

# Elsevier's Alicia Wise on the RWA, the West Wing, and Universal Access

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In recent years I have noticed that it is pretty difficult for journalists not attached to big media to obtain interviews with Elsevier executives – except where the purpose of the interview is to talk about a new product, or the company's latest financial results. Certainly, Elsevier has appeared very reluctant to talk about Open Access ([OA](#)).

This led me to conclude that the company believes it only needs to talk to two groups of people: its shareholders and its customers – where customer implies not the researchers whose papers provide the content published in its journals, but the librarians who purchase those journals, invariably by means of the controversial [Big Deal](#) (aka “bundling”).

## All changed

If my conclusion was correct, it seems safe to say that this has all changed in the past month or so. And the reason why is clear: At the end of last year a new bill was introduced into the US House of Representatives called the Research Works Act ([RWA](#)).

Co-sponsored by Representatives [Darrell Issa](#) (D-NY) and [Carolyn Maloney](#) (R-CA), the RWA would reverse the [Public Access Policy](#) introduced in 2005 by the US National Institutes of Health ([NIH](#)). This policy requires that taxpayer-funded research is made freely accessible online with 12 months of publication. The bill would also prevent any other federal agency from imposing a similar requirement on the researchers it funds. As such, the RWA would pose a significant threat to the Open Access movement.

Shortly after its introduction, the Association of American Publishers ([AAP](#)) – an organisation of which Elsevier is [a senior member](#) – published a [press release](#) welcoming the new bill. The RWA, it said, is “aimed at preventing regulatory interference with private-sector research publishers in the production, peer review and publication of scientific, medical, technical, humanities, legal and scholarly journal articles.”

However, the problem is that the research community views things rather differently, and so news of the bill quickly ignited a firestorm of protest, especially amongst OA advocates.

This firestorm was lit by [Michael Eisen](#), the US biologist who co-founded the open access publisher Public Library of Science ([PLoS](#)). On January 10th, Eisen published [an editorial](#) in the *New York Times* in which he complained, amongst other things that, “If the bill passes, to read the results of federally funded research, most Americans would have to buy access to individual articles at a cost of \$15 or \$30 apiece. In other words, taxpayers who already paid for the research would have to pay again to read the results.”

At the centre of the row lies a profound disagreement about the way in which research papers should be disseminated on the Web. In order to share their research, scientists have traditionally handed over (without payment) exclusive rights to distribute their papers to scholarly publishers like Elsevier. These publishers then sell this taxpayer-funded research back to the research community in the form of journal subscriptions. As a result, argue OA advocates, the taxpayer pays twice, first for the research to be done, and second for scientists (and members of the public) to read the results of that research. While this may have been necessary in a print world, they say, it is no longer necessary in an online world

In recent years, therefore, a new form of publishing has emerged in which publishers levy a one-off article-processing charge, and then make the papers they publish freely available on the Web – a model known as open-access publishing, or [Gold OA](#).

For researchers still publishing in subscription journals, funders like the NIH are increasingly introducing mandates requiring that their papers are made freely available on the Web via self-archiving, or [Green OA](#)

– normally after an embargo period intended to allow the publisher to recoup the costs of managing the peer-review process.

Subscription publishers like Elsevier complain that OA mandates threaten their livelihood (and thus, they add, the entire peer-reviewed journal system). Moreover, they add, mandates introduced by federal agencies amount to government interference in the market. The research community counters that there is no evidence that mandates impact on publishers' profits and, in any case, publishers' profits are too high.

## Boycott

The AAP has some 300 members. Yet it is Elsevier that has borne the brunt of the criticism. This is partly because Elsevier is the largest scholarly publisher in the world; partly because it has a reputation for charging very high subscriptions for its journals; partly because it resisted Open Access for so long, and so obdurately; and partly because other AAP members quickly began to disavow the RWA.

Amongst AAP members to distance themselves from the RWA are [MIT Press](#), [Pennsylvania State University Press](#), [Rockefeller University Press](#), [University of California Press](#), and the American Association for the Advancement of Science ([AAAA](#)), publisher of the well-known scientific journal [Science](#).

It did not help Elsevier that just days before his NYT editorial, Eisen [reported](#) on his blog that senior executives at the company had made [31 contributions](#) to US representatives in 2011, 12 of which went to Representative Maloney. "This includes contributions from 11 senior executives or partners, only one of whom is a resident of her district," wrote Eisen.

Subsequently, others pointed out that Issa too has been [the recipient](#) of political donations from Elsevier executives.

As the cries of rage echoing around the Web grew louder, a number of petitions were started calling for the bill to be rejected (e.g. [here](#) and [here](#)). More ominously, a [site](#) was created where researchers can publicly commit to boycott Elsevier – by refusing to publish in, or referee and/or perform editorial services for its journals. If the boycott were to become widespread, it would pose a serious problem for Elsevier, since it would dam the flow of papers into its journals, with obvious implications for its revenues. After all, how could a publisher sell subscriptions to a journal that had few or no papers in it?

In fact, at the time of writing the number of signatories to the boycott stands at just 4,573. This does not compare favourably with the 34,000 signatures collected during a [similar boycott](#) frenzy in 2001, although the earlier one was directed at all journal publishers not just Elsevier.

Nevertheless, the boycott has at least got Elsevier's attention. Conscious of the potential harm that it could have on its business were it to escalate, Elsevier has been stung into responding to the campaign of vilification. In early January, for instance, Elsevier's vice president of global corporate relations [Tom Reller](#) posted several [rebuttals](#) on Eisen's blog, and Elsevier's director of universal access [Alicia Wise](#) posted a [defence](#) of the company on the [Liblicense mailing list](#).

And as the mainstream media has begun to take notice of the boycott, Reller has been compelled to respond not only on mailing lists and blogs (e.g. the [Scholarly Kitchen](#)), but in the pages of prestigious print publications like [The Chronicle of Higher Education](#).

Meanwhile, Elsevier's director of global academic relations [Nick Fowler](#) has found himself having to defend the company's pricing policy in the [Economist](#), and the company's senior vice president for physical sciences [David Clark](#) has had to do the same in [The Scientist](#).

Elsewhere, [Chrysanne Lowe](#), Elsevier's VP global marketing communications, has been [helping in the pushback](#) on Liblicense.

