

Open Access and the Direction Moving Forward

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Watching cOAlition-S ratchet up urgency around open access has been an object lesson in the power that funders can wield when they coordinate around an issue. Spurred by the funder-led push for authors to make their works open access, research institutions have been signing read-and-publish deals and these have swiftly accelerated the total growth of articles published as open access. But if you look closely, you will find an ideological movement has arisen which objects to these deals (e.g., “[Transformative Agreements & Library Publishing: A Short Examination](#)” from Dave Ghamandi, “[Message from the Grassroots](#)” by Camille Marcos Noûs, and “[Transformative agreements: Six myths busted](#)” from a group of librarians and research funders) from those that otherwise favor open access. A common theme of these critiques, and related discourse more broadly, can be characterized with one word: Equity.

Notice that the theme of [International Open Access Week](#) for the past four years has consistently included that root word, equity. Open access may be on the rise, but do mechanisms such as article publishing charges and read-and-publish deals keep equity a part of this transformation? Many in the open movement, “declare equity as a goal,” [Ross-Hellhauer recently wrote](#), but he argued that, “without more critical thought, open science could become just the extension of privilege.” Ross-Hellhauer is correct to the extent that many current iterations of open access (and open science) need be tied to individuals’ or institutions’ ability to pay to play. This does not have to be the case. In fact, it should never be the case. What went wrong? Where did we lose the plot?

The Wrong Solution

The [original BOAI](#) set out a goal for peer-reviewed journal literature to be made freely accessible online, either through self-archiving or open access journals. The complexity of the self-archiving route can be difficult to explain to authors or convince them to take action. On the other hand, while read-and-publish deals aren’t easy, they do help institutions remove some ambiguity about copyright, journal choice, and funding pools. Additionally, read-and-publish allows an institution to nobly address the need for global citizens to freely consume works, especially those produced by that institution.

While these may decrease ambiguity, what fills that vacuum may be ‘[coercive nudges](#)’ for affiliated researchers to [make publishing decisions they feel bound toward from all sides](#). More

broadly, if the institutions signing these deals consider themselves to be leading institutions, they expect others to follow their example. The logical endpoint for this path is an unsustainable [open serials crisis](#) for well-resourced institutions in the long-term. And in the short-term, we sacrifice equity, as it becomes more difficult for global citizens unaffiliated with such sponsoring institutions to freely contribute their own works.

Course Correction

Perhaps in recognition of this state of play, the BOAI Steering Committee used their recent [20th Anniversary Recommendations](#) to help clarify the goal of open, stating that “OA is not an end in itself, but a means to other ends, above all,” the document continues, “to the equity, quality, usability, and sustainability of research.” Outside of the letter of the law of open access, so to speak, this document reminds that the spirit of the BOAI documents is/was also meant to encompass equity, quality, usability, and sustainability.

After six years of thinking about scholarly communication, I’ve come to think about what needs to happen to improve this system in ways that I believe are compatible with the high-level summary recommendations of BOAI20. What I believe is that:

- no author should be asked to pay
- no reader should be unable to access the record
- the idea of “excellence” should be incompatible with exclusivity, artificial scarcity, or any other device not pertaining directly to the soundness of a scholarly activity
- authors should be rewarded for behavior such as making usable data available whenever appropriate, for engaging with flourishing modes of experimental reporting or communication, or for exhibiting a history of collegial peer feedback.

In this column, I wish to offer a set of recommendations to funding agencies and research institutions as an alternative to our current course as I’ve described above. I believe my recommendations will work toward addressing not only the lack of access, but [other entwined issues](#) that have to be dealt with: wide failures to replicate existing studies; the relatively slow speed to communicate findings; suboptimal peer review systems with an accompanying under-trained and under-rewarded reviewer labor supply; the toxic interaction between research assessment and career advancement; and the increased privatization of infrastructure which is leading to less control and eventually higher prices for the academy. I believe, at this point, that funding agencies and research institutions are the appropriate levers of power to lead change. With that said, let’s dig into the recommendations.

Recommendation for Funding Agencies

This first recommendation is for funding agencies: Craft policies to redirect currently mischanneled energies (and monies). While the present set of sticks and carrots may allow for some to adopt behaviors and the use of tools that can help tackle these issues (like “[preprint](#)” servers, data and protocol hosting options, and open peer-review systems), the brightly-lit path still points toward maximizing publication in outlets regarded as high impact, open or not, with often little thought given to a project’s post-publication life.

Therefore, begin by decentering the peer-reviewed journal article. This doesn’t mean you have to forbid journal publishing for researchers, just take it out of your equation. By decentering the journal article, you can redirect an author’s energies from shoehorning their research into a particular publisher’s idea of a shoe. If you more deliberately foreground collaborative and collegial discussions, you will not just passively permit, but actively encourage researchers to post open access reports on their study findings, along with FAIR data, clearly-written interpretations, and a commitment to regularly, substantively, and collegially respond to peer comment.

