

Scholarly Communication, Open Access, and South America



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Big Changes in Scholarly Publishing

The world of scholarly publishing is quickly changing. One of the biggest changes is how we pay for scholarly journals. In the past, libraries subscribed to scholarly journals and made them available to their users. In some cases, individual scholars subscribed to printed journals that arrived in the mail each month, quarter, or year. Most of the time, authors did not have to pay to publish their articles; all they needed was a strong article that could pass peer review. The subscription costs paid by libraries and individual subscribers financed scholarly publishing.

But now academic libraries are gradually being pushed out of their role in the scholarly publishing process. Increasingly, researchers—the authors of the papers published in academic journals—are the ones covering all publishing costs. The source of the funds is “author fees” payments from authors to scholarly publishers. These fees are charged upon acceptance of a researcher’s paper by a journal. Now, for an increasing number of journals, when a paper passes peer review, the author receives an invoice from the publisher, a bill to pay for the costs of publishing the article.

The advantage of this model is that there are no longer any subscriptions. The published content is made “open access” meaning it’s freely published on the internet, and there is no charge to readers, no charge to libraries. Researchers in all countries are able to access the latest research and keep up to date with new discoveries, new ideas. It’s a veritable research utopia. Or is it?

Unfortunately, the author-pays model of scholarly publishing has many unanticipated weaknesses and problems. The chief problem is the conflict of interest that is a natural part of the model. If a publisher accepts and publishes more papers, it earns more money. This practice is in conflict with peer review, because performed properly, peer review frequently results in papers being rejected for publication. Therefore, many open-access publishers that rely on author fees have become corrupt, because they only want to publish as many papers as possible to increase their revenue and profit. They don't like to reject papers because that also means rejecting the income that accompanies the accepted paper. In addition, hundreds of new open-access publishers have been created only to take advantage of this weakness in the system.

These publishers have websites and names that appear similar to established, reputable publishers. Their journals have titles that sound impressive and are often close to or exactly matching the titles of respected journals. Some of these publishers pretend to be international institutes, associations or centers. They frequently use spam email to solicit papers, and some of

the spam emails are personalized, praising an author's previous article and inviting another.

Predatory Publishers

Since 2010, I have referred to these corrupt, open-access publishers as "predatory" publishers. Such publishers are unprofessional, scholarly open-access publishers that do not uphold the high standards of respected publishers and only want to make a quick and easy profit from researchers, almost immediately accepting the papers they publish, collecting the payments from the authors.

While the term "predatory publisher" may not be the perfect term to describe these publishers, it has persisted. Regardless of the terminology we use to describe them, they threaten science and honest researchers. They victimize researchers by not fulfilling the role society expects from scholarly publishers: carefully managing peer review and preventing pseudo-science from being published.

If you work for a university, you have probably received many spam emails from such publishers inviting you to submit a scholarly manuscript to them or



to serve on one of their editorial boards. While many predatory publishers only do a pretend peer review they often still have editorial boards for two reasons. First, they want to look like authentic journals, and second, they like to include people from top universities to make the journal look prestigious. Both of these practices help attract article submissions and generate revenue for the journal.

Scholarly Publishing and South America

Academic publishing has developed differently in South America than in other regions, but I believe the future of scholarly publishing in South America will change so that it matches the rest of the world. The one thing that has made scholarly publishing different in South America is SciELO, the meta-publisher that aggregates journals from selected countries both in the old and new worlds.

Many SciELO journals are open-access yet charge no fees to authors, the publishing costs subsidized by scholarly societies. Therefore, both the publishing and reading are free. This model effectively eliminates the conflict of interest built into the gold (author-pays) open-access publishing model, because authors are not sending money to the publishers. I've called this model the platinum open-access model, free to readers, free to authors.

However, this model has some weaknesses. Because platinum open-access relies on subsidies to operate, journals using this model often have small budgets. They are not able to invest funds into improving the journals and providing services such as copyediting and promotion of the published articles. Accordingly, articles published in the journals do not receive as much exposure as articles published in subscription journals, despite being open-access. Published work in them remains mostly hidden.

The gold open-access publishing model has fomented a cultural change in scholarly publishing. Increasingly, authors —instead of academic libraries— are the customers when it comes to academic journals. But this change has impacted other components of the





scholarly publishing industry as well. Now there are companies that also aim to make money from scholarly authors. These companies include those that do copyediting, translation, pre-publication peer review, and more.

Some SciELO journals are beginning to charge authors, and mandatory author payments are becoming more common for South America-based scholarly publishers. I think that in time, most of the journals that are currently free to authors in Latin America will have author fees. It will be hard for journals to compete with other journals unless they charge a fee and generate more revenue. When scholarly societies publish open-access journals, there is less motivation for scholars to join the societies, so they have less money to invest in their journals.

In the future, the biggest challenge for scholarly authors in South America will be getting money to pay to publish their articles. Higher quality journals will charge more. Universities with restricted budgets will be unable to pay for the publishing activities of their professors. The author-pays model will effectively silence many authors in South America.

Meanwhile, some of the predatory publishers will lower their prices, hoping to attract papers from authors. They may charge as low as fifty dollars. But the journals that use this strategy will often be predatory journals who hope to publish a high volume of articles at a lower price, employing the strategy of a discount store.

Conclusion

Scholarly publishing is changing rapidly. Increasingly, authors —rather than libraries— are the customers. Many bogus and low-quality businesses are appearing seeking to create services for authors, including the quick, easy, and cheap publishing of articles and other related tasks. Many open-access journals will perform a low-quality or fake peer review, meaning much low-quality research will be published and become a part of the scholarly record. To protect themselves, researchers need to be aware of predatory publishers and avoid them. They should submit their work to only the best journals, those managing a proper peer review.