In short, Elsevier now appears to understand that it needs to talk to the world. As Clark told *The Scientist*, "I look at the current situation, and we just need to do a better job of communicating about who we are, what we want to achieve, and how we value access and dissemination."

As I [suggested](#) recently, the challenge for Elsevier is that this new willingness to engage with the outside world may prove to be too little too late – a point I made to Reller and Alicia Wise when I [met them](#) in London earlier this year. To their credit, they acknowledged my point, and promised to arrange for me to do a formal interview with Alicia.

Moreover, this is not just about Elsevier talking. It also needs to listen. It has become increasingly evident that by not engaging with the wider world for so long, it has become dangerously out of touch with how it is perceived.

For this reason it was deeply shocked by the visceral reaction to the RWA, and at the end of last week felt it necessary to publish [an explanation](#) of why it supports the bill on its web site. This ends by saying: “[I]t is our sincere wish to de-escalate from the constant cycle of legislation and lobbying that has marked the scholarly communication landscape for many years, and accelerate collaborative work in partnership with other stakeholders.”

Given this background, when my interview with Wise was eventually scheduled I felt it would be useful to set any discussion we had about the RWA in the larger context of the changes taking place in the scholarly communication landscape – not least the rapid growth in Open Access – and to explore whether and how Elsevier views its role changing going forward. The RWA, after all, is merely a symptom of these changes.

I was also curious to find out what exactly “universal access” is, how it differs from Open Access, and why Wise had chosen to “change sides” – moving from a role managing national licensing deals with publishers on behalf of the research community at [JISC](#), to sitting on the other side of the table representing the interests of the world’s largest publisher.

## Q&A

To this end, I put together a long list of questions, a list I realised might be a little longer than the company was anticipating, and emailed it over to Wise in advance.

Wise did indeed seem a little surprised at the nature and number of the questions, and suggested that rather than doing a telephone interview with me, she give written responses to my questions.

Clearly, such an approach is not ideal when trying to discuss controversial issues, but an email Q&A is surely better than nothing. Moreover, Wise indicated that she would be happy for me to send back a few follow-up questions if I felt it was necessary. In the event, I sent four follow-up questions.

The interview below is the result.

The hanging question, I would suggest, is this: While Elsevier now appears committed to talking more with the wider world, is it equally committed to listening?



Alicia Wise

**RP: Can you start by introducing yourself. As I understand it, you began your career as an archaeologist; you later worked at the UK’s [JISC](#), where you managed national licensing deals with publishers. You then moved to the Publishers Licensing Society, and subsequently to Elsevier. How would you characterise the thread that runs through your career to date?**

**AW:** A passionate interest in access is the thread that connects. As an archaeologist I was frustrated by the amount of time it took to negotiate access to resources – museum collections, people with expertise, publications, satellite images, etc. In the mid-1990's, when electronic journals became available it transformed everything and made access to the formal literature so much easier.

Technology was clearly a way to overcome access barriers, and I followed this interest out of archaeology and to the JISC. There, technology was indeed a way to overcome access barriers, but I became intrigued about copyright because it regularly seem a barrier to access. To understand why it was so important to authors and publishers, I was excited to have the opportunity to become CEO of the [Publishers Licensing Society](#) and to learn about the huge importance of copyright to content creators and owners.

And then the chance to expand access by working at Elsevier was a great opportunity. It's my first time working in a commercial organization and so an opportunity to understand what that is like and how commercial organizations work, and a terrific chance to work in a publishing company. I believe wholeheartedly that publishers are an important, invaluable part of providing access solutions.

**RP:** *Some have characterised your journey from JISC to Elsevier as one of a gamekeeper turning poacher. Do you feel you have switched sides?*

**AW:** Others describe my journey as one from poacher to gamekeeper. I believe we are all on the same team, and there is more that unites us than separates us. Unfortunately, sometimes this gets forgotten or lost, so the magic is to align all our interests and to find ways to move forward together.

**RP:** *Your job title is “director of universal access”. What does that mean, and how does universal access differ from open access?*

**AW:** Thanks for asking this. There is a widespread misunderstanding that the two terms – open access and universal access – are synonymous, so it's helpful to have an opportunity to communicate more clearly.

Universal Access refers to Elsevier's vision of a future in which there is universal access to high-quality information underpinned by sustainable business models. Open access models are certainly a part of this future, as are subscription and transactional sales models. We're open to any business model that ensures quality and is sustainable.

The universal access programmes that I am responsible for include a wide range of initiatives. For example:

- Accessibility – extending access for people with disabilities
- [Open access publishing](#) – Elsevier publishes eight open access journals, and has more in development. Over 1,100 of our subscription titles also offer authors the option to open access to their articles sponsor [by means of an [article-processing charge](#)]. We also have 32 titles that are freely available after an embargo period.
- Posting policies – our policies aim to find a sustainable way to support [green open access](#), and aim to strike the balance between the needs of authors, Elsevier, funders, and universities. Preprint posting, voluntary posting of accepted manuscripts, and other posting by agreement are all elements of our policy.
- [Research4Life](#) – providing free or low-cost access to our content in the poorest countries.
- Subscriptions and licensing – although other colleagues are responsible for our commercial models and how these evolve, my team is very active in projects to widen/deepen access via subscriptions and licensing.
- Transactional models – Elsevier already offers a wide array of pay-per-view options. We are currently piloting article rental options with [DeepDyve](#) and we are also working in new ways with document delivery partners such as the British Library.

**RP:** *Can I ask where interlibrary lending fit in here? It has been said that Elsevier's ILL policy deters digital interlibrary loans. As I understand it, the [policy](#) used to be that when electronic journal*

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*articles are loaned librarians are told they should make a printout, scan the printout, and then loan the scan. Is that still the policy? And do you think cutting-edge research can proceed at the speed of interlibrary loan?*

**AW:** Last year we changed our policy for US academic institutions to allow them to fulfil ILL requests directly from digital files without the need to print first. We did this because we were satisfied that these libraries were complying with the [CONTU](#) guidelines and respecting copyright. Other countries do not have equivalent guidelines for ILL, so we are proceeding more cautiously in changing our "print first" requirement outside the US.

