

Paywall the Movie – opening access to global research

Science is getting left behind. Streaming services have changed the TV and music industries forever – you can now access music and TV wherever you are in the world at a click of a button. According to **Professor Jason Schmitt** at Clarkson University, it is time for science to do the same: enable global open access to research. For too long, the public have remained unaware of the debate between traditional scholarly publishing methods and an open access model. Professor Schmitt's upcoming film – *Paywall: The Business of Scholarship* – looks to change that, hoping to spark a public movement which breaks down the paywalls that limit access to research.

When you visit the supermarket to pick up a loaf of bread, you are given a choice: go for the branded, higher quality loaf – or, instead, go for the cheaper, unbranded option. The point here is that you get a choice of which loaf to buy, and where you want to buy it from – a principle seemingly missing in terms of scholarly research publishing.

Large for-profit publishers effectively control who can access research, usually limiting it to the interested academics willing, or able, to pay the subscription fees. Controversy is common within science, but no more so than in the debate between these traditional scholarly methods – hiding research behind paywalls – and an open access model – providing free, global access to research worldwide. Many believe it is time for a movement towards a more open world, enabling people globally to access the

research that their tax-paying money goes towards funding.

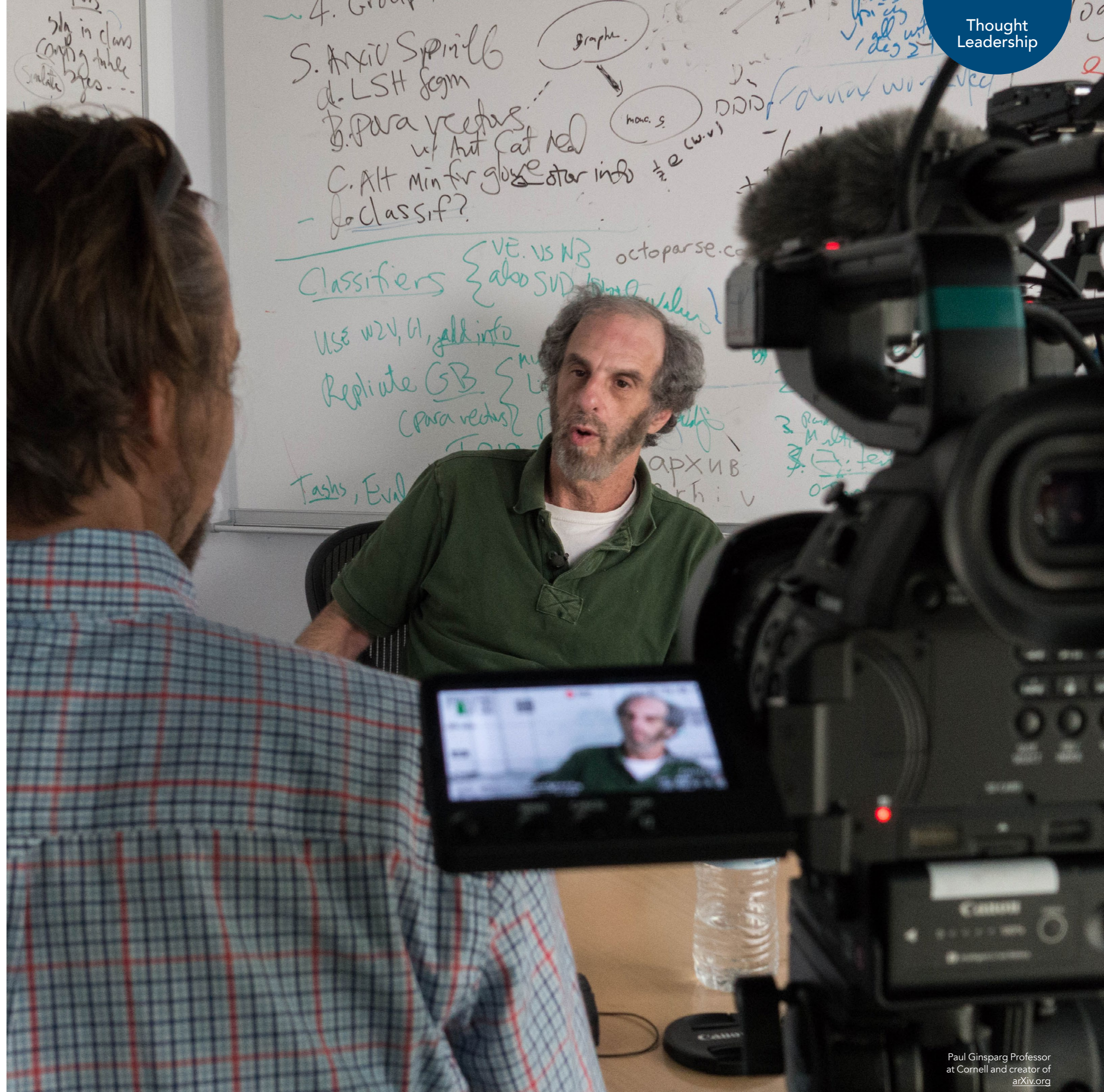
However, to implement this change and, effectively, knock down these paywalls, public support is vital. Therefore, to spread the conversation, filmmaker and Communication & Media Professor Jason Schmitt of Clarkson University has produced a film documentary called *Paywall: The Business of Scholarship*, to reach a wider audience than the academics who already understand the discrepancies involved.

