ASOR Journal Prices and Sales in a Changing Market

by Jeffrey A. Blakely

Introduction

On 1 January 2010 ASOR began to distribute its journals electronically as well as on the printed page. This report examines various consequences of this and other prior decisions on the prices and sales of our journals. The report represents the thinking and conclusions only of the author but includes observations and suggestions of others.

In the past ten months I have used various college, university, and national library collections around the US and Europe, and in conversations with these institutional librarians I became concerned that ASOR would soon see a diminished subscription and membership base for our professional journals, ***BASOR*** and ***NEA***, simply because we converted to an electronic format. The reason is fairly simple, once our current, electronic journals became available, no longer would there be a reason for any institution to maintain more than one electronic subscription and that single institutions with more than one subscription would cut back from as many as four to a single subscription. In addition where a university or college or seminary system has multiple libraries on different campuses the same dynamic would occur. Please note, I did not foresee a drop in readership, but only subscriptions and that is because multiple users can access a single electronic subscription in ways not possible with a printed subscription. Income, however, is based on subscriptions and if we simply maintain our current pricing structures we will see a drop in total income from journals.

It now appears my concerns were at least in part warranted. The numbers of paid print subscriptions for the past four ***BASOR***s are: #356 538, #357 492, #358 483, and #359 460. This is a drop of 78 print subscriptions that are partially offset by about 20 digital subscriptions. Still the net loss is over 50. As I have conducted research on this topic, I have concluded that other factors are also in play, but again the major factor is the result of a decision made by ASOR a number of years ago.

In the pages that follow I will present a very brief summary of recent trends in academic journal publication, a terse review of some aspects of ASOR's recent journals pricing, sales, and distribution decisions, and an overview of alternatives we can examine as we address these issues.

At the outset I thank those who have freely given of their advice as I sought to understand the issues: Charles T. Watkinson, Director of the Purdue University Press; Lawrence J. Mykytiuk, Microtext and History Librarian, Purdue University Libraries; Raymond English, Director of Libraries, Oberlin College; Ken Frazier, Director of the University of Wisconsin-Madison General Library System; John R. Bartlett, former editor of ***PEQ*** and current Chairman of the Palestine Exploration Fund; and Mitch Allen, COP Member and

Publisher, Left Coast Press. Each of these individuals has a keen interest in scholarly publishing and the dissemination of scholarly research. They represent people who produce and sell the journals, purchasers of the journals for libraries, and scholars who study the interface between publishers and users. In addition, many librarians across the US and Europe have explained aspects of their library's journals acquisitions policies to me. I also thank Kevin Cooney and Andy Vaughn for gathering and providing current sales and other information about ASOR's journals, and to Cynthia Rufo for finding needed files in the ASOR Archives.

Journals and Libraries

The digital age brought many changes to the publication industry. Decisions made by large commercial journal publishers and distributors created a financial crisis in how institutional libraries subscribed to journals and what journals they acquired as libraries sought to fulfill their own academic missions. This interface is actually a field of academic study.

At the most basic level, commercial publishers of leading academic journals dramatically raised prices as the digital revolution played out. They saw they could maximize profit by selling their journals at high prices to institutions that simply had to have them. This means both Research I institutions and those that specialized in a particular field, and, in other cases, almost all institutions who might need them to support a quality liberal arts education. This meant price escalation far beyond inflation faced libraries who were forced to make hard decisions and start cutting journals. One result was that journals produced by not-for-profit academic groups like ASOR could see a declining subscription base if their journals were not considered the leading journals. These groups generally tried to maintain their subscription base by keeping prices low so they would not be cut.

Digital journal distribution meant that larger institutions could cut back the number of subscriptions since one digital subscription could serve all of their libraries. Not surprisingly this led to further price increases as commercial publishers sought to maintain profits, and, for the libraries who only ever need one subscription, another round of journal cutting. Conversion to digital subscriptions meant that libraries no longer had to maintain any physical space for these journals on their shelves. In addition some groups, such as JSTOR, sought licenses to scan back issues of journals and sell libraries access to them at relatively low cost. As long as a journal was digital, therefore, it was possible for a library to banish them from the shelves, opening up new space for books. For the not-for-profit publisher this meant a small but real income stream derived from its older journals, usually those over three years old.

Other groups, including ProQuest, EBSCO, and Wilson, for example, sought out not-for-profit small academic publishers and asked to distribute their current journals in a digital format as part of journal packages that libraries could buy at reduced rates. These are very popular with libraries. A decade ago this was also viewed as a good deal for the not-for-profit small academic publishers, like ASOR, who licensed their product for a front-end payment and an income stream. It made the journals available at institutions that simply did not have a need to subscribe to the standard print subscriptions. At the time this was viewed as not competing with the print versions of the journals.

