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The commercial model of academic publishing underscoring Plan S weakens the existing open access ecosystem in Latin America

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The commercial model of academic publishing underscoring Plan S weakens the existing open access ecosystem in Latin America

*Health emergencies such as those we face today reveal the importance of opening scientific knowledge; something that not-for-profit open access publishing has permanently and organically allowed for a long time. The expansion of Plan S, a research funder led initiative to promote a global transition to open access to scholarly research, to Latin America has led to significant debate about how the policy will impact the existing system of non-commercial open access publication in Latin America. Responding to earlier posts on this subject, **Eduardo Aguado López** and **Arianna Becerril García** argue that introducing Article Processing Charges, whereby academics or their funders pay to publish open access, will inherently degrade existing non-profit forms of open access publishing that have existed in Latin America for over three decades*

This post is part of a series of exchanges focused on the impact of Plan S on the Open Access ecosystem in Latin America and globally: [AmeliCA before Plan S – The Latin American Initiative to develop a cooperative, non-commercial, academic led, system of scholarly communication](#) & [Opportunity or threat? What Plan S can contribute to Open Access in Latin America](#).

First of all, we would like to thank Professor Rooryck for his straightforward and candid [response](#) to our [previous post](#). However, in many ways this response has clarified the difference between Plan S and other global open access initiatives, such as [Redalyc/AmeliCA](#). In particular, whilst acknowledging that given the opportunity to redesign academic publishing from scratch, the academic-led and not-for-profit model adopted by AmeliCA and others would be the preferred model. This is then followed by an unexpected volte-face, in his words: “Try as we might, however, we cannot wish the commercial publishers away. This is why Plan S engages squarely with commercial publishers, pursuing transparent, transformational agreements and transparent pricing. In essence, Plan S encourages commercial publishers to regain the trust that they squandered.”

From our perspective, Open Access is about scholars taking control of their own labour and future – not reforming the for-profit sector. Attempts to deliver “transparent pricing” and “transformative agreements” are indicative of the way in which Plan S has been largely shaped by the interests of corporate publishers and ultimately not those of the academic community, especially the academic community outside of the Global North. It’s discouraging to admit that the main critique of Plan S is accurate: That it is a Eurocentric proposal that aims to remove paywalls to achieve open access, but which does not seek to reduce the earnings and concentration of power over academic publishing enjoyed by a small number of commercial publishers. As such, Plan S resembles an accounting project, albeit a potentially transparent one: shifting funds from subscriptions towards article processing charges (APCs), whilst leaving the current communication system largely intact.

The APC model is problematic for regions such as Latin America and runs against our historical traditions of scholarly communication – it is a disruptive concept. Rooryck argues: “The most legitimate objection against APCs is that they require authors to find the money to pay for their publications.” However, the more pressing question is, how the existing resources within the system are being directed overall. In Latin America, APC payments represent an exit of these resources away from an academic led system and into commercial firms.

It’s discouraging to admit that the main critique of Plan S is accurate: That it is a Eurocentric proposal that aims to remove paywalls to achieve open access, but which does not seek to reduce the earnings and concentration of power over academic publishing enjoyed by a small number of commercial publishers.

When Plan S invites funders from the region to participate, how should they respond? Would it not be more useful for regional research funders to further invest in the journals they already support, rather than guaranteeing the payment of APCs to commercial publishers? We believe it is preferable for these resources to be invested back into or kept in the academic system that generates knowledge. The crux of this dilemma hinges on the perceived quality of journals and the dominance of journals in the commercial sector within journal ranking and citation indexes. This is why we have stressed the need for research funders to re-evaluate the dependence of research assessment on these indexes and the way they act as a disincentive for researchers to engage with non-profit publishing. Investing directly in non-profit open infrastructure including journals, platforms, directories, services, tools and ultimately academic communities, is the best way to keep these resources focused on the needs of researchers.

Rooryck argues that transformative agreements are better suited to scaling open access provision as opposed to “arbitrary” investments in not-for-profit publishing infrastructure that funders do not control and which may be viewed as interference in the market. Given the scale and success of open access publishing in Latin America, this argument – that ease of managing funding and accounting should trump long term investment benefits – seems shortsighted at best. Investments in infrastructure should not be considered “arbitrary”, a view that is indicative of the work required to raise the understanding on how costs are distributed and covered in a cooperative publishing model.



Latin America has upwards of 3,000 peer-reviewed quality journals, with 10,000 more in the pipeline, 95% of which do not charge APC fees. It has been working this way for over three decades. This model is not exclusive to Latin America. DOAJ lists 9,879 non-APC open access journals globally: 2,449 of which are in Latin America; but 4,168 in—Eastern and Western—Europe; 2,794 in Asia; 560 in North America. Additionally, more than a half (61%) are academy-owned by either professional associations or universities.

With this in mind we need to consider what the purpose of academic publishing should be. We have always maintained that the goal of academic publishing should be to communicate, enable dialogue, advance the progress of science and the quality of human life. The diamond model, owned by the academic community, allows for an epistemic, methodological, linguistic, geographic and content bibliodiversity. A global ecosystem cannot be centered on a single model, to claim otherwise is strangely authoritarian for an open movement. Preserving multilingualism and valuing local research is essential to creating a truly global knowledge ecosystem and for embedding knowledge into the local contexts and communities where it can be used.

The journal platforms and portals that have developed in Latin America, point towards what a scholar-led, non-profit global scholarly communications ecosystem might look like. They are the technologies that stitch together a rich network of research and researchers in the region.

In Latin America, there is a strong tradition of academic editors that manage journals and justify these activities as a core part of their academic work. They often use open-source software, adapted according to their needs, to create complex networks of training and discussion that are open to everyone. In addition to their normal disciplinary work, they also form a vibrant community in and of themselves, which can focus on publishing as a subject of study and which serves to transmit these debates back into the wider academic community. This system creates a link between researchers and the often 'backstage' practice of scholarly communication. It also plays an important role in ensuring that the debate on around achieving open access remains centred on the spaces where knowledge is produced, rather than those that would seek to turn open access into yet another opportunity for profit.

The journal platforms and portals that have developed in Latin America, point towards what a scholar-led, non-profit global scholarly communications ecosystem might look like. They are the technologies that stitch together a rich network of research and researchers in the region. For this reason, we consider it necessary to further invest in open infrastructure on a broad scale and through it to offer services to editors who don't have to charge for reading or publishing. Robust and rooted though the Latin American model is, it needs resources to be sustained, to remain competitive and to keep innovating. Day after day editorial teams strive to survive and do much with few resources. Against this background, putting the region's budgets aside to pay APCs instead of strengthening its non-commercial scientific publishing "industry" is to diminish its capacity for competition. In this key point Open Access Initiatives like Plan S still have to resolve significant challenges if they are to bring about a better open future.

Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of the LSE Impact Blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [comments policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below

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