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The Film *Paywall: The Business of Scholarship*

by Caroline Winter | 25 February 2019 | English, Observations, Observations and Responses | 0 comments



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This observation was written by Caroline Winter, with thanks to Kate Shuttleworth for her feedback and contributions.

At a glance:

Title	<i>Paywall: The Business of Scholarship</i>
Creator	Jason Schmitt
Publication Date	2018
Keywords	Open access, academic publishing, scholarly communication

During [Open Access Week 2018](#), many universities and colleges across the country included screenings of the film *Paywall: The Business of Scholarship* (2018) as part of their celebrations, including the University of Victoria, the University of British Columbia, McGill University, the University of Waterloo, the University of Ottawa, and Simon Fraser University, among others. According to Kate Shuttleworth, who organized the *Paywall* screening at SFU's Open Access Week, they screened the film as a way of generating discussion about the issues it raises, including paywalls, impact metrics, and the open access movement as a whole. The screening also provided an opportunity for discussing ways in which SFU's library supports researchers who want to publish in open access venues.

Generating discussion about scholarly publishing practices and supporting open access is precisely what *Paywall* aims to do. The film was directed and produced by Jason Schmitt, a filmmaker, journalist,

and Associate Professor and Chair of Communication and Media at Clarkson University. Through a series of interviews with people involved in various aspects of scholarly research, *Paywall* argues that publicly funded research should be open access out of principle and in the interest of advancing knowledge. In keeping with this argument, the film is itself open access, available to download free of charge and screen publicly or privately.

The interviews in the film feature a diverse cross-section of stakeholders in the open access movement, including professors in a variety of disciplines and fields, medical doctors, deans, editors and publishers of scholarly journals, directors of libraries and library associations, founders and CEOs of open access tools and resources, and representatives of institutional centres and programs related to scholarly communication. The discussion is international, with interviewees from Bangladesh, Canada, Colombia, Hungary, Nepal, the Netherlands, Nigeria, the US, and the UK.

The film makes its case for open access through three key points: keeping publicly funded research behind paywalls is exploitative and inefficient, open access benefits individuals and promotes global equity, and open access allows us to address big problems. As Judy Ruttenberg puts it in her review of the film, *Paywall* “weaves together two principal stories: the exorbitant financial cost to access for-profit academic journals and the associated, incalculable human cost when doctors, patients, students, and would-be innovators all over the world hit paywalls that deny them access to the latest research” (2018).

In the film, Schmitt notes that the profitability of the academic publishing industry is a point of contention. This 25.2 billion dollar a year industry boasts profit margins of 35–40%, and these margins are possible, as John Adler from Stanford University notes, “because the workers don’t get paid”: the work of conducting research and writing articles is paid for by publicly funded institutions, not the publishing companies who profit from it.

In addition to issues of exploitation, *Paywall* discusses the inefficiencies of the closed-access publishing model. While Rick Anderson of the University of Utah points out that advocates of open access must not be blind to its costs and drawbacks, Jeff Spies of the Center for Open Science explains that his motivation is to improve research efficiency, and the best way to do it is through open access. István Rév of the Central European University Budapest argues that we should view the open access debate not only in the context of academia but also as part of larger social problem: paying subscription fees contributes to rising tuition fees, for example, and the affordability of education is a widespread social problem that may not necessarily be considered in discussions of open access. In a similar vein, Heather Joseph from SPARC notes that, under an open access model, the money institutions currently spend on journal subscriptions could be redirected toward lowering the cost of attending colleges and universities, lowering tuition fees, hiring full-time faculty, and supporting research rather than increasing publishers’ profit margins.