He spoke to us at *Research Features* about his upcoming film documentary in more detail, explaining why a movement towards open access is so long overdue.

Hi Jason! So, what inspired you to create the Paywall documentary?

I looked at the academic scholarship climate and I felt that it was very unfair for society. When we look at the \$25 billion a year that

It is the researchers who allow this kind of asinine hazing system of scholarship to stay in existence and who create the problems we see in traditional scholarly publishing



Paul Ginsparg Professor at Cornell and creator of arXiv.org

goes to just a few academic publishers, I feel that is taking away some of the power and energy from science as a whole. That massive amount of money could be used more appropriately. There are some significant things that can, and need to, be done. I think implementing an open access model will not only positively affect society on a broader scale, but it will also improve the climate of global education – which is very important.

How would you describe the movement towards open access within scholarly publishing?

So, within scholarly publishing you have the for-profit and not-for-profit publishers. The for-profit publishers say they are the biggest open access publishers – which is true to an extent – because of their infrastructure, but they don't back a sustainable form of open access in any capacity. There is however, a growing movement towards a true, open access approach to research. We are already seeing how this can take place – back in 2015, *Elsevier* had a fairly expensive journal called *Lingua*. The editorial body had an idea to produce the same quality work, with the same editorial body and rigor, without the high payroll costs on society. From this, the editorial body of that journal stepped down from *Elsevier*, transferring all of their quality and credibility to the open access derivative. They then created *Glossa*, which was a very bold and public move, showing how the quality of a journal isn't the publisher. Rather, it is the scholars that create the review, and the quality of the research that is submitted to it which makes the journal what it is. The publishers of journals are nothing without the scholars who bring the credibility.

We are seeing a real revolution happening, where research, which would have typically followed in a for-profit direction, is now being brought into a more open access model, and that's great to see. The nature of this movement is becoming more and more turbulent as we see more of these transitions starting to happen – and I think that's going to continue, fairly significantly over the next five years.

We are seeing a lot of governments and major foundations – like the Gates Foundation or the National Institutes of Health (NIH) – saying to academic institutions that the system can no longer run like this. These are the funding levers which can really shape policy and implement change – by telling universities and academic institutions that they can no longer support research without an open access



Professor Jason Schmitt,
producer and director of *Paywall:
The Business of Scholarship*

I hope this film will make independent disciplines realise that there are other options rather than the well-presented, glamorous, stylised pages of the most prestigious for-profit publishers

path, and that will significantly change the number of publications following the open access model.

Ultimately, there is a need to create an environment which utilises the full horsepower of humankind, as opposed to the western based countries horsepower of humankind – which is a small drop in the bucket. There is a lot of red tape to be cut, and there is a lot of cattiness to be circumvented, but there is also a number of great reasons to be hopeful.

What kind of a reaction to the movie do you expect to get from these big scholarly publishers who operate with a payroll publishing model?

They are going to say that open access is not sustainable. The big publishers are obviously not thrilled with our documentary – they've made that much clear. Most of them choose not to be involved as well, which is understandable – I would probably take the same path if I was situated from their vantage point.

