Clarifying a few facts for Elsevier and their response to Lingua

Elsevier has just published a response of sorts to the resignation of the Lingua editors and editorial board. The company there claims that:

The editor-in-chief of Lingua wanted to take ownership of the journal. Elsevier cannot agree to this as we have invested considerable amount of time, money and other resources into making it a respected journal in its field. We founded Lingua 66 years ago.

Lingua is a hybrid open access journal which means that every author who wants to publish open access (i.e., free-of-charge for the reader), can do so. However, we have observed little uptake of the open access option in Lingua or elsewhere in linguistics at price points that would be economically viable.

The article publishing charge at Lingua for open access articles is 1800 USD. The editor had requested a price of 400 euros, an APC that is not sustainable. Had we made the journal open access only and at the suggested price point, it would have rendered the journal no longer viable – something that would serve nobody, least of which the linguistics community.

While Elsevier claims that it presents these “facts” to “clarify some misconceptions”, I thought they might appreciate some facts to clarify their own misconceptions.

Firstly, as far as I know, the editor-in-chief of Lingua did not want to take ownership of the journal. He asked to transfer ownership of the journal to the collective of editors. This is very different to the individual “ownership” paradigm under which Elsevier seems to think.

Secondly, again, to the best of my knowledge, Lingua was founded in 1949 by Albert Willem de Groot (1892-1963) and Anton Reichling (1898-1986), two Dutch structuralist linguists. It was originally published by North Holland, a Dutch publishing house, that was purchased by Elsevier in the nineties (edit correction: actually, the 1980s it seems). Elsevier didn’t, therefore, found the journal as far as I can see.

Thirdly, and most importantly, when Elsevier claims that price points below their current level are not “sustainable” I feel the urge to point out that Elsevier would say that and they are using the argument that “what the market will bear” is the acceptable price point. They did, of course, make $1.1 billion profit in 2012 on a 36% profit rate. They have just established (correction: leased) new offices in the UK that include basketball courts for their staff, even as our university budgets here face a forecasted cut of 40%. So they may have a different idea, in the mind of shareholders, as to what “sustainable” actually means. I define it as: covering labour, technological and business costs necessary to publishing on a not-for-profit/charitable basis. Not paying for Elsevier to play basketball on our time.
On the other hand, though, a number of Elsevier journals do have APCs at around $1,100.00 (~£713.47). As above, Elsevier had a 37% profit margin in 2014. If you take that profit margin off the Hybrid APC that they are charging on journals like “Habitat International”, “Cities”, and others you end up at ~£449.49 per article, which is not so far off the Lingua figure.

Of course, you could argue that Elsevier does this across the list, so it may be merely breaking even or even loss-leading on those lower fees. It might have alternative revenue streams to support those journals. However, Elsevier also runs a journal called “Economic Modelling” (of all ironies), another called the “Journal of the Korean Statistical Society”, “Results in Physics”, another called “Studies in Communication Sciences”, and another called the “International Journal of Law, Crime and Justice” all at an APC of $750.00 (~£486.00). “Medical Mycology Case Reports” has an APC of just ~£450.

So by Elsevier’s own standards they seem to be claiming that a number of their own journals are unsustainable. I can’t believe they are doing this out of the goodness of their hearts. Also, if they truly believe their own rhetoric, then surely they are also acting extremely irresponsibly in signalling that lower price points here are sustainable? After all, nobody wants these journals to collapse. Least of all Elsevier’s shareholders. Err, I mean, the academic community.

In short:

1. Elsevier has many incentives to claim that models cheaper than its own are not sustainable while it makes double the profit margin of many oil companies.
2. Elsevier does not know the internal business costs of others, so any statement it makes is an inference based on its own setup. It is not qualified to comment on whether others can make it work at a lower price, when those entities demonstrably already are.
3. Elsevier runs a number of journals at price points that it claims are unsustainable.
4. What is “sustainable” for Elsevier is unsustainable for universities.

**Conflicting Interests Statement**

I run the Open Library of Humanities, which will play host to the new journal to be run by the previous editors of Lingua, Glossa.