For the extremely cash-strapped smaller institutional library with no specialty in a particular field, they could subscribe to JSTOR and get journals covering all years of publication of a journal's run except, usually, the three most current years. In some cases, and this seems to be increasing recently, these libraries simply stopped subscribing to the current years and picked them up after a three year delay through JSTOR. In a field like archaeology where older materials matter as much as current, this is a viable option.

Other cash strapped institutions of all sizes started to drop subscriptions and count on groups like ProQuest, EBSCO, and Wilson to provide current materials at a reduced cost. This has become more popular in recent years as users are more computer savvy and the wireless internet has become faster. As a case in point, earlier this year Purdue University dropped ***BASOR*** and ***JCS*** after decades of subscription and now relies on EBSCO to provide the content.

Digital journals allow entire multi-campus university and seminary systems, again, to pare back because one digital subscription could cover the entire system. For example, the University of Wisconsin system which has 26 campuses and 178,000 students, 42,100 of whom are in Madison. It is possible for one campus, usually Madison, to subscribe to a journal. It is possible for two or three (e.g., Madison, Milwaukee, and LaCrosse) to share a subscription. Or it is possible for these two or three campuses to pay for a subscription that covers the entire 26 campus system. Each process is followed, but, it seems, some providers are more diligent than others and many times a subscription only to Madison may not be encoded properly by the provider and become available to the entire system. This, generally, is the fault of the provider and demands constant diligence to make sure that the one subscription is limited to the entire system of 26 campuses.

It is also clear the universities, colleges, and seminaries actually expect a substantial bump in price when a journal goes digital since, as just described, the individual campuses or university system may only need one subscription when, before, many were needed. ASOR did not impose a large price increase on its digital copies.

ASOR and Its Journals

ASOR kept its journal subscriptions print until 1 January 2010 when it began to offer them digitally through ATYPON-Link. As prices for scholarly journals increased in the later 1990s and 2000s ASOR kept its print prices low in an attempt to maximize subscriptions. In addition and starting a decade or so ago, ASOR licensed groups like ProQuest, EBSCO, and Wilson to distribute an electronic version of our current journals to libraries through various packages. ASOR got an upfront fee and an annual payment that has been called "paltry" by a librarian with whom I discussed this. These were long-term contracts, many times with roll over clauses. In late 2008 Executive Director Andy

Vaughn began to cancel, or not renew, some of these contracts because of the "paltry" return, especially for current content. At the present time, some, but not all, of these contracts have been terminated. ASOR also licensed its non-current content to JSTOR and here it sees a growing income stream.

In the Spring of 2009 it became clear to Executive Director Andy Vaughn that we were beginning to lose journal subscriptions, and maybe even institutional members, because we did not distribute our journals in a digital format. Simply put, and as noted previously, some major research institutions and libraries had severe space issues and one way they sought to solve this problem by dropping most, if not all, paper journal subscriptions and replace them with digital, web-based journal dissemination. Some institutions were refusing to subscribe to our journals unless the journal could be obtained electronically.

Since institutional subscriptions and memberships are at the heart of the financial structure of ASOR's publications program, Andy undertook a rapid, but deliberate, search process to find a cost effective means to distribute our journals digitally. In the end ATYPON-Link was chosen as the means to accomplish such distribution. One reason for this choice was that it was known that JSTOR was looking to enter the market for marketing and distributing current scholarly journals starting in 2011 and the ATYPON platform was to be used. If this new JSTOR program, now called JSTOR Current Scholarship, came into fruition and turned out to be financially viable and beneficial for the marketing and distribution of ASOR's journals, then migration from ATYPON-Link to JSTOR Current Scholarship would be greatly simplified if ASOR were to choose that option

ASOR's contract with ATYPON-Link became operative on 1 January 2010. Since that time all ASOR members and subscribers have the option of choosing either digital or paper copies of ***BASOR***, ***NEA***, and ***JCS***. This action stemmed the tide of institutions dropping our journals for lack of the digital option. In addition, we made the same option available to individual members and subscribers. At this point we are not sufficiently into the program to determine the precise impacts of these options on institutions and members. We also do not know how many members and subscribers want digital versus paper versions of our publications because ASOR subscriptions can start in any quarter of the year and some subscribers are only now being faced with the options. By the Spring Trustee meeting of 2011 we should be able to provide a preliminary analysis based on our experience of one year.