The film offers several examples of how limits on access to information affect individuals, institutions, and entire disciplines. Tom Callaway from Red Hat, for example, describes his attempts to access the latest medical research on his wife’s medical condition, only to run up against paywalls. Ahmed Ogunlaja, a medical doctor in Nigeria, expresses similar concerns that his patients suffer when he and other doctors cannot access the most current medical research. Roshan Kumar Karn, a medical doctor in Nepal, describes how academic libraries in less wealthy countries are unable to support student research, leaving students to bear those costs on their own, and Sara Rouhi of Altmetric notes that lack of access to information about climate change has “a real concrete impact” on researchers in that field as well on as policymakers and the public. Looking at the issue from another angle, access to knowledge has implications for what researchers choose to study, as Brian Nosek of the Center for Open Science discusses. At the University of Belgrade, he discovered that many graduate students were choosing a particular subfield because its culture of openness would allow them to access the publications they need to do their own research. As Nosek points out, this example shows the positive effects of open

access as well as revealing how barriers to access artificially limits which fields of research are active and therefore the direction of knowledge generation overall.

Paywall emphasizes the role of academic publishers in limiting access to research, but several of its interviewees point out that institutional and cultural norms also have a role to play. The emphasis on journal impact factors is one example: Lars Bjørnshauge of DOAJ notes that the impact factor is often used “as a proxy for quality, and we know, all of us, that it is subject to gaming and fraud.”

Overall, *Paywall* emphasizes that closed access publishing models undermine the primary goal of scholarship, which is to generate new knowledge. As Cable Green from Creative Commons puts it,

The reason that we have research is that we’re trying to solve problems in the world. ... If you want to do that, we’ve got make sure that everybody has access. Not just rich countries, not just people with PhDs, but everybody gets to read scientific research, think about it, and then contribute their ideas. And when large segments of the population don’t have access to research, the odds of us solving big problems are significantly lower.

As Green and several other interviewees point out, solving big problems requires many people working together; collaboration and interdisciplinary work is necessary but possible only when information is accessible to all.


Responses to the film are mixed. In a piece for *Inside Higher Ed*, Lindsay McKenzie reports that reactions from audience members at the premiere of the documentary in Washington, DC, were generally positive, but while many seemed to agree with the message of advocacy presented in the film, others were disappointed that it did not present a more balanced view of the debate (2018). The film’s clear stance draws criticism in more negative reviews as well, such as in Richard Poynder’s piece for *Nature* (2018). Poynder argues, too, that although Schmitt’s intended audience is a public one, the film is almost always screened at universities and does not do enough to “educate the public in the complexities of open access” (2018). A review by Judy Ruttenberg points out, though, that universities also sometimes need to be educated, and quotes a statement by Geneva Henry from George Washington University emphasizing how important the film is for giving weight to arguments that his university’s library has been making for many years. In a piece for *NewScientist*, Graham Lawton praises *Paywall*’s ability to evoke “righteous anger” in its viewers but also criticizes the film’s unbalanced perspective and its singling out of Elsevier as “the villain of the piece” (2018). In an interview with Patrick Bawn, however, Schmitt clarifies that he doesn’t see the academic publishers as “the bad guys.” Rather, he says, “The publishers are simply doing exactly what the market tells them or allows them to do, which is to create good products and a great profit margin” (2018).

Paywall places the impetus for change on those who create and make use of research, and presents the challenges facing the open access movement as complex and multifaceted. In a featured talk at the 2018 INKE Gathering in Victoria called “[Open in Order to ...](#)” (starting at around 8:00), Heather Joseph raises many similar points that she and other interviewees raise in the film; she, too, emphasizes the need for a multifaceted approach to solving the complex challenges facing those advocating for open access. Much of Joseph’s talk focuses on the problem of the misalignment between the values that drive research—the same values expressed in most institutional mission statements—and the activities that are rewarded by most tenure and promotion frameworks, a problem discussed in *Paywall* by Bjørnshauge, David Prosser of Research Libraries UK, and Kim Barrett of the University of California, San Diego, among others, who point out that this is a significant barrier to the open access movement, and a complex one to overcome. Although one of the compounding factors has been the lack of available information about current tenure and promotion practices, Joseph points to Juan Pablo Alperin and Stefanie Haustein’s [Review, Promotion, and Tenure Project](#) as an example of research that is necessary for the open access movement to move forward. Just like other complex issues, open and interdisciplinary collaboration presents a solution for achieving worldwide open access to research.

