

# Why academic journals need to go

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In his fantastic Peters Memorial Lecture on occasion of receiving [CNI's Paul Evan Peters award](#), Herbert Van de Sompel of Los Alamos National Laboratory described my calls to drop subscriptions as “radical” and “extremist” (starting at about minute 58):

Scholarly Communication: Deconstruct & Decentralize?

Scholarly Communication: Deconstruct & Decentralize?

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Regardless of what Herbert called my views, this is a must-see presentation in which Herbert essentially presents the technology and standards behind the [functionalities](#) I have been asking for and have been trying to get implemented for the last decade or so. Apparently, where we differ is only that I actually want to use the functionalities and concepts he describes in his presentation and, consequently, I am naive or idealistic enough to think of ways to get there. If this makes me a radical, so be it: *radix* is Latin for ‘root’ and I try to tackle the root of our problems.

Right before he talks about me, he also mentions David Lewis’ [2.5% Commitment](#), which I also support. In Cameron Neylon’s [critique](#) of Lewis’ approach one can find an important realization that bears quoting and repeating as it is one of the main obstacles why Herbert thinks we will never have the tools he describes in his presentation. Cameron writes:

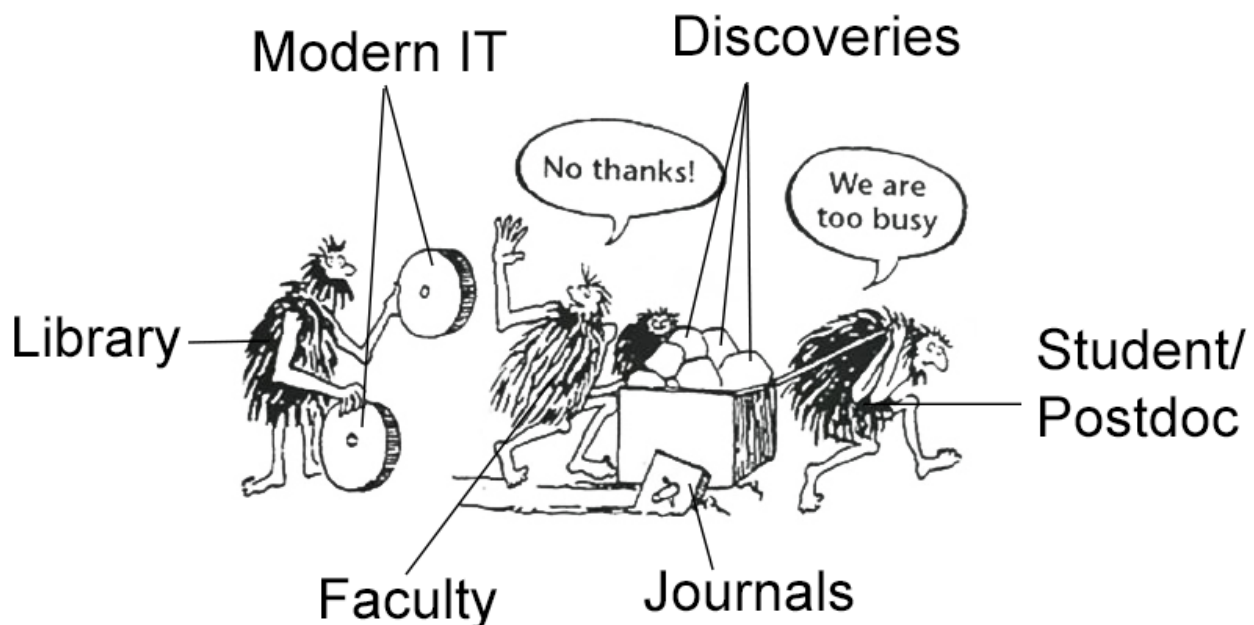
*That in turn is the problem in the scholarly communication space. Such shared identities and notions of consent do not exist. The somewhat unproductive argument over whether it is the libraries responsibility to cut subscriptions or academics responsibility to ask them to illustrates this. It is actually a shared responsibility, but one that is not supported by sense of shared identity and purpose, certainly not of shared governance. And notably success stories in cutting subscriptions all feature serious efforts to form and strengthen shared identity and purpose within an institution before taking action.*

Cameron very astutely dissects one of the main sociological issues holding us back: scholars do not share a common identity any more, just as librarians and faculty do not and just as different scholarly institutions do not share an identity with each other. So pernicious an effect have the neoliberal mantras of “competition” and “every man for himself” had on scholarship, that it has all but completely disintegrated into either warring factions or competing careerists. University rankings provide a clear metaphor for scholarly institutions as players in a competition for whatever the neoliberal ideologues want them to compete for: funds, human resources or prestige (aka. the scholarly fetish “[excellence](#)”). If you talk to current university presidents, deans or provosts or read what they have written, it seems as if most of them have completely absorbed the neoliberal cool-aid and made themselves the defenders of individuality, competition and external ‘incentives’, with the underlying assumption that without those concepts, everybody in academia would just sit in their comfy chairs and collect tax funds, twiddling their thumbs. Apparently, carrots and sticks are the only way to squeeze

excellence out of otherwise lazy, selfish and parasitic scholars. Ironically, election data suggest that a large section of these scholarly politicians, if they are representative of their academic peers at large, may go on to vote for left-of-center parties or candidates who vow to combat exactly the neoliberal policies they so ardently defend in their day jobs.

