Access. If the author's institution subscribes to the journal — which is €450 per year — then the author fees are waived, and he gets the benefits mentioned above for no additional charge.

The Journal on Design & Nature and Ecodynamics journal has no page charges at present, as we have been able to secure a limited amount of support in this case. Authors who wish to see their paper Open Access can pay an optional fee of €300.

RP: *If my understanding is correct this means that if an author pays to have his paper Open Access then WIT's revenue is based exclusively on the author-side fee (which is the same rate as the page charge fee), and if his institution has a subscription WIT receives €450 a year, but not the €50 per page in page charges as these are waived for researchers at subscribing institutions?*

CB: The subscription to the *Journal on Sustainable Development & Planning* is €450 per year, while the second journal (*The Journal on Design & Nature and Ecodynamics*) costs €550 per year. Users can access papers through their library, either through the paper version or digital version.

The eventual aim is for the revenue to be exclusively based on the author-side fee. Papers whose authors have paid the €50 per page are offered Open Access and hence we expect the whole of the *Journal on Sustainable Development & Planning* to be Open Access in the near future. This may be the case for the other journal if the author-side charge policy works well.

In the case of *The Journal on Design & Nature and Ecodynamics*, only some papers are Open Access and hence the user whose library does not subscribe can pay \$30 per paper on a pay-as-you-go basis. There is also an optional charge of €300 for Open Access.

As you can see, we are operating two different models, one for each journal.

RP: *Would I be right in saying that authors at a subscribing institution can get their articles published Open Access without having to pay an author-charge fee?*

CB: Your understanding is correct regarding the Open Access and institutional subscription charges. Authors at those institutions get their articles published Open Access without page charges.

RP: *So there are a number of ways in which users can access WIT articles: If their institution pays an annual subscription of €450 they get unlimited access to all WIT journals; If their institution does not have a subscriptions to the journal they can pay \$30 per paper on a pay-as-you-go basis; In addition, any reader can get free access to any WIT article where an author-side charge has been paid. Is that correct?*

CB: Yes, there are two ways to pay, but the annual subscription varies: for *The Journal on Sustainable Development and Planning* it is €450, and for *The Journal on Design & Nature and Ecodynamics* it is €550. Subscription allows unlimited access to that WIT Journal. And as you say, papers can be downloaded on a pay-as-you-go basis for \$30 each.

Complicated model

RP: *This is quite a complicated model: do you think that some authors and readers might be confused?*

CB: I agree that the model is complicated and some authors have become confused. We have recently rewritten some of our instructions to better explain our publishing models. It may also look more complex here because we are describing different journals whereas an author or subscriber will only be involved with one of them.

RP: *Would you say that your model is more like Springer's Open Choice than, say, the models adopted by [Biomed Central \(BMC\)](#) or [Public Library of Science](#)?*

CB: I think that our model for *The Journal on Sustainable Development and Planning* is more like [Springer Open Choice](#) than others, although I was not aware of that until recently. Medical science journals (such as those published by Biomed Central) are different as they have a substantial amount of support from foundations and research councils.

RP: *How do you mean: BMC has support from foundations and research councils?*

CB: I mean that a substantial number of funding bodies support the page charges of medical sciences journals (such as those of Biomed Central). Those organisations are listed on the Biomed Central website and include the [Wellcome Trust](#), one of the main supporters of Open Access.

RP: *Recent research suggests that many Open Access journals actually [charge no author-side fees](#), but support them through other activities — e.g. conferences, advertising, sponsorship etc. Can you see that as a viable model for WIT?*

CB: I was not aware of any Open Access scholarly journal models seeking payment through supporting activities. They seem to be following a different route. Sponsorship (which is always welcome) tends to be for a limited period and advertisements are difficult to obtain for scientific journals (and they usually require a full marketing team to service them).

Regarding conferences, I presume you are referring to publishing papers from meetings in the journal, in which case participants could pay an extra fee for the Open Access. This is incidentally the way we support our conference papers library, which we call [Transactions of Wessex Institute](#) and which is very popular.

This route however, has the danger of not differentiating between journals and conference papers. The journal papers ought to be prepared more carefully, with full explanations, and ought to undergo a more strict review process. It has been the policy of WIT Press to differentiate between the two.

RP: Actually, what I had in mind was more like the model that some learned societies have experimented with, where they subsidise their journal publishing activities with the profits from running conferences. This is also a model used sometimes by trade publishers — who may run an annual exhibition and have, say, a monthly journal or magazine that is partly or entirely funded by the proceeds from the exhibition. Could this kind of model not work for WIT?

CB: I appreciate your suggestion but I must say that I am not aware of a model to subsidise scholarly publications by organising conferences. My own ASCE ([American Society of Civil Engineers](#)) used to do the opposite in the past, i.e. subsidise meetings out of publishing surpluses. The danger of the suggested model is that a journal may start publishing conference papers without reference to the more rigorous process associated with learned journals.