Consequences of Various of the ASOR Actions

I have described where we are and how we got here. There are consequences. As noted at the very beginning and throughout the discussion, the expected drop in subscriptions because a university campus or system can purchase one electronic version instead of three to six individual copies seems to be confirmed to some level. At this point the drop may be about 50 for ***BASOR***. That has a substantial impact to our journal finances. ***NEA*** is much harder to determine since it ran late for so long.

In conducting this research, it became clear that there is another equal or potentially greater factor. It seems that for the past five or six years, in particular, and with growing momentum that libraries have been dropping subscriptions to our journals and switching to the far cheaper ProQuest, EBSCO, and Wilson, which provide us a "paltry" income. Purdue is the easy example I gave, but if you spend time going the libraries that subscribe to our journals through WorldCat you see that many get our journals through ProQuest, EBSCO, and Wilson. What these libraries do not know is that we are dropping our contracts with ProQuest, EBSCO, and Wilson and even now many of these libraries actually no longer receive our journals in any form. Needless to say, ProQuest, EBSCO, and Wilson do not advertize when a journal stops being provided.

A further complication from the ProQuest, EBSCO, and Wilson contracts is there really is no way to know if many of the subscribing libraries actually want our journals. These libraries receive our journals as part of a package and our journals may simply be journals included in a large package that a certain library does not need or want. For example, Indiana University has about 10 campuses, and historically only two, Bloomington and Indianapolis, subscribed to any of our journals in print. A few years ago the other eight started to received ***NEA*** and ***BASOR*** through EBSCO. Does Kokomo really want ***BASOR***? I doubt it, but it is included in a package they get and this is probably true for the other seven campuses here, too. But, we have dropped EBSCO so soon they will not be getting our journals at all.

There are too many variables to get precise answers. Now that we are digital, we are losing some subscriptions when campuses and systems drop multiple copies. We have been losing subscriptions to ProQuest, EBSCO, and Wilson, but this is ending. In a matter of days it would be possible to determine who was getting our journals through ProQuest, EBSCO, and Wilson, but there is no way of knowing whether they actually wanted our journals short of contacting each library. If we contacted the libraries we could tell them how to get our journals, but as one person told me, he had done this procedure when ***Hesperia*** faced a situation similar to ours and the process was extremely time-consuming and there was little reward. Nonetheless, to regain some of these lost subscriptions some marketing effort is needed. Given all of these variables and the unknown quantity of subscription losses because of ProQuest, EBSCO, and Wilson, we might actually be able to increase subscriptions beyond even what it was a few years ago with aggressive marketing.

Options

The issue at hand, however, is that ASOR needs to set prices for its journals (see attached price list for journals in our general field), whether on its own or in conjunction with someone else, and distribute them. It is also possible to take a larger view and instead of simply continuing to produce, market, price, and distribute our journals we could partner with others for one or more of these functions. The following options are not all mutually exclusive and, in addition, at some levels we could follow different policies for our different journals (***BASOR***, ***JCS***, ***NEA***, and possibly ***The Annual***; see excursus).

Option 1. We can continue what we have been doing for years, setting a low competitive price and trying to maximize subscriptions. Given that subscriptions or sales may well be declining, we will need to consider a price rise soon. If we take this option we recognize that we are not trying to maximize income, rather we are trying to maximize subscriptions. Maximizing subscriptions may or may not maximize readership.

Option 2. Some commercial publishers of leading journals in any field maximize their profit by raising prices, sometimes dramatically, and they make their profits off of the leading institutions who simply must subscribe to the particular leading journal.   This leads to a far smaller, but profitable, subscription base. Larger commercial publishers have expertise and leverage we do not have. We could attempt to emulate this practice, but librarians suggest this would be risky on our own.

Option 3. Some publishers of scholarly journals are opting for tiered pricing, the prices being determined by the sizes and numbers of campuses or libraries of the subscribing institution. As an example, the University of Chicago Press is doing this with JNE (see http://www.journals.uchicago.edu/userimages/ContentEditor/1279300093789/2011_Chicago_Journals_inst_rates.xls). We could attempt to emulate this practice, but librarians suggest this would be risky on our own.

Option 4. Some professional journals produced by smaller societies, like ourselves, or by smaller departments at colleges and universities are opting to align themselves with a larger commercial publisher who then assumes many, or even all, of the production, marketing, pricing, and distribution responsibilities. In our own field ***PEQ***, ***Tel Aviv***, ***Journal of Field Archaeology***, ***Levant***, and even to a certain extent ***JNES*** have opted for this model. In the end we would negotiate for the specific services the commercial publisher would provide for production and they would do all the rest, including setting the prices. In return we would receive a modest income stream. In this model we would lose much of the control over our journals. In addition, many of the tasks currently associated with publications would be transferred to the commercial publisher.