**RP:** *Some have suggested that Elsevier adopted the term universal access because it could not bring itself to use the term open access. Is there any truth in that? Does Elsevier fear open access?*

**AW:** Elsevier doesn't fear open access. When the concept was first introduced, and there was not any evidence about how it could work, there was real resistance to it by some in Elsevier.

For several years now we have had an active test-and-learn approach and with evidence there has been greater clarity and comfort about how open access models can be made to work. I have been very impressed since joining Elsevier at the rigorous use of evidence to inform policy. This flows from having so many scientists in the business, I suppose.

## Open Access is here to stay

**RP:** *Would it be right to conclude that Elsevier now accepts the inevitability of open access?*

**AW:** We believe open access is here to stay, and that it will be part of the balance of sustainable business models that publishers use.

Right now open access publishing models are used for a very small minority of articles – about 3% of STM articles published each year (more in some disciplines; less in others) – so it is not clear how quickly this will scale, or whether it will scale in some or all disciplines. But open access will grow in different ways and at different paces in different disciplines.

We also believe that licensing and transactional sales models will continue to play important roles in providing access to information and sustainability.

We believe it is important to offer authors options, and for there to be time for all of this to evolve gradually. That's not because we're defensive, but because there is enormous complexity in science and publishing models differ very widely between disciplines and even between titles.

I know some advocates call for a revolution, but there is much of value that could be lost through haste and much that can be retained and even strengthened through careful, thoughtful planning and evolution.

**RP:** *So what is Elsevier currently doing with regard to Open Access? And how does it see its OA offering developing over time?*

**AW:** We publish eight open access journals and are developing more in collaboration with our author communities. We offer authors the option to have their article published open access in over 1,150 of our subscription journals.

Over 30 of our titles, including all titles published by Cell Press, have [open archives](#). This means that titles such as [Cell](#), [Neuron](#), and [Journal of the American College of Cardiology](#) are freely available to all after an embargo period.

Elsevier also has sustainable options for those that support the green road to open access. Authors can voluntarily distribute and post their accepted manuscripts on websites or to their institution's repository. In those cases where [an institutional or funding body mandate](#) is in place, we first seek a free access agreement with the institution or funder. A list of funding body agreements is available online [here](#).

As you can see, we have embraced open access options. At the same time, we continue to develop and invest in publications that use other business models too. We believe the future will see a blend of open  
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access, subscription, and other business models.

**RP: How much does it cost to publish a paper OA with Elsevier, both in its hybrid journals and in its pure Gold OA journals? How would you say that Elsevier's fees compared with industry norms?**

**AW:** We have a wide range of fees, and continue to test and learn in this area. Our lowest price open access title is the [International Journal of Surgery Case Reports](#) with a fee of £420 per case report. Our most expensive open access options are \$5,000 for articles in *Cell* or [The Lancet](#). Our average figure is \$3,000 per article. The fees vary based on a range of factors.

Elsevier's charges are broadly in line with other publishers, and are high in some cases and lower in other cases.

**RP: Does Elsevier offer fee waivers for any of its OA journals, or plan to?**

**AW:** Open access publications are funded not through library subscription payments but through author fees. If authors would like to publish open access with Elsevier and cannot afford these fees, then individual waiver requests are considered on a case-by-case basis and may be granted in cases of genuine need.

Priority for this waiver program is given to applications by authors from countries eligible for [Research4Life](#).

Researchers can, of course, publish in any of our subscription journals with no article processing charge at all.

**RP: Does Elsevier view charging an article-processing fee as the default model for OA?**

**AW:** For our open access publications then fees from authors, their funders or their institutions is the norm. However we have open access publications that are funded in others ways – for example by societies or other sponsors. There are also a range of articles and titles available open access because the publisher pays – for example, the Cell Press open archives or articles published with Elsevier and written by Nobel prize winners.

The other dominant model of open access is where authors post versions of their articles in repositories. There is no funding stream associated with this model of open access, and so by itself it is not sustainable. Where systematic posting is occurring we ask that an embargo period pass before the articles are made available freely to all. This allows time for the subscription model to operate to cover the costs of the publication.

**RP: In its [submission](#) to the 2004 UK Inquiry into scholarly publishing Elsevier said, “By introducing an author-pays model, Open Access risks undermining public trust in the integrity and quality of scientific publications that has been established over hundreds of years. The subscription model, in which the users pay (and institutions like libraries that serve them), ensures high quality, independent peer review and prevents commercial interests from influencing decisions to publish. This critical control measure would be removed in a system where the author—or indeed his/her sponsoring institution—pays. Because the number of articles published will drive revenues, Open Access publishers will continually be under pressure to increase output, potentially at the expense of quality.”) Is this still the company's view?**

**AW:** I haven't read the whole submission, it was made long before I joined the company, but taken out of context it does indeed sound a little defensive!

Today open access journals do generally contain high-quality peer reviewed content, but in 2004 this was unfortunately not always the case. Good work in this area by the Open Access Scholarly Publishers Association ([OASPA](#)) has helped to establish quality standards for open access publications.

For several years now Elsevier has taken a positive test-and-learn approach to open access and believe that open access publishing can be both of a high quality and sustainable. Our launch of an open access title in our flagship Cell Press imprint, [Cell Reports](#), is testimony to this. We also have seven other open

access titles (more on the way!) and over 1,150 titles that offer authors the option to sponsor open access to their articles.

Another interesting aspect of this quote, for me, is that it is an effort to explain that the subscription model continues to hold value. That belief certainly hasn't changed. Just think back to what journals were like in the early 1990's... we all trudged across campus to find dusty, heavy tomes that we then hauled to photocopiers or else sat patiently and read in the library. Access today is terrifically better than it was then, and all that was achieved through library subscriptions.

Now, in addition to library subscriptions there are a wide array of ways to get access to journals – for example through document delivery services, lending services such as [DeepDyve](#), through patient and philanthropic access programmes, etc. etc.

## Green Open Access is more of a challenge

**RP: Would it be accurate to say that Elsevier is now comfortable with Gold OA, but remains uncomfortable with Green OA, or self-archiving?**

**AW:** This isn't quite right, in my view. Elsevier is business model neutral as long as the business model is sustainable and maintains quality. [Gold open access](#) can do this. Green open access is more of a challenge because it is not associated with a funding stream of any kind. This means green open access can be sustainable, but only if it works in harmony with another business model that provides revenue to support publication costs.

