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Op Ed — Open Access: Misconceptions and Misdirections

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As I listen to speakers and read articles about Open Access, a few things frequently occur to me as unspoken — and important — issues that are often misrepresented.

The first is the continuing confusion caused by people equating OA and Author Page Charges (APCs). APCs are one type of business model which can support OA platforms, but there are many other — and in many ways better — business models that should be discussed when describing and projecting the future stability of OA publishing. It may be untenable to build support for this infrastructure purely on funds from the limited number of authors (or their surrogates). Especially when so much value is obtained by readers, both academic non-profit and corporate profit organizations. APCs only address the interests of authors ... and there is a great deal of interest and significant value contained in the long tail of readers which would be dropped in the APC OA model. Yes, some government and foundation funds can be seen as derived from taxpayers or other readers, but the old subscription model did include the interests of readers in the support model. Looking at the classic subscription revenue and use charts, the heaviest user communities frequently are also the heaviest producers of content. But there is simply too much volume in the long tail of only-reader subscriber funds to be absorbed by the authors. APCs do not adequately address this scenario; there must be other ways to obtain support beyond the author population.

Regardless of the sources of funding, no combination of sources can continue to support the unsustainable 30% profit seen by some major commercial publishers. In a world where successful companies expect a 4-5% profit margin, this scenario is simply unreasonable and untenable. Until now the pressure has been felt primarily by smaller publishers, as the Big Deal packages have protected profits on suites of titles — even those that contain many infrequently used titles. In addition to removing a subsidy on lesser used titles, it is time to remove at least a big portion of the profit skim ... and reallocate these released funds toward new OA platforms. These new and less expensive OA platforms can be populated with existing or new editorial boards and the academic community can reallocate enormous funds for other academic purposes. In this migration, some Society publishers may be forced

to find revenue from other sources for some of their existing operations that are currently supported through publication subscription revenue. This type of hidden taxpayer support for valuable operations such as conferences, professional development, and lobbying, will need to be made more public and accountable.

Another frustrating position stated in these conversations is that OA is responsible for Predatory publishing activities. OA certainly provides additional avenues for enticing unsuspecting authors — due to the continuing escalation of publish-or-perish pressures and less expensive online editing and distribution models. But questionable and predatory publishers have existed for many years, and were present even when we were only dealing with commercial print journals. One would think that sophisticated researcher/authors would think twice about accepting pay-to-publish offers from unknown journals which have never been previously read or even recognized, and which have little or no history. It is time to stop equating OA with predatory publishing, and to simply state that OA publishing only makes the already existing peer review certification and filtering problem a bit more complicated.

Article submissions continue to increase exponentially, with increasing costs for reviewing, editing, copy editing, and publication. Given these conditions, I offer a radical Gatekeeper distribution and peer review process¹ that would reduce costs by creating separately supported methods of distribution and peer review. This Gatekeeper model starts with a qualified and society-appointed Gatekeeper discipline expert who serves as an initial junk filter before submissions are entered into a free document repository. This allows for inexpensive repositories to be built and searched which are composed of free quality material. There would be no immediate expensive peer review process applied to all submissions. At the time of submission, no commercial or financial expectation is made upon authors or readers to contribute to maintain this body of current material. More expensive peer review will then be applied to a selection of this repository

material based upon a variety of criteria. My Gatekeeper model suggests the criteria for on-demand peer review for papers are three possible trigger events: high readership levels of specific articles within the free repository, a signed nomination from an expert, or nomination upon receipt from the designated subject expert Gatekeeper.

Peer review boards, composed by either migrating existing commercial editorial boards to these less expensive platforms, or from newly appointed boards of experts, would then provide this intensive and more expensive overlay stamp of peer review certification as an overlay to segments of the free repository materials. These peer reviewed materials could then be searched as a unique subset of the larger repository.

One could even imagine the possibility (but not necessarily the need) to create revenue streams to support the peer review enterprise by offering various subscription options. My Tiered Model² presents an infrastructure that includes levels of separated peer review and distribution. This differentiation can allow for the layering of revenue-generating services such as autoalerts to peer review subject channels or subscriptions for support of selected titles in high-demand “peer reviewed journal” modules. The same platform can also serve free journals in disciplines in which there is a small population (or no ultimate financial benefit) where subsidized publication by sponsors is an unlikely prospect. 🐼

Endnotes

1. “E-Print Moderator Model,” Newsletter on Serials Pricing Issues No. 214 (February 8, 1999). ISBN 1046-3410. Reprinted in: **Stern, David.** *Guide to Information Sources in the Physical Sciences* (Colorado: Libraries Unlimited, 2000), pp. 168-171.
2. “Tiered Model” “Pricing Models: Past, Present, and Future?” *Serials Librarian* 36 (1/2): 301-319 (1999), p. 315.
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