How the rich get richer

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HHMI will bestow monetary rewards on a commercial publisher in return for the type of public access already provided by many nonprofit publishers.

The Howard Hughes Medical Institute (HHMI) has announced that it will pay the commercial publisher Elsevier $1,500 for each article by an HHMI investigator published in an Elsevier journal (1). This payment will allow public access to the article via PubMed Central six months after the publication date.[1]

Two problems with this deal immediately come to mind. First, there is a clear potential for conflict of interest when a publisher stands to benefit financially by publishing papers from a particular organization. Second, and even more seriously, this action by HHMI undermines the effort to persuade commercial publishers to make their content public after a short delay, by rewarding them for not doing so.

The HHMI–Elsevier deal coincides with an impending mandate to make publications resulting from HHMI-funded research available to the public after a six-month delay (2). To fulfill this mandate, HHMI had two options: (1) take a stand against commercial publishers by prohibiting the highly productive and influential HHMI-funding recipients from publishing in journals that do not release their content after six months, or (2) capitulate to the commercial publishers and pay them to release HHMI papers after six months. Choosing the former option had the potential to force the commercial publishers to reconsider their policies or risk losing prized content. HHMI chose the latter.

For many years The Rockefeller University Press and many other nonprofit publishers have released *all* of their content to the public after only six months, and have proven that such a policy does not reduce subscription revenues. We thus provide *all* authors with a free service for which HHMI will now pay Elsevier. Commercial publishers should need no financial incentive to provide this service to the scientific research community, on whom they rely for their content, their quality control, their subscribers, and for the patronage of their advertisers. Instead, Elsevier has accepted a deal that does a disservice to that community by increasing publication costs and thus further reducing the funds available for research.

HHMI has rewarded Elsevier for their steadfast refusal to release their content by further enhancing their already highly profitable business model.[2] Although nonprofit publishers are motivated by the dissemination of knowledge rather than the acquisition of profits, we still require considerable sums to operate. If we can afford to release our content after six months without the benefit of HHMI's largess, then surely commercial publishers can do so as well. It is unfortunate that HHMI has forfeited its substantial bargaining power in a deal that represents a setback to the mission of public access.

[1]For journals published by Cell Press, which is owned by Elsevier, the payment will be $1,000. Papers published in Cell Press journals are already released to the public after twelve months—Elsevier has convinced HHMI that they will lose this much revenue by releasing this content just six months before they normally would.

[2]Elsevier reported profits of US $925 million in 2006.

References

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