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## Open access publishing should not favour those with deep pockets

The leading model of open access publishing discriminates against academics unable to pay publication charges

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Posted by John Bynner, Harvey Goldstein  
Wednesday 9 May 2012 13.37 BST  
guardian.co.uk  
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There's a risk that the costs of open access publishing will be met from funds otherwise available for research itself. Photograph: Alamy

The present academic publishing system obstructs the free communication of research findings. By erecting paywalls, commercial publishers prevent scientists from downloading research papers unless they pay substantial fees. Libraries similarly pay huge amounts (up to £1m or more per annum) to give their readers access to online journals.

There is general agreement that free and open access to scientific knowledge is desirable. The way this might be achieved has come to the fore in recent debates about the future of scientific and scholarly journals.

The announcement by the UK government's universities and science minister, David Willetts, of free access to all publicly funded research findings, Jimmy Wales's appointment as a government adviser and Dame Janet Finch's working group set up to advise on open access, all reflect the importance of this issue. Nevertheless, we have a real concern that the process of opening up academic publication may exclude some key interests as a result of the methods used to achieve it.

Our concern lies with the major proposed alternative to the current system. Under this arrangement, authors are expected to pay when they submit papers for publication in online journals: the so called "article processing cost" (APC). The fee can amount to anything between £1,000 and £2,000 per article, depending on the reputation of the journal. Although the fees may sometimes be waived, eligibility for exemption is decided by the publisher and such concessions have no permanent status and can always be withdrawn or modified.

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The APC approach is increasingly favoured by funding bodies such as the [Wellcome Trust](#). These funding bodies make provision in academic research grants to pay for publication charges for the research they fund.

A major problem with the APC model is that it effectively shifts the costs of academic publishing from the reader to the author and therefore discriminates against those without access to the funds needed to meet these costs. Among those excluded are academics in, for example, the humanities and the social sciences whose research funding typically does not include publication charges, and independent researchers whose only means of paying the APC is from their own pockets. Academics in developing countries in particular face discrimination under APC because of their often very limited access to research funds.

Not only is APC discriminatory, but within a finite research funding budget its costs are likely to be met from funds otherwise available for the research itself, thereby potentially penalising the whole research community.

There is another approach that could be implemented for a fraction of the cost of commercial publishers' current journal subscriptions. "Access for all" (AFA) journals, which charge neither author nor reader, are committed to meeting publishing costs in other ways. We have been involved with the funding of a journal, [Longitudinal and Life Course Studies](#) (LLCS), which is free for authors and readers, and was initially established with the support of a three-year development grant from the [Nuffield Foundation](#). We don't benefit financially from the journal, and the editorial and reviewing services are supplied free.

The costs for an AFA journal include copy-editing, layout, editorial meetings and journal management, including the peer review process, together with website hosting charges and publishing software support. For LLCS these amount to about £15,000 per year for three issues and are met with the help of the [Society for Longitudinal and Lifecourse Studies](#), independent research centres and a nominal readership registration fee.

How can AFA be encouraged? We propose that university libraries set aside some of their journal acquisition funds, currently paid to commercial publishers through bulk arrangements, in the form of grant aid to support new or existing AFA journals. Allocations would take account of the many years it can take to build the readership and submissions base on which the journals' reputation and future viability will depend. Governance details would need to be decided and ideally would involve library consortia, universities, learned societies and research funders.

What we need is some clear thinking about how online publishing should develop. In particular we strongly urge the Finch working group to give serious attention to the alternative AFA strategy for journal funding and for Willetts to adopt it within his vision for open access.

We are not advocating a sudden major shift to this form of publication, rather a funding regime that would encourage its growth and explore how it might best be managed. Such a publication model would not only be cost-efficient, we believe that it would also find greater acceptance within the academic community as a legitimate return on the editorial and refereeing resources that are currently provided for free.

*John Bynner is emeritus professor of social sciences in education, Institute of Education, University of London. Harvey Goldstein is professor of social statistics, University of Bristol*



Open access is the future of academic publishing, says Finch report

Transition to open access could cost £60m a year but bring benefits for UK economy and increase efficiency of research

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I can no longer work for a system that puts profit over access to research

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**oharar**  
9 May 2012 1:44PM

How can AFA be encouraged? We propose that university libraries set aside some of their journal acquisition funds, currently paid to commercial publishers through bulk arrangements, in the form of grant aid to support new or existing AFA journals.

Why would a library want to do that? What do they gain from it, other than a warm fuzzy feeling? It would be much better for any one library to decline to do this, and their researchers can still publish in the journal *and* the university has more money to allocate to research (or to paying for the librarians' coffee and biscuits).