Be that as it may, apparently even for an advocate and expert like Herbert, asking scholars to cooperate in order to achieve a greater, public good, has now become sufficient grounds to label someone who strives for cooperation as a “radical” or an “extremist”. If indeed he is correct and in 2018 asking scholars to behave cooperatively, rather than competitively, is something so exotic and outrageous, scholarship has deserved the state it currently is in.

These thoughts have reminded me of an old cartoon I’ve been showing in many of my presentations. Now, I’m posting a disambiguated version of the cartoon (sorry, I can’t provide a source for the cartoon, created it from a photograph I once was sent) that I hope explains in an entertaining way why dropping all subscriptions and buying Herbert’s solutions from the money instead isn’t extreme at all (click for larger image):



All scholars and those working to support scholars share a common identity. Cameron is spot on in that all too few are realizing that we all strive for better scholarship, for more knowledge. Acquiring knowledge for its own sake is one of the very few behaviors that humans do not share with other animals and all scholars share a particular enthusiasm for knowledge. In fact, the German word for scholarship is “Wissenschaft”, literally translated with “knowledge creation”. In this argument, it doesn’t matter if scholar A is at institution X and librarian B is at institution Y – they are all scholars.

I must assume (not having been there) that this sense of communalism (to use Merton’s term) and shared identity (to use Cameron’s term) must have been much more prevalent in the early 1990s when institutions invested in routers, cables, computers and other hardware (and time!) for something that nobody knew what it could do: the WWW. I often wonder what faculty would have said around 1992 (first time I had an email address), when asked by a computing center

employee: “wouldn’t you like a new service, let’s call it ‘email’ by which your students could reach you 24/7?”. I would tend to believe that if that had been the mindset of infrastructure experts at the time, we would not have any internet today.

Instead, infrastructure experts at the time embraced the new technology, were competent enough to realize which standards worked and would be sustainable long into the future and started spending some serious money – regardless of whether faculty expressed any interest in using any of this technology. In contrast, today, we stand to save money from adopting the standards Herbert talks about and yet thinking about how to practically achieve adoption of such common standards is grounds for being labeled an extremist. How dare I suggest implementing modern technology without asking faculty first! Today, we have similarly competent experts like Herbert, but they seem to despair, expecting this modern technology to never arrive for scholarship, instead of doing what their predecessors have done: embrace the new technology and the potential it brings and implement it. What a difference 25 years make: the common good was sufficient cause for spending money in the 1990s, when today it is seen as ‘extremist’ just to try and save money while promoting the common good.

Today, librarians and other infrastructure experts dare not implement modern technology without fear of reprisals: after all, faculty are not colleagues any more who share a common identity, they are customers and librarians are service providers in this corporation only called ‘university’ for dusty historical reasons. Clearly, single institutions cannot act without risking league table standings or the competitiveness of their labor force. Everyone is busy chasing prestige in an absurd artificial competition where “excellence” is the only thing that counts, but can’t itself be counted. Some of Monty Python’s most absurd sketches appear rational in comparison.

When done competently, dropping subscriptions today doesn’t risk anybody’s livelihoods or league standings any more. Thanks to a [growing set of tools](#), journals remain accessible during the transition period. The old adage “everybody who needs access has access”, once used to resist open access campaigning, has finally become true – without subscriptions. We just need to take advantage of the [new circumstances](#). After the transition, nobody needs access to journals that do not exist any more, so the enabling properties of this toolset are decisive here and the set not comprising a solution becomes irrelevant: we have the solutions, as Herbert so eloquently explains. What we need are enabling technologies. We have those now, too. Most journals won’t survive being cut off from all funding.

And yet, faculty continue to chase journal spots as vehicles for their discoveries from which they hope to harvest sufficient prestige just to keep going. Without removing this source of prestige, faculty and students/postdocs have little other choice than to reject the better vehicles we now could offer. This is the main reason why 25 years of campaigning for scholarly infrastructure reform have barely brought scholarship to embrace the web of 1995 (in the words of Jon Tennant). Journals, the square wheels, are the main physical obstacles to the technology Herbert describes in his presentation. They need to go. That is a rational solution that targets the root of the problem. If scholars can find the Higgs Boson, I’m confident they can find other

sources of prestige once journals have ceased to exist – should they decide that chasing prestige is a functionality they wish to replicate.

Coincidentally, journal subscriptions also usurp most of the funds required for implementing Herbert's solutions – the round wheels. Canceling subscriptions hence serves two main purposes: removing the main obstacle for scholars using modern information technology and freeing up funds to implement said technology: removing the square wheels and replacing them with round wheels. Subscription journals are the keystone in the current scholarly communication arch: remove them and it all falls apart. Any journal-like functionality that scholars value is easily recreated with modern technology, but with [new functionalities](#) and few, if any, of the current [disadvantages](#) and [unintended consequences](#).

Finally, with scholars so busy chasing excellence, chances are slim to none they will ever ask for round wheels, as so many librarians I speak to seem to hope for.