

EVOLVING TRENDS IN OPEN ACCESS

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ABSTRACT

With the growth of open access publishing there has been a concomitant growth in the number of predatory publishers. This article considers why open access has arisen and the various models under which it operates before considering the nature of predatory publishers and what can be done to stop them.

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I. BACKGROUND

Academic publishing used to be relatively simple. Scholars submitted manuscripts to a limited range of journals. If they were published, other interested scholars could read the work by visiting their university library and obtaining a copy which was paid for by the library. If a copy was not available, for a nominal fee, they could obtain the article from another library. Some academics subscribed to their own copy of a journal or obtain regular copies as members of academic societies or as editors and editorial board members. This model of publishing did not have a name as it was the only model that existed. Some journals charged a fee to authors to submit their work, but these were rare, and the fee was for processing the article; libraries still had to subscribe to these journals. This was the predominant model of academic publishing until well into the present century. The model is now referred to as ‘pay to view’ – albeit that it is rarely the reader who is paying directly to view the article

It is hard to pinpoint exactly when, but around 2000 the concept of ‘open access’ arose, and this referred to journals which made their content available free to the reader and to libraries; no subscriptions were required. There may always have been some journals operating like this model but there no systematic study exists to support this. Since around 2010, open access journals have become very common and they operate under a range of models, to be described. Due to pressure from various sources, open access has become a genuine competitor to the ‘pay to view’ model, and for scholars wishing to publish their work, open access is now a major consideration.

II. WHAT OPEN ACCESS MEANS

Open access means that anyone can read a published article free of charge. The article becomes available as such because the publisher has sold the copyright on the article to the author. Therefore, open access can be expensive because the publisher is waiving—or should be waiving—the right to generate any further income from articles that are available open access.

Around the open access industry, a system of licensing to enable sharing but to offer some protection for authors and publishers has been developed known as CCLs (creative commons licences)¹ and this also applies to other aspects of intellectual property such as art and photographic images. The CCL system operates at several levels but publishers using the open access route will normally specify which type of CCL they use to derive agreement with authors.

¹ Creative Commons, *The state of the commons 2016*, (Sep. 28, 2017) <https://creativecommons.org/>.

III. WHY OPEN ACCESS

The pressure for open access publishing and the ‘industry’ that has evolved around it comes from several sources, some laudable and some misguided. I consider the ‘misguided’ to be those who see the rise of the open access movement as a protest against—and an alternative to—the ‘mainstream’ publishers who they inevitably claim are making ‘excessive’ profits². The extent of ‘excessive’ is never defined; the fact that open access suites such as Biomed Central (BMC) and Public Library of Science (PLOS) charge large amounts of money for their services is never considered. Nevertheless, the pressure on academics, universities and journals in Europe and Australia—not yet strongly visible in North America—to publish open access is extreme. Indeed, research councils and charities funding research in the UK make open access publication a requirement for outputs from projects they support. More formally, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (now Research England), and equivalent bodies in the remainder of the United Kingdom, make open access compulsory for research outputs submitted for the Research Excellence Framework³—the mechanism whereby universities in the United Kingdom receive research infrastructure funding.

Otherwise, the pressure to publish research outputs open access comes from the general public, at least via pressure groups, on the basis that they largely fund the research that universities carry out and, therefore, it should be available—free—for them to read. Another ‘pressure point’ for open access comes from some academics and some universities—some of whom have broken ranks and made their publications available for anyone to read—who not only believe that their research should be thus made available but who often also cite ‘excessive profits’ by the major publishing houses responsible for producing the majority of academic journals. The exact nature and extent of these excess profits is not specified and the fact that, certainly in the United Kingdom, the academic publishing industry is a hugely successful export industry with sales in 2016 of £1.1 billion⁴ employing thousands of people⁵ is ignored. Producing journals, by any means, is not cost neutral and open access fees, called APCs (article processing charges), are charged—once only—to the author as opposed to recurring annual fees to readers (via library bundles) to offset the loss of income for pay to view.