**SCWW**  
9 May 2012 1:54PM



It seems likely that a mix of open access options will emerge. I would hope that a shift to this mode of publishing would both stimulate a more efficient market among publishers (current inefficiencies/flaws allow profit margins of 35%) and more creative ideas about how to disseminate research cheaply, particularly among humanities scholars and those from poorer countries.

I think the Finch committee is mindful of these issues — see my [recent summary](#) of their deliberations.

If you want to lobby them, you'd better get your skates on since I the committee is shortly to report (contact details [here](#))



**MikeTaylor**  
9 May 2012 2:08PM

I wrote a detailed 600-word comment in response to this. As I was proof-reading before hitting submit, the window just evaporated, and my comment was lost. Thanks, Guardian!



**MikeTaylor**  
9 May 2012 2:10PM

Meanwhile, with perfect timing, [PeerJ](#) have just announced that they will publish Open Access papers for a one-time author-side fee of \$99 -- 7.3% the fee charged by PLoS ONE.



**dirkbruere**  
9 May 2012 2:58PM

The main thing researchers can do is ensure that their preprints go to [ArXiv](#), which is freely accessible.



**HarmoniousFrog**  
9 May 2012 3:45PM

The discussion is mainly about papers that haven't been written yet.

What will be done about all those papers that are already behind the payroll? Valuable literature that has suddenly become inaccessible was written many decades ago.



**HarmoniousFrog**  
9 May 2012 3:48PM

Response to [MikeTaylor](#), 9 May 2012 2:08PM

I wrote a detailed 600-word comment in response to this. As I was proof-reading before hitting submit, the window just evaporated, and my comment was lost. Thanks, Guardian!

That happens sometimes on all sorts of forums. Packets easily get lost on the web. Keep typing CtrlA then CtrlC (or equivalent) and, if you want, have a text editor open.



**meganhall**  
9 May 2012 3:57PM

Actually, the Public Library of Science suite of journals (the first OA publisher on the scene now producing seven OA journals) offers partial or complete fee waivers so that inability to pay has no bearing on publication. I recognize that PLoS doesn't

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**TredStone**

9 May 2012 7:12PM

There is another approach that could be implemented for a fraction of the cost of commercial publishers' current journal subscriptions. "Access for all" (AFA) journals, which charge neither author nor reader, are committed to meeting publishing costs in other ways. We have been involved with the funding of a journal, Longitudinal and Life Course Studies (LLCS), which is free for authors and readers, and was initially established with the support of a three-year development grant from the Nuffield Foundation. We don't benefit financially from the journal, and the editorial and reviewing services are supplied free.

The costs for an AFA journal include copy-editing, layout, editorial meetings and journal management, including the peer review process, together with website hosting charges and publishing software support. For LLCS these amount to about £15,000 per year for three issues and are met with the help of the Society for Longitudinal and Lifecourse Studies, independent research centres and a nominal readership registration fee.

Assuming that paper formatting, editing and reviewing is performed by volunteers, the Open Journal System of the Public Knowledge Project can host a journal for \$850 per annum (most basic service) or \$2700 for the enterprise service. See:

<http://pkpservices.sfu.ca/content/journal-hosting>

It also provides the online software for the formatting, editing and reviewing.

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**oharar**

9 May 2012 7:18PM

Response to [meganhall](#), 9 May 2012 3:57PM

the first OA publisher on the scene

BMC started before PLoS, and there were possibly others before then.

I think all OA publishers offer waivers, but they obviously depend on the proportion of authors taking up the waiver being fairly small. If everyone demanded waivers or refused to pay, they would obviously be in trouble.

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**GavinMoodie**

9 May 2012 9:55PM

I share other posters' optimism that of the several open access funding arrangements that are developed over the next few years, some will be free to both impecunious authors and readers. Scholarly journals were first sponsored by learned societies and many still are sponsored by disciplinary associations, and it is possible that these or modern analogues will support access for all journals.

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**Utopic**

9 May 2012 10:27PM

So here is the basic Maths, If you put together a journal in the UK which publishes 200 papers a year you will need about £5000 to cover staff costs, software and website - this is probably a minimum but there are no other attendant costs apart from your time. So that puts breakeven at about £25 per paper, the rest is profit and its easy to do if you are even remotely web savvy - that is why so many people are launching open access operations and why costs can be so low. Now meeting that cost can be done by APCs, but far better if you can attract sponsorship. If your journal is clinical/medical/pharmacological then sponsorship/advertising opportunities are abundant and you can easily meet all the publishing costs of the journal and turn a tidy profit on advertising alone. BMJ for instance were very quickly open access no fees (FTA) which was commendable but are bucking the trend now by introducing fees where there were none, which is just straightforward short-sighted and reprehensible, they don't need to and its against there own interest actually.