RP: An alternative way of providing Open Access is for authors to publish in the traditional manner, and then [self-archive](#) their papers in an institutional repository — the so-called [Green Route](#) to Open Access. Do WIT journals officially endorse the author's posting of the final, peer-reviewed draft free for all on the web immediately upon acceptance for publication, even if the author does not pay WIT's page charges (and the author's institution does not subscribe to the journal)? If not, do you endorse their doing so after an embargo period?

CB: Although we have not adopted a policy regarding immediate author self-archiving yet, it is something we are considering, as we are aware of the importance of this issue.

RP: Can you say what WIT's revenue per article is for its journals (i.e., total articles per year, divided by total costs per year)?

CB: If I understand the question correctly, you are asking for the total revenue for all journal articles per year, divided by the total publication costs per year. If so, it is still very low but as I said earlier, we hope to start breaking even in five to seven years — at which time I expect the journals to be supported by the author-side charges.

Confused state

RP: Would you say that the move to Open Access publishing represents a particular challenge for small publishers, or are the challenges the same whatever size the publisher is?

CB: OA publishing represents a challenge for all publishers, particularly small academic publishers with limited resources. It also represents a unique opportunity for us to take advantage of the changing circumstances by moving much faster than the large organisations. In my opinion, Open Access is a reality and we need to learn how to profit from it. That is why WIT Press is committed to it.

RP: I first became aware of WIT when someone forwarded me an e-mail — signed by you — that seemed intended to encourage the author concerned to persuade his/her institution to take out a subscription in order to avoid having to pay author-side fees. That would seem to imply that WIT prefers the subscription model to the Open Access model. You are saying that that is not the case?

CB: We do of course very much encourage all authors to persuade their institutions to take out a subscription to the journal. Authors whose institution subscribes are able to have their papers published for free, in a similar manner to the way that authors from what BMC calls "[Supporting Member Institutions](#)" are not required to pay page charges.

At present, we are still being flexible regarding which model to follow and we may end up having both. However, my personal feeling is that all journals will become e-based and our long term strategy would be to rely on page charges.

RP: *The person who passed your e-mail on appeared to be concerned that there might be something dishonest about your approach, and feared that you were applying undue pressure on researchers to either have their institution pay a subscription fee, or themselves pay page charges.*

CB: There is nothing wrong with charging page fees and a notice to that effect is displayed in all our issues and on the website. In addition, all authors are reminded of it at the time they send their papers for publication, just in case they have not noticed. This takes place before the article is sent for review to avoid wasting anyone's time. It also ensures that there is no possibility of any conflict of interest between the financial and scientific aspects.

We have already discussed the page charge model which I believe is the way forward to achieving Open Access.

As regards the second part of your comment: What type of pressure can we apply on authors or libraries? We request our colleagues, as well as the authors, to ask for a subscription from their librarian. This is not unusual and it is reasonable to expect that the authors who submit a paper to any journal will be interested in having access to that publication to be aware of new developments in their field. Nowadays university libraries will only consider ordinary subscriptions if requested to do so by members of the academic staff.

RP: *Perhaps the way that the e-mail was worded caused it to be interpreted in a negative way — evidence, perhaps of the confused state that scholarly publishing finds itself in today. Are such misunderstandings inevitable during a process of transition?*

CB: I agree with you that scholarly publishing is in a state of change and that this has resulted in a substantial amount of confusion.

I have looked at the related e-mails and I think that WIT Press has behaved properly. I will nevertheless rewrite this type of message, explaining in more detail what we are trying to achieve. Thank you for your suggestion.

Holy Grail

RP: *What are the specific challenges of Open Access for small publishers, and how can/should they be resolved?*

CB: The main problem for small publishers is how to make their contents accessible to the scientific community as part of larger repositories without losing control of their business. They also need to be able to access sources of finance open to others. Currently we are trying to address this problem by applying for support from the EU in association with other small, mainly academic, partners.

RP: *You said that Open Access is a reality. Can you elaborate on your expectations for the future of scholarly journal publishing?*

CB: I think that the situation is changing very rapidly but, yes, in the future, all scholarly publishing will be Open Access. In the immediate future, however, I envisage a mixture of Open Access and subscription-based models, particularly for the smaller publishers.

RP: *What about the larger publishers?*

CB: The major publishers will not disappear, as they have positioned themselves very clearly as the 'gate keepers' in charge of reviewing, indexation, impact factors etc. They could survive by continuing to receive royalties from librarians in a process not dissimilar to the ones applying to music or other media royalties.

RP: *How else do you see large publishers responding to the changing market conditions?*

CB: I think the larger publishers will also be able to compete by offering increased Open Access options paid for by advertising, grants and sponsorship. The main loss may be the disappearance of the small and, in many cases, highly innovative publishers — which will represent a loss to the scientific community.

On the other hand, those small companies which are able to adapt to the changing circumstances have the possibility of being leaders in the field, and this is one of the reasons we are so keen to experiment with ways of making our journals Open Access.

RP: *So for you it is very much a time for learning and testing new models?*

CB: Indeed. The journals are for us just a very small part of our business, but the lessons we are learning may one day allow us to make all our material freely available to the scientific community. That is the Holy Grail of modern publishing!

RP: *Thank you for your time, and good luck for the future.*

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