The challenge with green open access is that the concept of embargo periods remains controversial. The idea here is that posted articles would only become publicly available after an embargo period, and that embargo period gives the publisher time for costs to be recovered via a subscription model.

I appreciate that some open access advocates want this model to result in articles being freely available at the point of publication, but I'm never clear about their vision for how the costs of these publications will be sustained. I'm told that [Derk Haank](#) at [Springer](#) used this metaphor at last week's [APE meeting](#): it's like telling people they can have free meals in restaurants after 10pm then still expecting them to show up and pay for dinner before 10pm.

I like that quote because he's a great communicator, but also because it demonstrates that Elsevier is not the only publisher that struggles to see how green open access can be sustainable unless it operates in tandem with another business model.

**RP: So how would you characterise Elsevier's views on Green OA, and what is its current policy on self-archiving?**

**AW:** Our views on green open access are explained in the answer to the previous question.

Our policy on self-archiving depends on the version of the article to be posted and whether or not there is a mandate or other systematic encouragement/requirement to post.

Authors are free to post preprints, they can post accepted manuscripts to websites or institutional repositories where they do so voluntarily or we have an agreement with their institution/funder, and we do not permit the posting of final published journal articles.

**RP: Am I right in thinking that Elsevier has two main issues with regard to Green OA: 1) the length of embargoes and, 2) whether papers are posted online voluntarily by authors, or by means of what Elsevier calls "systematic posting". The latter I assume is shorthand for archiving that is done because of a mandate, probably by an intermediary. In other words, Elsevier disapproves of mandates?**

**AW:** Our only issue with green open access is how it can be made sustainable. Title-specific embargoes where there are mandates, or other inducements to systematic posting, is a way to make green open access sustainable for the underlying journal. This is because it allows some time for the journal costs to be covered through subscriptions before the content is made freely available.

We, like most publishers, do have some concerns about mandates and in particular government mandates. We prefer to work in consensual ways and are always willing to work in partnership with others. We believe that authors should be able to publish in the journal of their choice where they feel their work will be best reviewed by their peers and where its publication will have the greatest potential to advance their field. That may be an open access journal, a subscription-based journal, or through hybrid options.

We understand that journals vary greatly, and each needs special care and handling if it is to thrive – somewhat like flowers in a garden. A flower may thrive in one part of the garden, but struggle in another where the soil, light, and moisture are not so optimal. Journals are the same, and so a concern we have is that some mandates are overly rigid and can undermine the sustainability of some journals.

**RP: I guess the real problem for Elsevier is that it can do little to prevent mandates being introduced. We can come on to the Research Works Act in a minute. However, I am told that Elsevier has been visiting universities that have introduced a mandate and “putting the frighteners” on them, presumably with threats of copyright litigation. What is the background to this? Is it true?**

**AW:** We have been visiting lots of organisations to understand their access objectives, and to try and find ways of working together to achieve these in ways that are sustainable for journals. If an institution doesn't wish to work with us, and has a green mandate in place then we draw their attention to our posting policy and ask that they respect this.

We do keep an eye on the contents of repositories, and from time to time send requests for items to be taken down if they do not align with the policy. This has only been necessary a small number of times. The take down requests are written by me, not our legal team, and are very politely and respectfully worded. In all cases, the repository managers have removed the material, and so far as I'm aware no one has felt frightened!

I suppose if our polite take down requests were ignored then this could result in a more formal legal letter being sent. However, this isn't our aim. Our aim is to find ways to work with institutions to expand access in ways sustainable for the journal.

**RP: As a result of Elsevier's visits I understand, some universities are introducing “secret mandates”, presumably with a view to ensuring that papers are systematically deposited but without the knowledge of publishers. Do you know about this? Assuming it is true, what is Elsevier's view of the matter?**

**AW:** Gosh, it sounds like the plot from a spy movie! I am not aware of 'secret mandates'. Of course we do monitor the repository landscape and can easily identify when a significant amount of Elsevier content is being posted. This means we might assume a mandate is in play, and we would then reach out to the organisation to try to initiate a conversation.

I am aware of what might be described as 'wishy-washy policies'. These are policies where academics are required to deposit in their institutional repository but great pains are made to avoid the use of the words mandate or mandatory in the policy itself. I sort of think of these as passive-aggressive policies rather than assertive ones.

For example, a librarian explained to me that her institution didn't have a mandate, but did expect compliance and actively chased the academic staff to deposit articles. Whatever a policy is called (or not called – and this is why we refer to 'systematic posting'), our interest is in finding ways to ensure the journals in which those articles are published remain sustainable.

I am happy to say that the vast majority of institutions we have engaged with have done so in a very open and positive manner.

## Global study

**RP: To return to the question of universal access for a minute, in [an article](#) you published in [Research Information](#) last August, you said that 93% of authors worldwide (97% in the US) express satisfaction with their access levels to research in journal articles. Elsevier cited the same figures in its [submission](#) to the US Office of Science & Technology Policy (OSTP) consultation on public access, referring to a study commissioned by the [Publishing Research Consortium](#). Can you say who**

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***the Publishing Research Consortium (PRC) is, who did the survey, and how these figures were arrived at?***

**AW:** Right, this isn't really my area of expertise but I have consulted with colleagues for the answer.

In 2009, the Publishing Research Consortium commissioned a study to assess the importance of and level of access to various information types, including journal articles, for users in the UK.

That UK study was carried out by [Mark Ware](#). Mark Ware is now at [Outsell](#), but when he did this study he was still the principal at Mark Ware Consulting. The Publishing Research Consortium is a group of associations and publishers, which supports global research into scholarly communication in order to enable evidence-based discussion.

The global study, which is the one you refer to, used the core of the survey questionnaire created for the UK study and applied it to a global research audience. The global study was carried out for PRC by Elsevier's research team who set up the online questionnaire, mailed it to a global audience of researchers drawn randomly from those who had published in at least one of over 18,000 journals, and analysed the results from the resulting 3,823 respondents.

The particular question to which you refer was "of the various types of information which you consider important, how would you describe your level of access to them?" using a scale for responses of (Very difficult, Fairly difficult, Fairly easy, Very easy), 93% of respondents globally indicated they found access to journal articles as fairly or very easy.