It is pretty clear that if academics switch en masse to the journals that are FTA when they are available to them, then all the top journals will adopt this model (less the lose advertising revenue, prestige and profitability). All the Nature journals would switch next week if they thought they would lose thier elite status by not changing, since they can easily make a profit without charging authors or libraries - just much less than they do now of course but still a profit.

The bigger problem will be lower impact journals in areas lacking commercial interest - these will not attract advertising revenue. The answer there I suspect lies in learned societies meeting the costs in a not-for-profit way. Most learned societies could invest a few thousand per annum to meet sustain a journal which was open access and no APCs even in the absence of advertisers. To do this though they will need to move away from commercial publishers who wish to take profits, reset thier ideas of journals being cash cows for them where they do have them and start to view them as legitimate and necessary expenditure integral to the infrastructure of

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the societies.



**AlexReisner**

10 May 2012 1:00AM

Perhaps now would be the time to approach the IMF so that OA would be stably supported world-wide.

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**shunsuke**

10 May 2012 5:20AM

Larger learned societies could fairly easily set up open access journals which do not charge authors for production costs. The potential editorial board, reviewers, authors and readership are already identified. If the society has a thousand paying members, then one could increase membership with \$10. The first year the journal would probably need more financial support, but it should be able to break even with \$10,000 per year. Maybe a small fee (\$100) for authors from developed countries.

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**RNLawrence**

10 May 2012 8:39AM

We propose that university libraries set aside some of their journal acquisition funds, currently paid to commercial publishers through bulk arrangements, in the form of grant aid to support new or existing AFA journals.

'Grant aid' is simply another name for a library journal subscription.

For LLCS these amount to about £15,000 per year for three issues and are met with the help of the Society for Longitudinal and Lifecourse Studies, independent research centres and a nominal readership registration fee.

A 'readership registration fee' is simply another name for a personal journal subscription fee.

AFA is not free at all; it just has a name that sounds like it is free and uses slightly different terminology instead of APC or subscription to make it sound somehow better. The reality is that publishing costs some money. We can argue how much it costs and what is involved, but to produce something that is sustainable (i.e. is not reliant on grants or other handouts) then it has to charge a fee somewhere to cover its costs and it has to also make a profit to make it a stable resource. There really is nothing wrong with that and it is seen in most other walks of life so to suggest this should be any different makes no sense.

I agree that the Gold Open Access model may be more difficult in a few fields, especially those areas that do not often receive grants. However, Sage Open is very successful in the social sciences; the fees are small and they have found that authors are willing to cover those charges from their own pocket to get their work out. For the other fields, funders are already incorporating the fees within their grants and it is an extremely small proportion of the total research costs. Those that have problems paying (from developing countries etc) apply for waivers and I am not aware of anyone in that situation being turned down for such a waiver. There is also the HINARI / AGORA agreements that all the major publishers adhere to where authors from the poorest countries are guaranteed free publication.

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**oharar**

10 May 2012 8:58AM

So here is the basic Maths, If you put together a journal in the UK which publishes 200 papers a year you will need about £5000 to cover staff costs, software and website - this is probably a minimum but there are no other attendant costs apart from your time.

Can you give a link to your run-down of this basic maths? A journal of this size would need an editorial assistant, and there's no way they could be paid for their time on £5000 p.a. I don't think any decent sized journal would be able to operate without someone doing the admin and management - someone needs to organise us.

Larger learned societies could fairly easily set up open access journals which do not charge authors for production costs.

Larger learned societies get a large amount of their income from their journals, so I don't think this is going to happen, unfortunately.

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**Utopic**

10 May 2012 10:00AM

Response to [Utopic, 9 May 2012 10:27PM](#)

Excellent comment; I was always wondering what on earth costs £ 1200 in the publishing process, and why the whole enterprise of open access publishing is

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seen as an act of social justice.



**epentz**

10 May 2012 10:43AM

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Response to [dirkbruere](#), 9 May 2012 2:58PM

ArXiv serves Physics, Mathematics, Computer Science, Quantitative Biology, Quantitative Finance and Statistics - how does this help social science and humanities researchers?



**LarryJayCee**

10 May 2012 10:50AM

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Response to [oharar](#), 9 May 2012 1:44PM

If the University Libraries no longer have to pay journal subscriptions, then they could use these funds to support researchers at the Universities and pay their publishing fees. As you say there is no justification for simply giving money to publishers; they are not charities.



**PFurtado**

10 May 2012 11:10AM

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Yes, open access journals are 'a good thing' but they've been around for a while now (in the humanities as well as in science). If they served everyone's needs then why is commercial academic publishing not dead in the water by now?

Anyone who wants to publish needs to create great IP, then to find a way of exploiting it. In the world of scientific research, 'exploiting your IP' may not mean selling it to libraries, but getting your next research grant.

