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Op Ed — Open Access: Two Caveats

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The Open Access that Peter Suber and the California Digital Library authors, John Ober, Catherine Candee, and Beverlee French, have so ably defended in this issue of Against the Grain has enormous appeal. The movement promises free information at the point of access for anyone who wants it, and it promotes a new economic model for journal publishing, a model built on author rather than reader payment.

But even in an era of expanding journal costs and declining library budgets, one wonders if the wide-spread acceptance of Open Access could prove more problematic than beneficial. Consider for a moment two of the movement’s more troubling dimensions: the possibility of a compromising long-standing tradition of peer review and the necessity of insisting that authors pay to be published.

Open Access, of course, can accommodate peer review as readily as traditional publishing. Make no mistake about that, but journal publishers (be they not-for-profit or commercial) have long contended that they provide a needed service — a third player in the scholarly communication game. By standing apart from the author and researcher on the one hand and the academy and research community on the other, publishers take a disinterested stance — a neutrality that ensures that only the best and very best becomes published.

Of course, if men were angels, as the saying goes, there would be no need for government — much, I suppose, as if all scholars were scholarly there would be no need for disinterested peer review. But the reality of the human condition warrants checks and balances in politics as much as in publishing.

Now if Mark Herring (see this issue’s “Red Herring” column, p.88) and Barbara Fister (see this issue’s “Academic Authors and the Crisis in Publishing,” p.48) are right, this peer-review process itself may already be beset with troubling questions of integrity. Fister argues that peer-review journals routeinely hazard publishing far more than they should, and Herring suggests that false data and political correctness sometimes passes for scholarship. Such contentions make it hard to see how discarding one of the authentic safeguards of the apparently suspect process, one of the genuine checks and balances of a possibly tainted system, the third party role of commercial publishing, will do anything but exacerbate an already troubled scholarly process.

That brings us to the second troubling dimension of Open Access. Authors must pay to have their articles published in an Open Access journal. Naturally the income of such journals depends on the number of articles the journal publishes rather than the number of issues sold. That means that every editor would have the unsavory incentive to print an ever increasing number of articles. It may be that the quality of a journal’s scholarship would remain uncorrupted by such temptations, that editors would never succumb to temptation to publish more than they should, and that the caliber of the scholarship would remain high. I am not sure, but I do know that I personally hesitate to embrace wholeheartedly a system that might further jeopardize the already shaky reputation of peer review.

Requiring author payment could similarly jeopardize a commendable democratic or even-handed dimension to current publishing models. In the present typical publishing model, editors and their peer-reviewers are looking for solid authors, for first-rate research. The gates are relatively wide open for submissions. The would-be scholar doesn’t have to pay to have publishing. The writer doesn’t need institutional support. An electronic submission likely costs a contributor nothing, a paper submission no more than the cost of postage. The process places the onus on the journal. However burdensome that procedure may be for the editor and peer-reviewer, it is remarkably free to the scholar.

Looking back on my own career, I fancy my modest publishing efforts may never have been the light of day had I been forced to seek institutional support in advance. A skeptical research and development committee or a tight-fisted administrator may not have been willing to underwrite a fledgling librarian’s feeble attempts. As it was, I had nothing to lose. It was my own effort. Let the peer-reviewers reject it or amend it. It didn’t matter. I pestered editors, sent off manuscripts, wrote whenever the notion struck, with no thought about funding, no need to clear my intentions with any committee, and with little care for anyone’s approval. Had I come of age in an era of Open Access and author charges, I fear the opportunities for professional development might have been far less than they actually were.

Open Access holds great promise — the prospect of extended access, the potential savings for the academy, and the advancement of knowledge for all. But there are also troubling dimensions — aspects of the movement that give me pause — peer review and the author-pay-to-publish model being two of the more salient. Before we abandon an older model, a long-established approach to publishing, one built with safeguards and legitimate checks and

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