The full report is available on the PRC website [here](#).

***RP: I am hoping to follow this up with Elsevier's [Mayur Amin](#), whose team I understand did the survey. But can I ask if you are happy that the survey data – which differs markedly from other international studies like the one done by [SOAP](#) that have looked at this issue – is being cited by Elsevier employees without flagging up that the survey was done by Elsevier itself? And do you worry that by describing it as a PRC study (rather than an Elsevier study) Elsevier may be leading people to conclude that it was done by an independent research company, rather than by Elsevier itself? I also wonder why you did not point out in your answer above that – through its [membership](#) of the International Association of Scientific, Technical & Medical Publishers (STM) – Elsevier is itself a member of the PRC, and that one of its employees, Mayur Amin is on [the steering group](#) of PRC. Should we be concerned about lack of transparency here?***

**AW:** I know Mayur and his team to be meticulous. Their involvement is made transparent, for example in the report itself, and the involvement of Elsevier staff in a wide array of industry committees and bodies including the PRC is very transparent as well. I don't believe we're leading anyone to conclude that we weren't involved but your point is well taken and I'll talk with my colleagues about being more explicit and clear when we cite these findings.

My understanding is that the SOAP questionnaire was widely publicised via open access lists. This suggests that there is a sampling bias toward authors who very actively support open access. The SOAP study provides valuable insight for us all in how these authors think and intend to behave, but it is not necessarily a good reflection of the thoughts and behaviours of all, or even the majority, of authors.

***RP: What do the numbers of the survey mean in practice? I note, for instance, that [the report](#) says 78% of respondents in Africa find it very or fairly easy to access journal content that they need. Many people will be highly sceptical about such a figure.***

**AW:** Well access in many African institutions (and indeed in developing countries around the world) is pretty good because of programmes like Research4Life. Elsevier was a founding partner of this programme along with UN agencies such as the [World Health Organization](#), leading academic libraries, the STM Association, and other publishers.

Research4Life recently celebrated its 10th birthday and our content (we provide over 2,000 journals and 6,500 ebooks) was downloaded 3m times during 2011. In these countries there are lots of barriers, for example regular electricity supplies and access to equipment, but access to journals is not generally one of them.

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## The Research Works Act

**RP:** Moving on to the [Research Works Act](#), Elsevier has stated publicly that it supports the RWA. Can you outline for me exactly what role Elsevier played in the introduction of the bill into the US House of Representatives?

**AW:** There is a lot of misunderstanding about our reasons for supporting the Research Works Act, so please allow me to step back and start from there.

Elsevier is committed to access, and believes that open access is here to stay and that's a good thing. However, we don't believe that the government should tell authors and publishers what we can do with our publications. Our support for the Research Works Act is about our concern over government regulation, not access.

We have always been happy for researchers to voluntarily post the manuscripts they submit to us on their websites or in institutional repositories.

Ever since the [NIH Public Access Policy](#) was introduced in 2005, we have also been helping researchers by posting their accepted manuscripts for them on [PubMed Central](#) so they are publicly available 12 months after publication. We've posted more than 80,000 articles.

But putting an article online for free has economic consequences for the publisher because it effectively takes away returns that a publisher earns from the value it has added and the investment it has made. And it has the potential to make a journal unsustainable. When a journal is unsustainable, the research community that relies on it loses.

Elsevier hopes the current dialogue will stimulate reflection about the appropriate role for US government agencies in expanding access. We believe that government mandates are unnecessary and that there are better ways to provide access including to taxpayers.

And to the question you originally, posed... what role did we play in the bill's introduction. Elsevier, along with other publishers and publishing Trade Associations, lobbied for the bill to be introduced.

**RP:** As I understand it, the RWA would reverse the NIH Public Access Policy, which was introduced in 2005, and which requires that all the papers produced as a result of research funded by the NIH are made freely available on the Internet within 12 months of publication. It would also prevent any other US federal agency from introducing a similar requirement. Is that correct?

**AW:** The bill would prevent inflexible government mandates, and keep such mandates from spreading. Keep in mind that the NIH Public Access Policy pre-existed the mandate and was established on the basis of voluntary participation by publishers. So the RWA wouldn't reverse the NIH Public Policy, but the basis on which it operates. We have stated very clearly that Elsevier would continue to work in partnership with NIH, as we do with others, to provide public access.

**RP:** What is the key issue here so far as Elsevier is concerned?

**AW:** The key issue is with the US Government dictating what is done with the articles we publish. Putting an article online for free has economic consequences for the publisher because it effectively takes away returns that a publisher earns from the value it has added and the investment it has made. And it has the potential to make a journal unsustainable. When a journal is unsustainable, the research community that relies on it loses.

## Association of American Publishers

**RP:** I want to explore with you some of the claims made in the [press release](#) released by the Association of American Publishers ([AAP](#)) at the end of last year, and get your views on its claims. For instance, it says, "The legislation is aimed at preventing regulatory interference with private-sector research publishers in the production, peer review and publication of scientific, medical, technical, humanities, legal and scholarly journal articles." Would you agree that the NIH policy regulates grantees, not publishers, and that publishers could simply refuse to publish NIH-funded

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**authors if it felt that the cost of publishing these papers exceeded the benefits for the company? That is the way that markets are supposed to work is it not?**

AW: Richard, it's probably best to talk directly with the AAP about its press release and the thoughts behind it. I've outlined Elsevier's views in the previous questions.

**RP: The press release also says, "the Research Works Act ensures the sustainability of this industry [academic publishing]". Do you not think that six years after the NIH Policy was introduced it would be fair to say that the industry is doing just fine? Consider, for instance, the financial analyses and comments [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#).**

AW: Richard, it's probably best to talk directly with the AAP about its press release and the thoughts behind it.

**RP: I do realise that in it [submission to OSTP](#) , Elsevier says, "Early indications show that the NIH Public Access Policy has had a negative impact on Elsevier and other publishers. We have experienced a modest reduction of usage (by subscribers) and transactional sales (for non-subscribers) for articles on our publishing platform after they are placed on PubMedCentral even with links to the published journal article." Is it possible to put a figure on this modest reduction?**

AW: Thanks for reading our submission. It does indeed say this, and we are currently evaluating the best way to disseminate these results.