The work researchers conduct should be a priority for funding assessment, and while this can be understood through a published journal article, it may be best understood through alternative reporting methods which incorporate direct, ongoing, and open communication with an audience of practitioners. We all incorporate proxies at some level in our decision-making, so we should strive to use sensible ones. Don’t just decenter journals, forbid inclusion of journal-based metrics from grants applications. Instead, ask grant applicants to show you a clear history of collaborative service, peer-review, and responsiveness to good faith feedback on one’s own work. If you need a jumping off point that threads this needle for your updated policy, I tried drafting [a bundle of funder policies & principles](#) which I’m sure you can improve on.

If you redirect your funds away from publishing fees, this will leave you some surplus of non-earmarked funds. But don’t overlearn the lesson by taking your money entirely out of infrastructure support. Redirect that money to areas that researchers may become more active in as a result of the new incentive structure described here. And don’t just support any infrastructure, support open infrastructure. Over-reliant outsourcing to the big commercial vendors is always a mistake.

Recommendation for Research Institutions

This second recommendation is for research institutions: Discontinue signing read-and-publish deals or paying for individual APCs. As has been stated above, these transactions enshrine

structural inequity. Take these pathways to expand access off the table, and consider funding these alternative options instead: [Subscribe-To-Open](#) (S2O) (requires neither payment from authors or readers during years in which the offer succeeds), university & library-based publishing (well-situated to host diamond open access journals), and [Read & Let Read](#) (R&LR) (caps article download costs for a subscribing institution allowing it to offer usage to researchers outside the institution). These initiatives will serve your users in a manner that is also to the benefit, and not to the detriment, of the global research community.

- **Support Subscribe-to-Open (S2O) models.** Authors on this blog have offered [overviews](#), [critique](#), and [interviews](#) about this, but [in the words of its architects](#), S2O “allows a publisher to convert journals from gated access to open access one year at a time” by offering its current subscribers continued access at a discount so long as enough subscribers participate in the offer. S2O is not a diamond model, but in years where the published articles are made open, neither the authors nor the non-subscribed readers are asked to pay. In successful years, this achieves open access in an equitable manner since the authors do not need to pay or have independently secured a sponsor who can pay.

Showing support for journals using S2O provides hard evidence that independently-owned journals run by scholarly societies have viable and sustainable paths to open access besides buyout by a larger commercial publishing company, which rarely if ever results in a publishing model without author-side payments. This may be a diminishing cohort of journals, but [improvement is made at the margins](#).

- **Meet as much need for new journals as possible with university-based and library-based publishing.** Publishing services coming from within the academy, led by mission-driven scholars, could meet some of the appetite for new titles and develop them under diamond open access models. While the recent [Library Publishing Directory report](#) does not reflect 100% uptake of APC-free open access journals, these programs are better positioned to offer it than commercial operations that report to stakeholders. The same holds for university presses. Research institutions should sponsor an increase in the overall share of open access articles by directing money toward these programs with funding tied to full Diamond Open Access outcomes. A well supported library publishing or university press staff could expand outreach to scholars working in [emerging disciplines where new journal growth is most likely to be found](#).
- **Bulk-purchase article downloads and offer coverage to outside users.** Under [Read & Let Read](#) (R&LR), a research institution/library prepays a publisher a base amount each year according to the total number of articles that institutional users downloaded during the previous year, multiplied by two. This prepays for an institution’s estimated article usage from a partnered publisher during the next year as well as provides an equal

amount of article usage outside of the institution. More concretely, if the University of California implemented R&LR, it would buy 11 million article downloads for its own users during the next year, plus 11 million article downloads for the global public, all for roughly the same price as [UC and Elsevier's present deal](#).

This may sound like an unorthodox strategy since it does not actually enable open access. Instead, it simply enables access, enough for an institution's own users plus an equal share for the rest of the world. R&LR allows readers access to articles by authors of any affiliation, giving no particular citation advantage to anybody.

The effort to transition journals to models with no author payments and no reader payments should be given priority wherever possible. The methods described here are three viable ways research institutions can sponsor that change across an encompassing range of journal types without immediate equity issues.

The Show Must Go On

What matters in a theater performance is not simply that dialogue is conveyed to an audience, but the quality of its delivery. Similarly, open access conveys research, but if that manner of delivery makes it more difficult for other actors on the stage to be heard, it's no good. An effective actor will express emotion in a way that audiences can immediately unpack and replicate from where they sit, and that will allow generative response from fellow actors. This is exactly the sort of outcome that our research environments should be encouraging.

While researchers are the most important actors in all of this discussion, it is the funding agencies and research institutions who set the stage, provide the house, and signal many of their important cues. Choices that these latter two groups make do not necessarily determine the decisions that researchers will make, but they do determine many of the options that are available to start with. By setting our stage with plenty of equitable open access communication tools, it will not make researchers use those set pieces, it can only increase the likelihood.

If funding agencies and research institutions share a vision of a scholarly communication which is open and equitable, I hope the recommendations outlined in this column will be useful to your direction moving forward.

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