That doesn't apply in many other [areas of publishing](#). Different revenue models are needed: and the new government guru tried one last year. It was called 'A Personal Appeal for Donations from Jimmy Wales' and it appeared at the top of every Wikipedia page for months. Fancy seeing that one on your research findings?



**Nonsek**

10 May 2012 5:32PM

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The more I read about it, the more I like the SciELO scheme.

[SciELO site](#)

No money involved from the researchers, from the libraries or from the readers.

More about it:

Here: [Canadian Journal of Higher Education](#)

And here: [EMBO Open Reports](#)

(disclaimer: I have no link to the SciELO!!)



**philcommunication**

10 May 2012 8:01PM

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Response to [Nonsek](#), 10 May 2012 5:32PM

In order to find the solution to this problem we need to do some proper research... but I'm a bit skint, so fuck it...

No seriously, that Scielo link is a shining example of how easy it is to setup so everyone can have open free love of research, it's not as difficult as what them other folk are going on about. Will just take a few kind people to help keep the server going :)



**cmreveley**

10 May 2012 8:53PM

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It sounds like a good idea and I've nothing against it.

but at least in science, 1 or 2k is actually a very small portion of an average grant leading to a paper.

a research grant comes from public finds. all you need to do is insist that grants specifically allocate a few thousand for publishing costs. most people are quite happy to pay PLoS, even if they could get away with saving the money.

science is really, really costly. grants cover materials, salaries, MRI time for 50 2 hour sessions, computer clusters, everything.

maybe it's different in the humanities. take that comment as you will.



**cmreveley**  
10 May 2012 8:57PM

and what's more, there's nothing to prevent the indian institutes of science system from setting up their own equivalent of PLoS, with costs more commensurate to how their economy presently functions.

Frankly it could be in hindi. Which we'd then have to learn if we want access to the research. Just like people have to learn english, and used to have to learn german if they wanted to do science.

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**engagebrain**  
11 May 2012 4:20AM

There are two related issues

- 1) the actual cost of publishing and how these are shared between authors and readers
- 2) the private for profit model

The private for profit industry is taking over 30% of the journal price in profits, which is clearly obscene and takes resources away from scientific research. This should be addressed at a governmental and university level with some very tough negotiations and the refusal of authors to provide free content and free reviewing.

However there are real costs to publishing which somehow have to be paid. Free to authors and free to readers is unworkable. The author's suggestion, that libraries should give a journal a grant, is actually no different from the existing arrangement - libraries mostly pay. However if reader access is free then libraries will choose, indeed the accountants will insist, on not paying.

A related issue is access for readers not affiliated to universities. Again the problem is that if access is free to all readers then libraries will not pay or give grants to journals. An imperfect solution would be to run journals on a not for profit basis with libraries paying greatly reduced charges and with free access kicking in after 6 or 12 months.

Even in a not for profit world there are real costs of publishing which have to be met.

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**Utopic**  
11 May 2012 6:36AM

Response to [oharar](#), 10 May 2012 8:58AM

So you are right, the software and stable storage costs can usually be met minimally in a good University with a co-operative IT department, website cost is small and fixed leaving the vast majority of that £5000 (which if you want to do it you can get as a grant from places like the "open society/soros foundation") to pay for your copy editor. 200 papers is roughly a third of a copy editor salary, since it is less than a paper a day that is ample, though finding the right person can be a challenge. This is based on what it cost me to do it for my first one about 10 years ago, but it is worth noting that some not for profit OA publishers are only charging £25 per paper to cover costs and if you have several journals there is an economy of scale - so my estimate isn't too far off and also that some OA publishers have either very poor copy editing (developing world salaries can be very low but copy editing quality often suffers) or no copy editing at all - placing the onus on authors and editor to get the QC right. Also you can of course spend much, much more and organizations like PloS do spend a lot even in addition to the half million or so for their Chief exec's annual salary mostly on marketing and promotion. BMC say they spend 20-40K per journal for launch and marketing, I personally find that quite hard to beleive but once you are renting high quality space in central london and paying programmers, advertizing execs, middle management etc it starts to get expensive, so its easy to see that thier breakeven might be several fold higher - but it doesn't have to be done that way.

I agree with the comments on Scielo, this is a great initiative and it would be good if it was more supported from Europe and the US.

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**oharar**  
11 May 2012 9:09AM

Response to [Utopic](#), 11 May 2012 6:36AM

Why are you going on about copy editing? What about the person who actually runs the journal: giving manuscripts sanity checks, sending them to the editor, making sure editors and reviewers are prompt (or fielding their excuses), dealing with questions from authors, keeping the web pages updated (and passing problems onto the relevant people), making sure people are up to date with what's going on at the journal etc. etc.

How do you propose to run a decent sized journal without having someone to actually run it?

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