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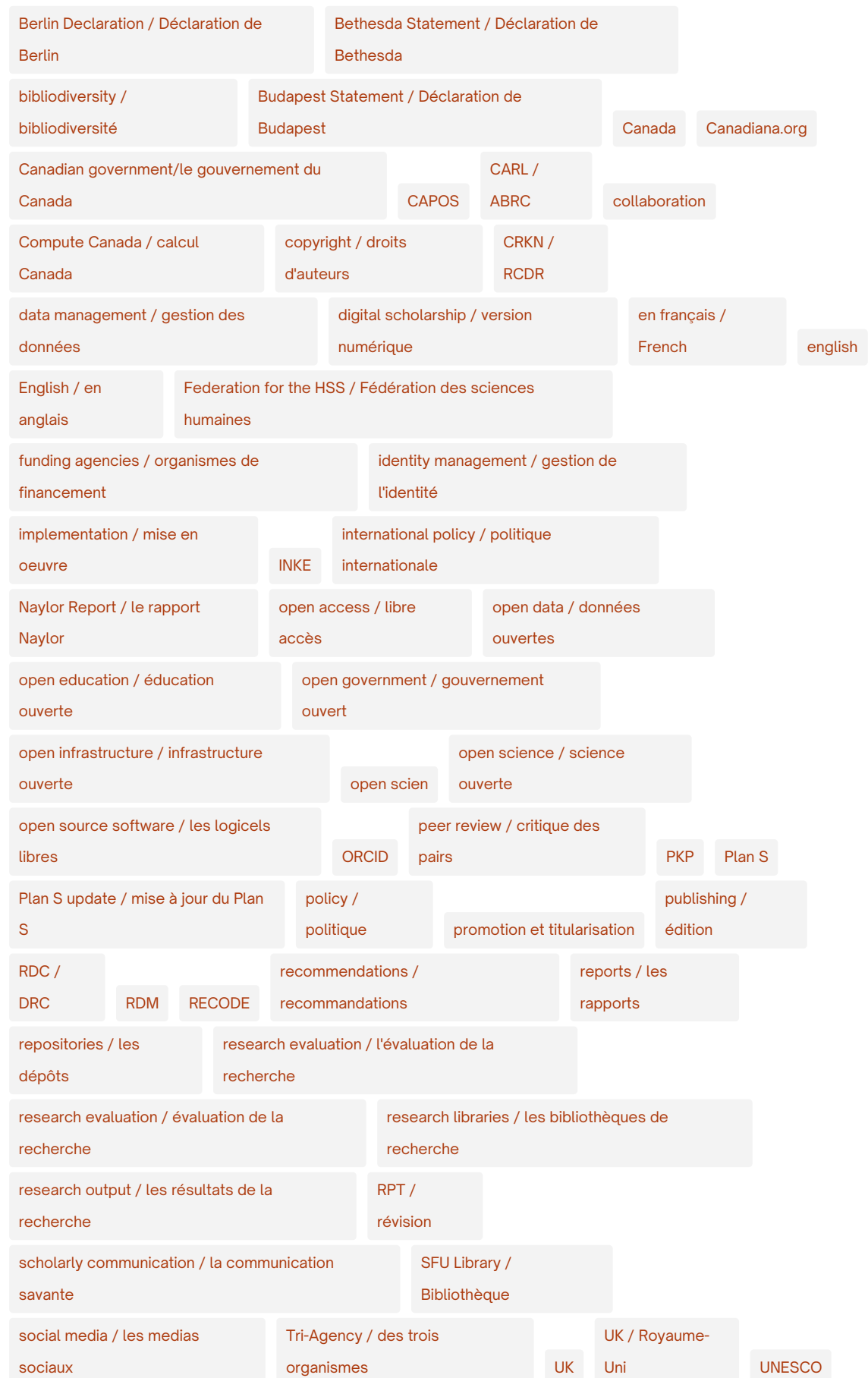
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