**RP: Could not some of this modest reduction be a consequence of other factors than the NIH Policy? Could not take-up of the article lending service DeepDyve, for instance, have led to a fall in transactional sales for Elsevier?**

AW: Part of our test-and-learn approach is to carefully monitor the impact of different options and services so we can evaluate these independently. We believe in evidence-based policy making, so this is really important to us.

**RP: I also [understand](#) that 100% of surveyed publishers were found to be willing to publish NIH-funded authors, despite the need to make it publicly available within 12 months. Does that not suggest that the Policy offers little threat to scholarly publishers?**

Hmmm... I'm not sure that this Wikipedia page would count as a proper "survey". Anyway, as I explained in a [liblicense post](#):

*Elsevier participated in the voluntary NIH posting policy before the NIH mandate was enacted. We continue to post on behalf of our authors, despite increasing concern over the uniform 12 month embargo period and a principled objection to government-imposed mandates.*

**RP: The AAP press release implies that the NIH policy will cost jobs in the publishing industry. Peter Suber has suggested [five reasons](#) why this is unlikely. There is no evidence, he says, that the NIH policy has cost any jobs or journal cancellations. In fact, he adds, if that were so, then why did not Elsevier present such evidence to Congress when it was asked to provide it in [September 2008](#) and [July 2010](#).**

AW: Again, for comment on the AAP press release it is really best to talk with the AAP. I've answered these questions from Elsevier's perspective already.

**RP: The AAP press release also says, "The Research Works Act will prohibit federal agencies from unauthorised free public dissemination of journal articles that report on research which, to some degree, has been federally-funded but is produced and published by private sector publishers...." Can dissemination through PubMed Central as a result of the NIH Policy really classify as "unauthorised"? Is it not the case that NIH-funded authors are required to retain the non-exclusive right to authorise OA through PubMed Central? And is not the consent of the copyright holder "authority" to disseminate? Also, does Elsevier believe that publishers "produce" the research reported in the articles they publish?**

AW: Again, for comment on the AAP press release it is really best to talk with the AAP.

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On the specific question you ask of Elsevier, no we don't believe we "produce" the research reported in the articles we publish. How could we? It is the scientists that do this. But we do "produce" the formal publications that flow from this research, and we incur costs in this "production".

**RP:** I note also that in [Elsevier's submission to OSTP](#) it says, "Employers and funders sometimes seek to adopt copyright policies that are intended to override or undermine the agreements between authors and publishers." In fact, the NIH asserts rights upstream of any agreement with publishers doesn't it? Nothing is being overridden is it?

**AW:** I've consulted with colleagues in our legal department about a response to this question as it isn't my area of expertise. They say:

*It is the author we have an agreement with, not NIH. NIH's policy procedure asserts itself into the grant mechanisms prior to the creation of the article, and thus before the creation of copyright in the first place. However the NIH policy (and the policy of some other funders and employers) is intended to place a "lien" on the ultimate intellectual property that is produced, and thus undermines the general principles of copyright. Other funders and employers attempt to override existing agreements through various means.*

**RP:** One OA advocate has [said](#) that the RWA is "an admission by the publishers involved that they do not at present have any intrinsic intellectual property right to control the disposition of the Version of Record otherwise known as the 'publisher's pdf'. The Act is an attempt to create a new right." Would you agree with that? If not, why not?

**AW:** Maybe we should get all the lawyers to talk to each other directly! However, again acting as intermediary, here is how my legal colleagues respond:

*Publishers add the greatest concrete value in journal articles when and as we coordinate the review, consideration, addition of text and references, and other production and distribution mechanisms, and we think that RWA acknowledges this. Of course copyright arises on the creation of an article, and journals add other value to the scholarly communication system by for example fostering editorial perspective and viewpoints, aims and scope, and the like.*

**RP:** Finally, on the press release, it says, "Journal articles are widely available in major academic centers, public libraries, universities, interlibrary loan programs and online databases. Many academic, professional and business organisations provide staffs and members with access to such content...." Librarians argue that such walk-in services as you describe are in reality not widely available. Do you have any figures to demonstrate that they are?

**AW:** The press release is from the AAP, so probably best to refer to them for comment on it. Elsevier contracts with academic library customers do permit access for walk-in users. This is our standard practice.

Anecdotally, it appears that some libraries act on this and do provide walk-in access, and others do not citing reasons including costs, competition for terminals, and the like. Personally, I think it is unfortunate that many more libraries could provide walk-in access and do not.

**RP:** I understand you are saying that you do not wish to speak for AAP, but we should not give readers the impression that it is an organisation that Elsevier is unconnected with, or has no role in. Elsevier's [Y.S. Chi](#) is on the [board of directors](#) of the AAP, and I am told that Elsevier employees are on a number of its committees. And I would be most surprised if someone at Elsevier did not see the AAP press release before it was published. However, for purposes of clarity can you – or the head of corporate relations [Tom Reller](#) – confirm whether or not Elsevier agrees with everything written in the AAP press release. If it doesn't, can you say where it differs from the press release? If it does, I would be most grateful if you could go back and address the above questions on the press release.

**AW:** Richard, of course Elsevier is involved with a wide array of industry bodies including the AAP. It is wrong, however, to imagine that we control the AAP and its actions. We have influence, of course, and so do other members of the AAP. My colleague, Tom Reller, tells me that he did see an early draft of the release, but he's on the AAP's PR committee so that isn't particularly surprising.

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We agree with the broad terms of the press release since we too support the RWA, but the AAP produced it on behalf of all its members and that's why I think it more appropriate for you to discuss the press release with them.

## Special interests

**RP:** *You said that Elsevier lobbied for the RWA. As you know, one of the most vocal critics of the bill is PLoS co-founder [Michael Eisen](#), who has directly [criticised](#) Elsevier over the bill on his blog. As an OA publisher, of course, Eisen has his own axe to grind. But do you accept that he is justified in drawing attention to the fact that senior [Elsevier executives have contributed](#) to the two lawmakers who co-sponsored the bill – [Darrell Issa](#) and [Carolyn Maloney](#)?*

**AW:** I have personally learned more about such things since Michael Eisen's blog. We don't have a television at home, and I've never watched the [West Wing](#), but had I done so, my colleagues assure me, I would understand more about the American political process.