IV. OPEN ACCESS MODELS

² Roger Watson, *Ethics and open access*, 2(2), NURSING OPEN, 47-48 (2015).

³ Higher Education Funding Council for England, *Policy for open access in Research Excellence Framework 2021*, HEFCE (2016).

⁴ The Publishers Association, *Strong year for UK publishing industry as it grows to £4.4bn*, 2016, May 13, 2016, (Sep. 28, 2017) <https://www.publishers.org.uk/media-centre/news-releases/2016/strong-year-for-uk-publishing-industry-as-it-grows-to-44bn/>.

⁵ Creative Industries, *Publishing facts and figures*, 2017, (Sep. 28, 2017) <http://www.thecreativeindustries.co.uk/industries/publishing/publishing-facts-and-figures#>.

Open access is available in three ways, referred to as ‘gold’, ‘green’ and ‘diamond’. Gold open access is where the author covers the cost of publishing. This is also known as ‘pay to publish’, as opposed to the traditional ‘pay to view’. The cost, in reputable journals, can be considerable (several thousand US dollars) and journals should, strictly speaking, make no further money from sales of the published article. However, below I will consider the concept of ‘double-dipping’. The green model of open access is one whereby the content of published articles can be made available but rarely in the final published format and normally only after a period of embargo (between 6-24 months depending on the field of study and the publisher). Under the green open access model, the final accepted versions of manuscripts may be made available to read free of charge and this is increasingly being done via university or research funding body repositories. The diamond model of open access—also referred to as the ‘platinum’ model—is one where no money changes hands either to publish or to read. There are currently very few journals operating this model for obvious reasons.

V. FUNDING MODELS

From the funding perspective, journals can be described in three ways. Some remain totally dependent on pay to view, although few academic journals maintain this model and a comprehensive list is not available. But it does still appear to be an issue⁶. Others are now completely open access, and this mainly applies to new journals developed specifically to be open access and to be funded by APCs. Notable amongst these and early adopters are the BMC and PLOS suites of journals. However, many journals, once considered to be ‘traditional’ journals—ie pay to view—have incorporated open access as part of their funding model and these are described as ‘hybrid’ journals. They publish a combination of pay to view and pay to publish articles. In the process of submitting a manuscript an author can indicate their preference and pay an APC. The APC should be paid once the article has been accepted and should not influence the editorial decisions about the manuscript.

The practice of ‘double-dipping’⁷, whereby publishers were receiving income for open access and pay to view for the same copy has largely been addressed. To provide value for money, publishers are annually adding copy to their journals equivalent to that paid for by open access. This means that pay to view customers receive the same number of articles. Therefore, very quickly, many in the academic publishing industry have responded as well as they can without incurring significant loss of income and the inevitable redundancies and closures of journals that this would necessitate. They have not responded, by making their copy instantly available open access. Largely, they have responded by allowing their copy to be available after an embargo period and only then in the final accepted

⁶ University of Western Australia, *Open access toolkit: open v closed access journals*, 2018 (Jan. 20, 2019) <https://guides.library.uwa.edu.au/c.php?g=325342&p=2178784>.

⁷ Research Libraries UK, *The cost of double-dipping*, 2017 (Sep. 28, 2017) <http://www.rluk.ac.uk/about-us/blog/the-costs-of-double-dipping/>.

copy. To facilitate the demand for open access publication there has been a concomitant growth in the number and the size of university online repositories to accommodate the volume of publications.

VI. PREDATORY PUBLISHERS

On the back of all these changes in academic publishers we have seen the rise of the so-called predatory publishers. The rise in the number of publishers and journals has been remarkable from 18 publishers in 2011 to 923 in 2016 according to Beall's list (no longer available in its original form) of predatory publishers and a more recent estimate puts this figure conservatively at 10,000⁸ (Watson 2019). The definition of a predatory publisher used by Beall was⁹:

'In academic publishing, predatory open access publishing is an exploitative open-access publishing business model that involves charging publication fees to authors without providing the editorial and publishing services associated with legitimate journals (open access or not).'

