The deck is further stacked against new comers by the directories that rate journals. Thomson Reuters' Journal Citation Reports and Cabell's Directory require journals to publish consistently for years before they'll rate them. As a result, it's difficult to know the status of a journal until it's been up and running for about five years.

In addition to prestige, an institutional bias against collaboration is also slowing innovation in digital publishing. "There has been more credit for sending stuff to commercial publishers than for single-authored work," says Howard Besser, director of the Moving Image Archiving and Presentation master's program at the New York School of the Arts.

"Most universities, especially younger ones, are not trying to publish anything in that space," Besser says. "It's a real challenge to get faculty engaged.

But just as collaborative learning is an emerging trend in classrooms, collaborative scholarship is on a similar trajectory. At the Oxford debate, Govey told story of how he posted a challenging math problem on his blog and encouraged others to help solve it by posting comments. "This was quite a tough problem and six weeks later it was solved," he recalled. "It was quite unexpected. It was the sort of problem that I would have expected an individual to work on for months or years."

Besser saw collaboration across disciplines as "absolutely the trend in digital humanities, where scholars put together projects that defy the normal model of journal publishing."

Such projects often require the expertise of computer programmers and user interface designers.

One such project is "The Valley of the Valley," an online archive of material from Oregon's Beechnut and one Northern county before, during, and after the Civil War, all produced by the New York School of the Arts. It allows users to access the database through a map and the database also includes a database of 12,000 maps showing the changes that took place during that time.

"The normal model would be to gather material and write a book," says Besser. "Instead, the site provides different routes through the materials and invites visitors to find their own paths as well."

Open-Access Journals

For scholars who don't want to build an entire site, there is the option of publishing in an open-access journal, of which there are thousands. Many open-access journals have become well established in their field, but with a catch. Since they don't charge article or subscription fees to readers, many journals charge authors' fees instead. Big authors' fees. It costs $3,000 to submit to the Library's open-access journal, The Public Library of Science, publisher of such journals as PLoS Biology, PLoS Medicine, and PLoS ONE. charges authors between $2.50 and $2.846.

According to the publishers, these costs cover peer review, journal production, and online hosting and archiving. In some cases, the model is even more advanced: the subscription model where all papers are available for free, while the other charges scholars for the privilege of sharing their work with their peers.

It remains to be seen whether there's enough pent-up frustration in academia to overcome systems that are stacked in favor of publishers. In recent years, the library has worked to make the service more available to researchers, including offering to pay for subscriptions of open-access journals, and helping to create an online platform for researchers to share their work.

There are encouraging signs that open-access journals—following similar practice—can achieve success online. One example is Developmental and Comparative Biology (JCB) which, known for its flexibility, where the journal has changed its subscription model to a pay-per-view model, allowing researchers to access the journal for a fee. As the number of subscription journals expands, JCB hopes to capitalize on this new option to keep the workload from becoming burdensome.

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The model has been so successful that JCB has now received subscriptions from big publishers. "That's not our goal," says McCallum. "Our goal is to provide an outlet for this particular kind of research."

Since its inception, JCB has steadily gained influence in the field of development biology, and is scheduled to be included in the Journal Citation Reports in June.

A more recent trend is to the open-access field. "An Open Journal of Science" is a new open-access journal that is now available online. The journal allows for open-access dissemination of research.
According to Carol Stabile, A4A editor and director of the Center for the Study of Women in Society at the University of Oregon, the collective set out to make feminist research available to anyone with a web browser, both inside and outside the academy. But the collective also intends to stand the traditional peer review process on its head. For starters, it’s prepared to review materials other than text, including audio and video pieces.

“Around the country, more forward-thinking departments and schools are spearheading how to evaluate this kind of work, and how to include it in tenure and promotion cases in ways that we haven’t in the past,” explains Stabile. Accepted works of scholarship will be posted along with the comments of two reviewers, whose identities will be provided, and will be open for further review by Facebook members. After two weeks of feedback, the author has two months to revise and resubmit the work, which will then be posted on the website, open to review and comment by the world at large. By throwing the doors open on review and feedback, the collective hopes to make the process less daunting and mysterious.

“It’s too early to say whether efforts such as these will bring a new path for scholarly publishing, or whether the Elsevier boycott will snowball into a true Academic Spring. The internet tools are certainly in place to support such a revolution, but the cultural fundamentals do not inspire hope.”

While much of the anger about journal pricing has been aimed at Elsevier, the truth is that the company is a for-profit business that will charge what the market can bear. The real culprit in all this is the tenure-track culture of higher education that places a market-distorting emphasis on publishing in prestigious journals, often at the expense of academic freedom and efficiency. 

Michelle Testa is a freelance writer who splits her time between Portland, OR, and Seattle.