As a person who lives in Britain, I was initially surprised by the campaign donations. However I am told that, while not uncontroversial with all in America, such donations are commonplace. They are personal donations, not reimbursed by the company, and are perfectly allowable in the American political system provided that they are made transparently. It is in fact this transparency that made it so easy to see that Elsevier staff members had made contributions.

It should perhaps be no surprise that employees might support a candidate that is interested in their industry. I am told that many academics also make contributions to American politicians, for example through [Political Action Committees](#). I do know that [SPARC](#) [an Open Access organisation] lobbies for legislation, but I do not know specifically how this is done or whether financial contributions are made.

As a pragmatist, I think this underlines the key point: rather than relying on politicians to sort things out, it would be far more sensible for all stakeholders to talk and work together to find practical solutions. That's my very strong personal view.

**RP:** *What sort of support did Elsevier expect from the two co-sponsors of RWA when it donated money to them?*

**AW:** Certainly there can be no expectations when contributions are made. The insinuation is that the payments were made to 'buy legislation', and this is incorrect.

**RP:** *Eisen has also [drawn attention](#) to the similarity in language between statements made by Elsevier and statements made by one of the co-sponsors of the RWA, Rep. Maloney. Has Elsevier ever written PR material for the co-sponsors of the RWA?*

**AW:** If memory serves it was a criticism that our corporate communications team were writing text for everybody. I passed on your question and received this response from my colleague, Tom Reller:

*In regard to the similarity of content from things I've written, to Representative Maloney's letters, no I don't write for her staff. Now, I have written a lot over the years about the value of publishers, and I've contributed to various AAP committee content development efforts. To be honest it wouldn't surprise me if some of what I wrote, made it into some of what the AAP has been using to educate the Congresswoman for over the past five years. It's not particularly surprising nor damning that some of the language is similar.*

I suspect Tom is a bit flattered by the idea that his text is so perfect as to be plagiarised by politicians and government officials. Again, although he writes well, I question whether in reality it is all so dramatic.

**RP:** *I think it fair to say that Elsevier puts a lot of time and money into lobbying politicians and government agencies. People complain today about the power of "[special interests](#)" to influence political decisions. Do you think it is a problem? If so, do you believe that Elsevier might be part of the problem?*

**AW:** I've heard this a lot over the years, and so when I joined Elsevier I was intrigued to learn about our supposedly enormous lobbying machine. In reality we have a very small government affairs team, and they are all very nice people. There is unfortunately a somewhat adversarial style of public debate in the US, and I guess American politics would have to change in order for all people/organisations affected by it to change.

Personally, I am a pragmatist and believe people/organisations should get on with listening to each other and solving problems in win-win ways. Unfortunately, that's not always possible.

**RP:** *Has Elsevier played any role in the proposed Stop Online Piracy Act ([SOPA](#)) and Protect IP Act ([PIPA](#)) bills? I understand it supports SOPA. Can you say why? And does it support/have a view on PIPA?*

**AW:** I don't believe we have played a role, although we do support the act because piracy is a real problem for all of the creative industries including publishing. We have laws against theft in the real world, and similar social norms are needed online.

Publishers value freedom of expression and the internet, and don't want to do anything to undermine the former or shut down the latter.

**RP:** *What should we make of the fact that a [growing number of AAP members](#) are publicly disavowing the RWA, including [MIT Press](#), [Nature Publishing Group](#) and the [AAAA](#)?*

**AW:** From the public statements I have seen it appears that a majority of publishers support the principles underlying the RWA (i.e. no government mandates) even if they do not agree with the legislation itself.

**RP:** *Have you been surprised at the level of anger the RWA has sparked amongst the research community, anger that has, for instance, seen thousands of researchers [publicly committing to boycott](#) Elsevier? Do you fear that Elsevier's relationship with its authors may have been irrevocably damaged as a result of the RWA?*

**AW:** What I was rather surprised about is that other publishers stepped back from public support of the RWA at the first hint of controversy. While perhaps understandable this left Elsevier, unfairly I think, isolated and the sole focus for some anger. We value all of our relationships and hope through better communication and engagement they can continue to be nurtured and strengthened.

## Open data

**RP:** *What are Elsevier's views on open data?*

**AW:** These are outlined in our [OSTP submission on public access to digital data](#). Professional curation and preservation of data is, like professional publishing, neither easy nor inexpensive. The grand challenge is to develop approaches that maximize access to data in ways that are sustained over time, ensure the quality of the scientific record, and stimulate innovation.

- We believe rich interconnections between publications and scientific data are important to support our customers to advance science and health.
- We recognize that scientists invest substantially in creating and interpreting data, and their intellectual and financial contributions need to be recognized and valued.
- Funders too invest substantially in these data and their contributions need to be recognized and valued.
- Where publishers add value and/or incur significant cost then our contributions also need to be recognized and valued.
- There are potential new roles, and we want to embrace an active test-and-learn approach.
- We will be sensitive to different practices and preferences between subject areas as we test and learn.

- Any role for Elsevier would not be exclusive, and we want to work in collaboration with other stakeholders to establish a sustainable framework for the discovery and use of scientific data.

**RP:** I note in its [OSTP submission](#) Elsevier says that it is developing solutions for text-mining, linking and visualisation etc. It adds, “We are able to make these sorts of investments to make data more easily discoverable and reusable because we have sustainable business models for our journals.” This might seem to suggest that Elsevier believes it needs to earn high revenues from its journals in order to subsidise the development of discovery tools. Would that be correct? Should not such discovery services be self-financing?

**AW:** We have a wide mix of business models, and services built over content are an increasingly important part of this mix.

We don’t have a crystal ball, and so don’t yet know the relative proportion of revenue that will come from these different models. Developing new models and services requires investment, and the capacity to invest comes from generating a surplus.

To be successful, however, new services have to fill a real need and do of course need business models that are themselves sustainable.

**RP:** Looking to the future of scholarly publishing, some might argue that Elsevier currently has things the wrong way round. When I [spoke to](#) BioMed Central founder [Vitek Tracz](#) in 2006, for instance, he suggested that in the future there will be no viable business model for publishing papers, certainly in the way they are published today. Both the traditional paper and the traditional journal, he said, will give way to new ways of sharing research findings. For this reason, he added, publishers will need to focus on creating products from the data in papers, not from the papers themselves. Do you agree with that? If you do, should not Elsevier be shifting its energy and resources from journal publishing to creating the value-added databases that Tracz talked about, rather than ([in the words of critics](#)) seeking to protect an outdated business model?