Option 5. On 1 January 2011 a new marketer and distributor of on-line scholarly journals will become active, JSTOR Current Scholarship (see **http://about.jstor.org/ participate-jstor/libraries/current-scholarship-program** or **http://ucpressjournals.com/ucpress.asp?page=jstorfaq)**.   The market for this initiative is about 6,000 libraries worldwide. There is a buy in price for the initiative (probably $20,000 or more) as well as an annual fee based on the number of subscriptions serviced by JSTOR. Buying into this initiative would provide a seamless marketplace for both current and past issues of our journals. Currently there are over 174 titles and 19 publishers involved in this initiative. Subsequent to this being written, Andy Vaughn will have met with JSTOR in order to obtain more information on this program. If we bought into this program, we would still set prices and pricing structure for our journals although JSTOR does have models we could use to help establish such prices. The buy-in price is high and would be difficult to meet.

Option 6. We could decide that we cannot learn enough about the market place for us to make an informed decision on our own. We could hire a consultant to help identify our most appropriate choices. Three different librarians have all suggested the same consultant and these librarians suggest the cost of the consultant would be in the neighborhood of $10,000.

Possible Action Items.

Depending on the option or options that are deemed best for ASOR, there may or may not be a need for any action items. The most important result is probably a sense of the committee on the path ASOR should follow in pricing and distributing its electronic journals. I hope that the EC will have COP's recommendation on these issues to consider in the discussion.

Excursus: The Missions and Natures of ***The Annual*** *and* ***NEA***

Currently ***The Annual*** is produced as a book that is supposed to appear about once a year and is distributed by DBBC. Production of the volume is fully covered by subvention from the OF which is then repaid through the sales proceeds. The content of ***The Annual*** has changed over time and at the present time I am unsure of the precise wording of the mission of ***The Annual***. Joe Greene, Editor of ***The Annual***, and I have discussed clarifying or modifying the mission of ***The Annual*** and we have also discussed the idea of producing it as a journal on a set annual schedule. To my knowledge there is no formal proposal on this prepared for discussion at this point. If we were to market ***The Annual*** as a journal then ***The Annual*** should enter the current discussion. If we were to "journalize" ***The Annual***, then standing orders at DBBC would need to convert to subscriptions and we would have to rethink the use of the OF in its preparation.

Issues surrounding ***NEA*** are more complicated. The mission of ***NEA*** was formulated by the NEA Editorial Board in the mid-1990s and it was accepted, approved, or ratified by COP and the ASOR Board at that time. It has not been altered since that time. ***NEA*** is defined as a popular journal. Among other things it is supposed to popularize the field and provide outreach to the interested public for ASOR and its endeavors through archaeological reporting and discussion. Given that popular archaeological journals like ***Archaeology***, ***Biblical Archaeology Review***, ***Current World Archaeology***, and ***kmt*** are written by, or at least edited by, journalists it is fairly obvious that ***NEA*** (or ***BA***) has never been a popular journal. At best one might call the ***NEA*** of the mid-1990s "semi-popular". We have attempted to market and distribute it as a popular journal to mixed results.

Ann Killebrew, Editor of ***NEA***, on the other hand, recently described ***NEA*** in the following words: "NEA is considered a peer review journal – but one that is more 'accessible' to a wider audience …. I see our journals as mainly serving the academic community and students, providing opportunities for our colleagues to publish their materials in peer reviewed journals - which is still the mainstay of all academic advancement." In other words, ***NEA*** has become a professional journal. Personally I use current issues of ***NEA*** extensively when I teach and I like most aspects of the journal as it is currently being produced. But, I have been told by others that ***NEA*** is now beyond the reach of non-professionals and for this reason they do not read it. If true, this implies a failure in a defined mission, outreach. A Trustee volunteered that in the years since the name change ***NEA*** has become, "… a kind of ***BASOR*** with color and a nicer layout." In essence, this Trustee agreed with Ann Killebrew on what ***NEA*** is, but this Trustee did not see it as fulfilling the mission.

These varied views and statements reflect conflicting interpretations of the mission and reality of ***NEA***. For ***NEA*** to be truly successful, however, its mission, content, production values, pricing, and marketing all need to align. At the present time this is not the case. This is neither the time nor venue to discuss or debate these issues. The sole reason they are being noted in this discussion is that we must be aware of them as we examine pricing and marketing issues related to our journals so that we do not make a pricing and marketing decision that later forces us to make other decisions regarding the mission and contents of our journals without engaging in open discussion.