

What the Open-Access Movement Doesn't Want You to Know

Advocates of open access tell only one side of the story, ignoring the exploitative practices and poor quality of many open-access journals.

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The open-access movement has been around for more than a dozen years. It started with three ambitious proclamations made in the early 2000s following meetings in Berlin, Bethesda, and Budapest. Now, it's more of an institution than a social movement, and the statements have come to serve as a substitute for thought.

The open-access movement is a coalition that aims to bring down the traditional scholarly publishing industry and replace it with voluntarism and server space subsidized by academic libraries and other nonprofits. It is concerned more with the destruction of existing institutions than with the construction of new and better ones.

The movement uses *argumentum ad populum*, stating only the advantages of providing free access to research and failing to point out the drawbacks (predatory publishers, fees charged to authors, and low-quality articles). It's hard to argue against "free"—and free access is the chief selling point of open-access publishing—but open-access promoters don't like to talk about who has to pay. Few dare to disagree publicly with the open-access advocates' proclamations; those who do are stigmatized. The open-access movement has become so institutionalized that it even has a police department (a volunteer one, of course), whose members verbally attack anyone who has the courage to question the movement's ideals or its proponents' motives or to point out its weaknesses and unintended consequences.

The arguments in favor of open-access publishing seem initially compelling and hard to dispute. The movement, with its emphasis on sharing information freely and electronically, has the spirit of a researchers' collective. How could anyone be against free access to research? Advocates have cast the arguments in Manichean terms: you are either for free access or you support greedy publishers. Anyone who questions the movement is branded as an ally of the malevolent publishers.

I should know. I have been subjected to countless personal attacks by open-access zealots for questioning the sustainability of the open-access model and for publishing *Scholarly Open Access*, a blog that lists predatory open-access publishers and stand-alone journals that aim to rip off honest researchers for their own profit.

Varieties of Open Access

Most open-access promoters ignore the thousands of titles on the lists of predatory journals I publish and focus on those in the *Directory of Open Access Journals*, which includes only publications that meet certain quality standards. They don't tell the whole story. In fact, at least three varieties of open-access publishing exist today.

In the so-called gold open-access model, authors are charged a fee, called the "article processing charge," upon acceptance of a manuscript. Numerous publishers have emerged since 2009 that aim to exploit this model, setting up publishing operations with dozens of titles of broad scope such as the *Journal of Education* and sometimes duplicating the titles of established journals. They use spam e-mail to solicit manuscript submissions and have an easy or fake peer-review process. The more papers they accept, the more money they make, and they aim to make as much money as possible. Thanks to the Internet, there is a low barrier to starting a scholarly publishing operation; hundreds of people with no experience in scholarly publishing have created new publishing operations, all with the tacit approval of the open-access movement.

Some publishers and journals do not charge fees to researchers and still make their content freely accessible and free to read. These publishers practice *platinum open access*, which is free to the authors and free to the readers. Platinum open-access journals are usually published by nonprofit societies and associations. The publishing model is completely different from gold open access. Unfortunately, the number of predatory journals is surpassing the number of honest, platinum open-access journals.

A third variety of open-access publishing, often labeled as *green open access*, is based in academic libraries and is built on an oversimplification of scholarly publishing. In the green open-access model, authors upload postprints (the author's last version of a paper that is submitted to a subscription publisher after peer review) to digital repositories, which make the content freely available. Many academic libraries now have such repositories for their faculty members and students; the green open-access movement is seeking to convert these repositories into scholarly publishing operations. The long-term goal of green open access is to accustom authors to uploading postprints to repositories in the hope that one day authors will skip scholarly publishers altogether. Despite sometimes onerous mandates, however, many authors are reluctant to submit their postprints to repositories. Moreover, the green open-access model mostly eliminates all the value added that scholarly publishers provide, such as copyediting and long-term digital preservation.

The low quality of the work often published under the gold and green open-access models provides startling evidence of the value of high-quality scholarly publishing.

Researchers as Consumers

Researchers are both consumers and producers of published scholarly literature, and while it's great in theory that open access has removed price barriers for some consumers, in fact the price barriers are shifting to the author side. In other words, for the most part open access moves the financing of scholarly publishing from consumer to author.

When authors become the customers in scholarly communication, those with the least funds are effectively prevented from participating; there is a bias against the underfunded. Subscription journals have never discriminated on the basis of an author's ability to pay an article-processing charge. They focus on the readers and expend resources on copyediting, validating research, managing peer review, and preserving content.

Gold open access devalues the role of the consumer in scholarly research. The needs of consumers—subscribers and readers, in the case of publishing—drive business in any commercial enterprise. But with gold open access, the paying customers are now the authors, and the publishers are arranging the business model to please the authors, the source of their revenue. Open access is making readers secondary players in the scholarly communication process.