But I want to make a point clear – these open access issues are not the for-profit publishers fault. 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. So, we can't look at them as the bad guys. If we want to look at who the bad guy is in this scenario, we need a mirror and to look at ourselves. It is the researchers, the scientists, the academics who allow this kind of asinine hazing system of scholarship to stay in existence and who create the problem – the scientists that need to publish in these journals simply because it is what our forefathers did before us is a root of the problem. With that mindset, science is never going to evolve in this digital world without conflict.

That to me is the outcome I want to have portrayed through this documentary. I don't think that for-profit publishers are necessarily evil – I think they go exactly as far toward capitalistic intent as we allow them to do,

because that's the way the market economy works. So again, if we want change, we can't look at the people collecting the profit to do that for us.

What changes within the scholarly publishing industry do you hope this movie will stimulate?

I hope it invigorates conversations around access models because these conversations need to happen sooner rather than later – before the large publishers can influence and muddy up opinion. We are already seeing leading disciplines – whether it be in physics, psychology, or mathematics – adapting to an open access model and I hope this film will showcase why it works for some disciplines and how it can work for more areas of academic pursuit. It's time to make people realise that scholarly publishing, as it's been run over the past number of decades, is broken beyond repair.

What do you hope to achieve with *Paywall: The Business of Scholarship*?

I hope to achieve a broader society recognising the injustices of academic publishing and for-profit publisher motives. I hope that our neighbours, general society members, and community members can see why research funding needs to evolve, and move towards a more open means. I also hope that this film reaches a broader viewership than just academics and

researchers because, honestly, academics are the last people I want this film to appeal to – they are the ones who think about this all the time.

Instead, I want society to become aware of these conversations – after all, it is their tax paying money which goes towards funding these publications, and yet, it is those same people who are often unable to access and hear about research without paying a fee to the publisher. That, for me, is an important conversation which needs to be told and highlighted to a global community, and I am honoured to tell this story.

Do you have any more filming left to do before the documentary's release in September 2018?

We have completed most of our interviews, but into this Winter we'll still be filming pretty heavily. From that point onwards though, we'll probably do a couple interviews here and there, but we are aiming to be in post-production by Spring.

What has been your key personal takeaway from putting this documentary together?

One of my key takeaways has been the conflicting opinions that revolves around open access. I find it ridiculous the number of people who have grudges or issues with other researchers and scholars, who – in reality – actually want research to revolve in a similar direction to each other. There are so many little in-groups and out-groups, and that makes the evolution anything but cumulative. I've spoken to all sorts of groups and they all say: "Oh, don't listen to that group", or, "this group's doing it great." And then you talk to another and they'll say: "Oh, don't listen to them because they're doing it wrong – we need gold open access", and then another will say: "No, we don't – we need green open access", or "no, we don't we have hybrid journals". There are four gazillion different interpretations, which is great. I find it motivating at the end of the day that most of the individuals we speak to are generally working towards a similar direction – regardless of whether they like each other or not.

In the documentary, do you focus on the implication of an open access model more widely?

Yes – we spend a lot of time covering the global soft voice, looking into the worldwide impact of open access. In fact, I was talking to somebody recently at a large institution who said that he's never seen a more

religious backed belief system in an academic community than the open access community – and that kind of struck me. Does anybody have verifiable proof that open access is going to be the best outcome? Some do, but a lot of people promote it simply because they 'know it's right'. But how do they know that? Where's the data to back that up? So, when I heard that, it made me realise that scholars need to showcase why open access can work, but in a clear manner. I hope this film manages to do that somewhat as well.

Was there anything you would like to add?

Journal articles are a double monopoly. When you write an article and it's good, nobody else on the planet has that article. There is only one source: the author. Coupled on to that, when you publish that article in a for-profit journal, that automatically limits access to that one specific article, to one specific publisher as no other journal can host it.

This all creates a very unique monopolistic situation where a publication, which is a one-off product by itself can only appear in one journal, limiting society to accessing that article through one for-profit publisher. There is no option B in that scenario at all. And that is not a viable market economy, as it only creates a complex ecosystem that is not market-driven.

• To find out more information about Professor Schmitt's upcoming film documentary, or to watch the trailer, please visit his and his team's website at paywallthemovie.com.



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