

Idealism and Opportunism

The state of open access journals

by Walt Crawford

Open access (OA) journals have become widespread in recent years, but so have misunderstandings about them, fueled by a lack of real data. In order to add data, I looked at the websites for every journal in the *Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ)* as of May 7, 2014—or at least all of them that an English reader could make sense of. Here's a little of what I found.

OA journals—categorized as “gold OA” to distinguish them from content placed in an institutional or subject repository (“green OA”)—make all of their peer-reviewed articles freely available online, in the final version and layout, as soon as they are published. *DOAJ* is the key directory for OA journals, with increasingly robust standards as to what can be included. In May 2014, *DOAJ* included 9,709 journals, of which 7,301 were in English or had an English interface option. Of those, 811 fell out of the study for various reasons, leaving 6,490 journals that published just over 366,000 articles in 2013.

Most OA journals (67%) do not add article-processing charges (APCs) or other author-side fees; they are funded through other means. But most of the articles in OA journals (64%) were in journals that do charge APCs, at least some

of the time. Those statements are both true.

In the early days of OA publishing (going back to 1987 and lasting at least until 2001), OA was idealistic. Societies and groups of people started free online-only journals that filled gaps in the literature. Fewer than one-quarter of OA journals founded prior to 2006 charge fees.

Idealism has been joined by opportunism, with publishers looking to take advantage of readily available funds in medicine and other fields. There seems to have

been a gold rush between 2006 and 2013. Still, idealism plays a major role: Many APC-charging journals charge just enough to keep going, and more than 2,700 new no-fee journals emerged between 2005 and 2013. (Opportunism is a tricky term. Publishing does cost money, and it's hard to produce a large journal entirely with volunteer labor and absorbed overhead.)

It makes sense to look at journals in three subject areas, each including about 2,100 journals. Biomed journals have the lowest percentage of no-fee journals (47%). STEM journals—those in science (other than human biology), technology, engineering, and mathematics—include the most articles and the highest percentage of articles in

APC-charging journals (67%, compared with 66% for biomed), although 60% of the journals don't charge fees. HSS journals—those in the humanities and social sciences—are more numerous and are predominantly free (87% of journals and 70% of articles).

Assuming no discounts or waivers, the average cost per article in APC-charging journals was \$1,045; but that average hides the reality: \$439 for HSS journals, \$681 for STEM, and \$1,460 for biomed. (For all articles, including those published in no-fee journals, the average was \$630 overall, \$121 for HSS, \$422 for STEM, and \$894 for biomed.)

Almost every field has a range of high-quality OA journals, including some that don't charge author-side fees. Libraries should support those journals and make them known to scholars and readers. They should also encourage common sense on the part of scholars.

It's easy enough to spot the “bad guys” in the OA landscape; a short list of suggestions for identifying questionable journals appears in the *Library Technology Reports* on “Open Access Journals: Idealism and Opportunism,” which provides an overview of the OA landscape. For those wishing to explore the numbers in more detail, an anonymized version of the study is available at bit.ly/1zDwDDe. ■



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