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Portfolio 3

Academic journals and scholarly article databases have been around longer than the United States has, and have historically gone hand in hand with higher education and University study. Despite this long history, many debates are emerging as to whether or not these devices still have a purpose in the modern world. Some people feel that with the rise of the internet, subscription journals are making knowledge too exclusive in an era where it shouldn’t be. As a result, these individuals believe that it is time to put an end to the usage of such databases. What the above-mentioned people fail to realize is that despite the recent advances in information sharing technology, academic journals are still vitally important to the advancement of understanding. Getting rid of this time-honored way of sharing information would result in huge losses to the world of research.

When looking back at the history of scholarly journals, one finds that they were created to fill a need in the scientific and academic communities. These groups wanted a method that not only allowed them to spread their ideas, but to also receive input from intellectual individuals from other places. Thus came the creation of academic journals. With these periodicals, “authors contributed their works for publication in order to disseminate their ideas, and the scholarly societies compiled journals for distribution to scholars who then responded with contributions of their own.” (Keefer) The first of these databases was seen in Europe as early as the mid 1600’s, and they became increasingly popular among scientists and researchers since their inception. Since they were the main centers of research, universities traditionally were the main creators and distributors of journals. This however changed after the Second World War, where the world began to experience a period of exponential scientific advancement. With this came a major increase in the number of articles that scientists and academics were releasing. Universities, which had limited publishing capacities, found the new demand for information increasingly difficult to meet. As a result, the second half of the twentieth century saw private publishing firms take over the role of creating and producing academic journals. With the emergence of online journals in the 1990’s, it became even easier to widely disseminate newly found knowledge. (Keefer) Today, academic journals are widely used by scientists, researchers, and scholars alike as a tool to aid them in their studies.

With their extensive history and widespread use, it does initially seem surprising that many people are now strongly opposed to academic journals. The reasoning behind this stance has to do not only with the current times, but also with a development that has occurred over the past twenty years or so. Scholarly databases have seen their prices increase enormously during the 1990’s and 2000’s. “From 1986-2005, serial expenditures for the member libraries of the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) have increased 302% while the number of serial items purchased has increased only 1.9% on average per year.” (McGuigan) This has created problems, mainly that colleges and universities now have to be more selective with what they buy. According to a relatively recent study on the effect these price increases had on history research, “explosive growth in the cost of scientific, technical, and medical (STM) journals were soaking up resources for monograph expenditures.” (Townsend) In addition to all of this, the onset of the internet age and the increased flow of information in general have some people questioning why academic materials are being kept out of reach of the general public. As an opinion piece concerning the matter stated, “This extraordinary racket is, at root, about the bewitching power of high-brow brands.” (Academic Journals)

The above-mentioned argument certainly has some merit, and does bring to light some problems that, if fixed, would benefit the world as a whole. However, the movement to put an end to academic journals is entirely is based off of incomplete thinking. Such a viewpoint completely ignores the extent to which these databases are used today, as well as the fact that they are still instrumental for scientific and intellectual progress. Not only that, but despite their imperfections, they remain one of the best tools that scientists and researchers have when conducting their studies.

One of the main reasons that academic journals are still enormously popular among people involved in research has to do with the nature of research itself. It is a well-known fact that anyone involved in such a line of work will spend much time reading. Through reading, one can gain sense of inspiration and direction for individual projects. It is then easy to see why academic journals are so helpful with the above-mentioned field; they provide a plethora of articles that can prove to be invaluable in research projects. Carol Tenopir, who did an extensive project on the relevance of scholarly journals, concluded that researchers in all fields of study read an average of 130 articles per year. In her words, “Scientists have always relied on reading the research of others to support their own work, but the amount that they read has often been grossly underestimated.” (Tenopir)

In addition to giving a sense of direction with research projects, academic journals can end up influencing individual work directly. This comes in the form of peer review, an art which is practiced in virtually all academic journals seen today. The process behind this is self-explanatory; works published to academic journals will be reviewed by those who read it, who will then in turn write back with comments of their own. Taking part in this process allows researchers to gain valuable insight into their own projects, which in turn can enrich and improve various projects. The onset of electronic journals has made the review process much easier, meaning that more input can be given. This is extremely helpful to research. As educational psychologist David Solomon stated in a piece concerning the subject, “Using the Internet to conduct reviews dramatically reduces the cost and effort involved in peer review and makes it feasible to include a larger number of reviewers per manuscript.” (Solomon)

Perhaps the most important point of all, academic journals give researchers the benefit of providing them with sources that are legitimate. As anyone who had done research would know, not all information will be reliable. Some sources will be full of errors, while others may not come from a reputable author. Even with the aid of the internet, sifting through countless essays and papers to find legitimate information can be tedious. Academic journals virtually eliminate this issue, compiling only essays that are proven to be trustworthy. This can partly be attributed to the peer review process, because, “it allows these professionals to ensure that the information shared is accurate.” (3 Reasons)

Putting an end to academic journals would bring great loss to the research community. Such a tool has proven to be invaluable to scientists and academics through their work. That is not to say that the argument against such databases is completely wrong however. A few problems do exist with the current system that should be addressed. Like anything else, innovation is key to ensuring that scholarly journals continue to be relevant in the future.

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