

Summary breakout session 8:

Non-commercial journals: the role of the scientific societies

1. What is a 'non-commercial' journal?

A wide-ranging discussion led to the conclusion that 'non-commercial' indicates primarily a low-cost e-publishing activity. The publishers are academic / research organizations, or low-cost commercial publishers acting on their behalf. Publication was viewed as an integral part of the research effort, and within this context, 'hidden-cost' publishing activities carried out by academic organizations were regarded as admissible.

Concern was voiced that low- and hidden-cost initiatives are unlikely to be scalable to the level that many top-level commercial journals have achieved (high profile, high publication volume, intensive peer review, high rejection rate, extensive addition of post-editorial features etc). Other participants felt that such large-scale efforts were unnecessary, perhaps even undesirable.

2. Roles of the different players involved

In addition to those players already listed in the discussion guidelines, it was suggested that university authorities and grant-awarding bodies also played important roles in influencing a scientist's choice of a journal for research publications.

Further discussion centred on the fact that choice of a high-impact (usually commercial) journal was governed mainly by a desire of authors to acquire wide recognition for their publication in support of scientific career development and research funding. With few exceptions, most alternative, low-cost journals do not carry the allure of prestigious, high-impact commercial journals and the current practice of assessing research output in terms of publication impact factor reinforces current attitudes (especially in young scientists struggling to achieve recognition).

These considerations led to the formulation of a recommendation that other criteria for assessing quality of research output needed to be developed and that university authorities / grant-awarding bodies needed to be made better aware of the shortcomings of current impact factor-based evaluations.

A number of participants were of the opinion that members of editorial boards for commercial journals should be made more aware of the fact that they themselves were responsible for setting scientific publication standards and that high standards need not be a feature limited to commercially-run journals.

3. Economic models

Participants were divided on the issue of which economic model was best suited to sustainability of open access journals, with some participants arguing that in low- or hidden-cost operations, no charge for publication should be necessary.

Others favoured models similar to those operated by the BioMed Central group of journals, or the Public Library of Science. In these, a fee is levied on authors (individual submissions), or organisations (annual subscription covering submission of articles for all authors in a given institution) to cover costs of both peer review and publication.

It was, however, recognized that for scientific societies wishing to move their journals to open access, realistic alternatives to subscription-based models needed to be developed.

4. Recommendations

- Recognizing that current impact factor-based assessment of scientific quality in career development and funding applications is a major determining factor in a scientist's choice of commercial journal for publication, the group recommended that *other criteria for assessing quality of research output be developed and implemented and that university authorities / grant-awarding bodies be made better aware of the shortcomings of impact factor-based evaluations.*
- Recognizing the scientific, political and social roles that scientific societies fulfil on behalf of their members, the group recommended that *the consequences for these societies of open access publication and loss of subscription-based journal income should be carefully examined and evaluated. Further, that economically realistic alternatives to subscription-based models need to be developed.*

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