The combined pressure to publish *per se*, the acceptance of online publishing and the pressure for open access publishing has provided a fertile environment for the rapid growth in predatory publishers.

Predatory publishers operate by issuing a continuous stream of invitations by email to academic staff inviting them to publish in one of their journals. Emails invariably open up with inane 'greetings', an aspiration about how good your day is or about your health and happiness and then the invitation. The invitations to publish vary from simply wanting an article to inviting you to edit a special issue or consider being an editor or editorial board member – something to which I will return. As if the wording and the nature of these emails was not enough to warn you of their intentions then there are other obvious points, for example, they normally offer speedy peer review. This means, essentially, no peer review because it is impossible to make the peer review process, if it is operated properly, speedy. The top journals from the best publishing companies struggle to offer a speedy peer review process by which I mean one that does not take months. Finding ways to accelerate the peer review process has eluded us and it is only possible by the predators if they are not doing it properly. There is a classic example of a paper with an obscene title and the obscenity repeated throughout that was published by a predatory publisher

⁸ Roger Watson, *Predatory publishing continues*, 6(1), NURSING OPEN, 4-4. (2018), <https://doi.org/10.1002/nop2.226>.

⁹ Wikipedia, *Predatory open access publishing*, (Sep. 28, 2018) https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Predatory_open_access_publishing.

thereby demonstrating that they neither reviewed the paper nor read it¹⁰; presumably those operating the publishing system do not speak English and the nature of the emails and bizarre responses also suggests this. The predatory journals are invariably online and open access and they offer ridiculously low APCs or sometime charge no APC. Some predatory journals advertise impressive ‘impact factors’ – but these are undoubtedly fabricated¹¹.

An additional twist to the predatory journals is their invitation to edit special issues – which is just a way of getting you to do their work – and to join editorial boards. When the invitation to join a board does not work, there have been reported cases where they add your name anyway and it can be hard to have your name removed.

VII. AVOIDING THE PREDATORS

The best defence by academics in avoiding predatory publishers is the application of common sense: if in doubt; don’t. Never respond to emails of invitation to publish in a journal. If you want to publish, you select the journal.

Universities could do more to protect their staff and to help starve the predatory publishing industry of funds. Universities could lever this in two ways: providing information; and censuring staff who do publish in predatory journals¹². Information should be both general and specific; generally, staff induction and continuing professional development should include training in good publishing practices. Beyond that, universities could oblige subject areas to draw up regular lists of acceptable journals. These need not all be high impact factor journals; nevertheless, the Thomson Reuters impact factor list and the emerging sources index would be good starting points, merely because of the quality indicators and good practice that must be evident before inclusion.

Beyond universities, research councils and university funding bodies – especially in Australia, Hong Kong and the UK where research assessment exercises are conducted – could discount any outputs appearing in predatory journals from eligibility, and international bodies such as *Times Higher Education* which rank universities could ask for evidence of policies related to predatory journals.

These measures may seem extreme, possibly unworkable and harsh on individuals. It is impossible to know what the profits of the predatory publishers are; they are ‘hydra-headed’ monsters. However, any amount of money spent on them and any extent to which the reputation of an individual or an institution is debased is too much; something

¹⁰ David Mazières & Eddie Kohler, *Get me off your fucking mailing list*, INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ADVANCED COMPUTER TECHNOLOGY, (Feb. 10, 2017) <http://www.scs.stanford.edu/~dm/home/papers/remove.pdf>.

¹¹ Mehrdad Jalalian, *The story of fake impact factor companies and how we detected them*, 7(2), ELECTRONIC PHYSICIAN, 1069–1072 (2015).

¹² Roger Watson, *Beall’s list of predatory open access journals: RIP*, 4 (2), NURSING OPEN, 60 (2017).

must be done.