Description

Bringing Research to the Masses

As it reaches its fifteenth birthday, it may still be too early to speak of the “history” of Open Access (OA). Yet, enough time has passed since the day *Public Library of Science* (PLOS) was launched in 2000. The time has come for us to start examining whether the original mission of OA has succeeded. The mission to challenge the prohibitively high subscription rates of academic journals!

It took the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP) thirteen years to get on board with a directive: “Federal agencies with more than $100M in R&D expenditures” to make the published results of that research freely available to the public within one year of publication. This might just suggest that OA is facing a tough battle for broad acceptance. The reality, however, is that the argument for freedom of access has been challenged by a preference for quality.

Competition on Price has Consequences

When the *Open Society Institute* first coined the term *open access* back in 2001, the inference was deliberately “poor vs. rich.” Then, the publishers of expensive academic journals were called out for denying scientific knowledge to those who could not afford the high subscription fees. The availability of research through academic libraries that paid those fees was apparently ignored in the “us vs. them” battle, but the pronouncement did succeed in placing an explicitly financial frame on the relationship. It is no wonder, therefore, that alternative solutions proceeded directly to that financial problem.

Rather than asking subscribers to pay, OA advocates came up with the idea of allowing researchers to pay for the privilege of letting their audience read their work, and article processing charges (APC’s) were born!

Since the mission of OA was to bring research to the masses, OA publishers were precluded from chasing the alleged 40% profit margins of traditional academic journals. But it didn’t take them long to realize that the more articles they published, the more APC’s they received, and the best way to do that was to turn away from the 90% rejection rates of which traditional journals were so proud.

Promises to underwrite more esoteric journals with these profits helped to sweeten the deal, but that did little to quiet the growing concerns about the perceived lower quality resulting from lower rejection rates.

Time has the Answer Amid Different Customer Expectations

While OA journals were delivering similar content as the traditional journals, their business model included new customers—the authors who were picking up the tab!

Those customers expected their voices to be heard, and one of the highest priorities on their list of concerns has been the sclerotic pace of peer review in traditional academic publishing. Unfortunately,

expediting that process runs the risk of further damaging the reputation of OA journals. The journal PLOS ONE, for example, made an explicit commitment to limiting peer review of submissions to only ensure that they were scientifically sound, leaving further review to a post-publication audience.

Publishing 31,000 articles in 2013, which was 36 times more than the next largest PLOS journal, suggests that such an arrangement is very attractive to authors eager to get the word out about their research (and very lucrative for PLOS). But eventually it remains to be seen whether the larger scientific community will embrace the model in support of faster peer review, or question the quality of the published work.

Category

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