

ACTA at the Crossroads

Academic publishing is at a critical juncture. The challenges faced by the academics are mired in controversy. Among these are three hotly debated concerns. First is the issue of whether technological innovations such as artificial intelligence (AI) improves research efficiency or if its use sacrifices research integrity.¹ Another is the controversy between paywall publishing and open access. Lastly, adapting an appropriate business model for sustainability is a contentious issue and the choice between a commercial or a university-based publishing platform is a difficult one.

Traditional models of scientific investigation relied on tedious intellectual calisthenics in all aspects of research — identifying research gaps, reviewing of published literature, devising valid methodology, collecting data, analysing results, and, finally, drawing conclusions. With the advent of powerful tools employing artificial intelligence, these heavy tasks are efficiently carried out. The dilemma lies in determining which parts of the work can be attributed to the authors and which are ascribed to the output of large language models (LLMs) and other automated assistance employed.² Despite requiring adequate vetting by experts of these AI-aided output, many in the scientific community still question these methods. Can research employing AI be considered honest work? Will full disclosure answer doubts as to the integrity of the scientific work?

Indeed, LLMs just gather information that is already out there, albeit more efficiently. After all, science progresses by standing on the shoulder of giants. AI makes such work comprehensive and efficient. Standing on those proverbial shoulders, however, require access to prior work, hence our next challenge in academic publishing—open access versus paid access.³ Paywalls limit the benefits of valuable research to institutions and universities with the capacity to pay. Excluded from these are those from low resourced countries, with nations from the global south being affected disproportionately. Additionally, while numerous authors appreciate the features of open access as it improves their impact and visibility, many feel unduly burdened since the cost of publishing in this format is passed on to them.⁴

This brings us to our third issue: who bears the cost of academic publishing? Indeed, it is a lucrative industry, generating an annual revenue of US\$19 billion and an estimated 40 percent profit margin.⁵ Many, however, find fault in this business model as concerns about the profit motives of the commercial publishers far overshadow their sustainability goals.⁶

How do we navigate this landscape of controversies? We, at the ACTA, as part of the community of scholars, would need to clarify our mission. Our goals for this publication should be consistent with our values. These values, such as scientific rigor, integrity, and accountability, should be reflected in our policies. We should be cognizant of the role we play in national scientific discourse while we endeavor to make an impact in the global scene. We are accountable to our stakeholders — nurturing early career scholars, supplying evidence to health policymakers, and being accountable to those who provide resources to sustain us. This stewardship is essential so that ACTA will stand shoulder to shoulder with the giants on which science builds upon to benefit future generations.

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