Scholarly open-access publishing is not a consumer-friendly activity. In the past, underperforming subscription journals and those whose subscribers found they provided a poor return on investment would see cancellations, an effective demonstration of the consumer's voice in action. In the 1990s, as subscription prices rose, most academic libraries embarked on massive journal cancellation programs. Publishers responded by changing the way journals are marketed, making available bundles or "packages" of online journals. Most large academic libraries subscribe to these journal bundles, taking advantage of an economy of scale that facilitates access to many thousands of journals.

Questioning Peer Review and Impact Factors

There has recently been much discussion on academic blogs and websites about peer review and the value of the impact factor, a measure of the number of citations that is used to rank the importance of journals. It is no coincidence that people are questioning these institutions at the same time that scholarly open-access publishing and predatory publishing are increasing.

The peer-review process for many predatory publishers is either dishonest or nonexistent. In blind peer review, publishers manage the peer-review process confidentially, so it is difficult to gather evidence on the authenticity of the peer review conducted by many questionable publishers. The articles they publish, however, make it possible to draw some conclusions regarding peer review. For example, on my blog I've documented instances where journals have published supposedly peer-reviewed articles claiming to have uncovered the nature of dark energy—a discovery that would be among the most important scientific advances of all time. Articles proclaiming such unlikely findings are common in predatory journals.

I have also noted that many individuals with science-related political agendas are publishing bogus research in questionable open-access journals to promote their agendas. Antinuclear activists, for example, are using predatory publishers to spread half-truths and false information about the effects of nuclear radiation. The pseudo-science gets published in journals that, to the general public, appear authentic, and the research is branded as

science. Moreover, once political activists publish articles in open-access journals, they often seek coverage in the media, which sometimes publishes or broadcasts stories that promote the pseudo-scientific ideas of the political activists.

In short, the peer-review process is failing to prevent the mingling of authentic and bogus science in the scholarly record. This failure is causing many to question peer review generally, even though predatory publishers are the chief source of its decline.

Predatory publishers have similarly found ways to game the impact factor, and this gaming may be contributing to scholarly discontent with the metric. New companies have emerged, working with the predatory publishers, to “calculate” and assign impact factors for open-access journals. Scholars can no longer take claims about impact factor at face value. Many publishers are either lying about their journals having impact factors or are using false values. Impact factors are literally for sale; corrupt publishers want them because they increase the rate of article submission and, therefore, revenue. Very few components of scholarly publishing remain that have not been corrupted by those seeking easy money from scholarly authors.

Competition among Authors

Scholarly authors are now competing with each other financially, at least in the context of gold open access. If you’re an author from a Western country, the novelty and significance of your research findings are secondary to your ability to pay an article-processing charge and get your article in print. An increasing number of what I call “author-services companies” can help you improve and polish your manuscript before you submit it to a publisher. Their services— if you can afford them—claim to make your work stand out among competitors. These companies provide copyediting, figure and table creation, coverletter writing, abstract writing, translation, methodological and statistical review, and even prepublication peer review. Yes, you can pay to have someone peer review your paper before it is even submitted to the journals!

Open-access advocates like to invoke the supposed lack of access to research in underdeveloped countries. But these same advocates fail to mention that numerous programs exist that provide free access to research, such as Research4Life and the World Health Organization’s Health Internetwork Access to Research Initiative. Open access actually silences researchers in developing and middle-income countries, who often cannot afford the author fees required to publish in gold open-access journals.

The authors with the most money will be the ones who most benefit from this emerging status quo in scholarly publishing, and the top open-access journals will be the ones that are able to command the highest article-processing charges from authors. The more prestigious the journal, the more you’ll have to pay. The era of merit in scholarly publishing is ending; the era of money has begun.

Not only will you be paying top dollar to publish your best work; you will also be giving it away. Most open-access journals compel authors to sign away intellectual property rights upon publication, requiring that their content be released under the terms of a very loose

Creative Commons license. Under this license, others can republish your work—even for profit—without asking for permission. They can create translations and adaptations, and they can reprint your work wherever they want, including in places that might offend you.

Secrets Revealed

Scholarly open-access publishing has made many tens of thousands of scholarly articles freely available, but more information is not necessarily better information. Predatory journals threaten to bring down the whole cumulative system of scholarly communication, which builds on science already in the academic record.

I predict, however, that scholarly publishing models that serve the needs of consumers or readers of scholarly research will be the ones that ultimately survive. Any scholarly communications system that focuses on authors and demands payments for publication invites corruption. In the long term, the open-access movement will be seen as an ephemeral social cause that tried and failed to topple an industry. If open-access advocates attacked predatory publishers with the same fervor they use to attack subscription publishers, scholarly communication would not be in such a desperate state.

Be wary of predatory publishers and the goods they sell, the quick and easy publishing of one's research. Keep the readers and subscribers in mind, and submit your work only to the best journals in your field. Let's not trust the future of science to corrupt and profiteering open-access journals.

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