**AW:** I have noticed several comments along the lines of “see the future, be there, or die”, for example in the comment thread to a recent [Chronicle of Higher Education](#) article. We at Elsevier absolutely agree with this. Here are a few examples of how we are helping to shape that future:

- [Article of the Future](#) – a new way of presenting articles with a dedicated navigation pane, a central ‘traditional text’ frame, and a separate pane for key supporting information such as links to data and visualizations.
- [Geofacets](#) – to help geoscientist speed up oil and gas discovery by collating all information on carefully selected locations.
- [SciVerse Apps](#)– a development environment in which scientists and others can build apps that leverage our content and services, and share these with others.

We focus on publishing high-quality content and in increasing research productivity in the ways we deliver content and services. We have transformed from a journal publisher to a service provider for the research community to address key issues, for instance in the area of research performance evaluation.

**RP:** What should we infer from Elsevier’s [funding](#) of NaCTeM and [SciVerse Applications](#), and its recent [acquisition](#) of [QUOSA](#)? Does this demonstrate that Elsevier now “gets it” that the value publishers can provide no longer lies in publishing papers, but in providing discovery tools and value-added databases etc.?

**AW:** We get this. We’ve had it for some time!

## Peer review and the role of commercial publishers

**RP:** *There are also growing calls for the research community to abandon pre-publication peer review. This is an argument frequently made by former editor of the [British Medical Journal Richard Smith](#), for instance, who [believes](#) that it is time to move to a post-publication peer review process. Another advocate of this approach is former [BioMed Central](#) publisher [Jan Velterop](#), who [argues](#) that huge savings could be made by abandoning pre-publication peer review, which, he says, is in any case increasingly ineffective. Velterop estimates that STM publishing costs in the order of \$3 billion a year, which he says represents about \$2,000 per paper. By contrast, he says, it costs just \$7 to make a paper available on the physics preprint server [arXiv](#). If we adopted an arXiv-like model, but added a post-publication review service on top of it (what Velterop calls an “[endorsement system](#)”), he says, huge savings in the amount of public money spent on disseminating research could be achieved. Is Elsevier sympathetic to such views?*

**AW:** You might find Elsevier’s recent [submission to the UK inquiry on peer review](#) interesting. It explains that:

- We believe peer review is fundamental to academia and research. Peer review was developed by researchers and exists to assess articles for originality, sound method, and valid conclusions. Peer review is crucial to the learning and progression of scholars, is the essence of the scientific journal, and is essential to the progress of knowledge.
- Publishers manage the peer review system on behalf of scientific communities. Publishers act as stewards to support its continuous development and facilitate its use for the scientific community. Publishers have made significant investments into the peer review system to improve efficiency, speed, and quality.
- The peer review process is highly valued. Researchers regard it as an integral part of their research and they actively support it to further knowledge, encourage learning, and to ensure the highest quality research is communicated. Peer review has also evolved to underpin other aspects of science, such as allocation of funding and promotion decisions.
- The peer review process is not perfect in every respect, but it is dynamic and continues to evolve. We strive for continual improvement in three key areas – speed, time commitment for reviewers, and impartiality.
- Peer review processes continue to benefit from publishers’ investments in technological platforms and workflow systems, and from the deployment of guidelines, procedures and frameworks that uphold the high standards of objectivity and ethics in science communication.

**RP:** *There is also a school of thought that says commercial publishers no longer have a valid role to play in scholarly communication. How would you respond to those who argue this?*

**AW:** Historically, universities themselves published research articles, but they concluded that it was more effective and efficient for dedicated publishers to do this. There is a role for both commercial and not-for-profit publishers in the scholarly environment.

Commercial publishers are especially able to command resources to:

- invest in the creation of new journals where there is a demand for them
- market those journals to create an audience of users that will make them sustainable
- evolve new sustainable business models to expand access
- develop new technologies and platforms to access journal content and improve researcher productivity (e.g., [ScienceDirect](#), [Scopus](#), [Scirus](#), [CrossRef](#), [CrossCheck](#), [Article of the future](#), text-mining tools, measurement tools)
- leverage their scale for efficiencies (e.g. to share production/operations facilities and staff across journals (e.g. the costs of typesetting, pre-press, and production).

In a world where only government, universities, and not-for-profits did all the publishing the scholarly communication system would be exposed to cyclical financial risk – for example, in a tough financial climate like that for universities today we might see the ability of academics to publish rationed or investment in platforms and systems curtailed.

The scholarly communication system is more resilient because there are many different funding sources in the mix, including the ability of commercial companies to obtain funding from the markets.

**RP: What is your personal view of the future of scholarly publishing, the role that Open Access will play in that process, and the role that Elsevier will play in it?**

**AW:** Richard, your excellent (and exhausting!) questions have led us over this terrain already. To summarise succinctly, scholarly publishing remains important and continues to evolve. Open access is here to stay, and will increase to a higher proportion of the scholarly literature. Others models will also remain part of the landscape, and this mixed economy is important for resilience.

I hope very much that Elsevier will continue to play a vibrant role, but of course no organization has a right to survive and to thrive we must continue to serve real needs and add real value. I very much hope in future that Elsevier can communicate more and better as it is sometimes rather harshly portrayed and a bit misunderstood.

**RP: On that note, can I finish by putting this last question to you: The research community is now saying loudly and clearly that it cannot and/or will not continue paying scholarly publishers (be it via subscriptions or author-side fees) the same sums of money that it has been paying them. Do you therefore accept that Elsevier inevitably faces declining revenues, and thus profits, going forward? If you don't, why do you not?**

**AW:** No we don't accept that. While Elsevier, and other publishers, are committed to quality and keeping pace with the growth in research outputs, we are also mindful of the financial pressures on our customers.

Rejections rates for journals are actually going up, which is an indication that our editors are being more selective about quality. Our goal is to provide customers with value for money: we constantly drive down the cost/access for high quality information. Historically, universities themselves published research articles, but they concluded that it was more effective and efficient for dedicated publishers to do it.



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