

No-Fee Open-Access Journals

From “No-fee open-access journals,” SPARC Open Access Newsletter, November 2, 2006.

<http://dash.harvard.edu/handle/1/4552050>

A year ago last month, Cara Kaufman and Alma Wills found that only 47% of surveyed OA journals charged author-side fees (see pp. 1, 44, and Table 30).

<http://www.alpssp.org/Ebusiness/ProductCatalog/Product.aspx?ID=47>

To me, this was a little like the first human sighting of the Antarctic land mass in 1820: proof that a huge terra incognita existed just over the horizon, awaiting exploration.

Only a minority of existing OA journals actually used the most-studied and most-discussed business model for OA journals—charging author-side fees. (Let’s call these “fee-based” OA journals.) The majority of OA journals turned out to use business models that had rarely been acknowledged, let alone studied. (Let’s call these “no-fee” OA journals.) We thought we understood OA journals but we only understood a subset, and the greater part of the whole was still largely unknown.

I wish I could tell you how many different ways the no-fee journals have found to pay their bills, and which methods work best in which disciplines and countries. But I can’t. No one has done the studies yet. A few ships have approached the coastline of this land mass but we haven’t come close to penetrating the interior or producing a map.

Some no-fee OA journals have direct or indirect subsidies from institutions like universities, laboratories, research centers, libraries, hospitals, museums, learned societies, foundations, or government agencies. Some have revenue from a separate line of non-OA publications. Some have revenue from advertising, auxiliary services, membership dues, endowments, reprints, or a print or premium edition. Some rely, more than

other journals, on volunteerism. Some undoubtedly use a combination of these means. But we don't know how many other sources of revenue might be missing from this short list. We don't know how many no-fee journals use which method, and we don't know how the methods compare with one another for financial sustainability.

We have a lot to learn from the no-fee journals. Whatever their business models, and whatever their adequacy, they have found ways to generate revenue or subsidies that other journals (both OA and non-OA) could use or try. Exposing their models to scholarly attention and community-wide discussion might even uncover ways to refine and enhance them. Understanding how no-fee journals make ends meet will not only open up new ways to support OA journals, but also new ways to help TA journals convert to OA. And beyond financial support, no-fee journals have some clear advantages over fee-based OA journals, even if fee-based journals have their own set of advantages. The more we know about them, the more editors and publishers can make intelligent decisions that fit their research niches and special circumstances.

For about five years, the discussion of OA journals has been harmed by a family of false assumptions: that all OA journals are fee-based; that all good OA journals must be fee-based; that author-side fees are "author fees" to be paid by authors out of pocket. Learning about no-fee OA journals will correct at least the first two of these. Correcting them will lower the temperature of some debates and save time we now waste correcting errors, interviewing misinformed interview subjects, or dragging discussions back on topic. It will also help us overcome a collective blindspot. When we do, we'll see many beautiful opportunities that we have been too blind to pursue.

And beyond all these good utilitarian reasons to outfit some ships and start exploring, there's this simpler reason: the majority of OA journals are no-fee. We should know our own world.

But while we're waiting to hear back from the explorers, there's a lot that we can already say about the characteristics and advantages of no-fee OA journals. Here's a start.

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I've often argued that fee-based OA journals don't exclude indigent authors. But that's only if they offer fee waivers or if sponsors are available to pay the fees on behalf of authors. These safety nets must be arranged and, no doubt, cannot always be arranged. No-fee OA journals cut through the difficulties and put well-funded and unfunded authors on the same footing, without further ado.

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Likewise I've often argued that fee-based OA journals don't corrupt peer review. But that requires good firewalls between the editorial and business sides of the journal, and it's hard to know exactly what firewalls are in place at a given journal and easy to take cheap shots. No-fee OA journals disarm the objection without the need for further explanation or proof.

In both cases (excluding indigent authors and corrupting peer review), no-fee OA journals eliminate both the problem, to whatever extent it actually exists, and the

appearance of the problem. Hence, they make it unnecessary to take other steps to avoid the problems, saving time and money, and they put common objections to bed, changing the rhetoric and direction of the debate.

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The no-fee sources of revenue can help a journal make ends meet even if they don't suffice. One important consequence is that they can help a fee-based journal keep its fees low, perhaps low enough to attract authors who don't have sponsors and improve author uptake.

For semantic reasons, we can't say that fee-based and no-fee models can coexist in the same journal, since even a small author-side fee is a fee. But the different forms of generating revenue can not only coexist, but complement each other in very helpful ways.

The coexistence might be contingent. For example, an institution, like a university, might agree to cover a journal's expenses provided the journal charged author-side fees to authors whose research was funded by a grant. Because funders would pay first, universities would save money (compared to paying all a journal's expenses). Because universities would play back-up, scholars wouldn't be bereft or out of pocket in fields where funding is scattered or uncommon.

Even non-OA journals could strike such arrangements with institutions. If some percentage of their costs were covered by an institutional subsidy, then they could lower their subscription prices accordingly. If the non-subscription income grew to a certain size, they could convert from subscription journals to low-fee journals and perhaps later to no-fee journals.

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The fee-based model works best in fields, like medicine, where most research is funded and most funders are willing to pay the fees. It's hard to know without study where the no-fee model will work best. It will work in fields where there are already institutions willing to subsidize an OA journal. But it will also work in fields where scholarly entrepreneurs, who are highly motivated and know the terrain, could *find* an institution to support a journal, even if the institution never thought about it before.

Conversely, the fee-based model is not well-suited to fields, like social sciences and humanities, where little research is funded. And again, it's hard to know where the no-fee model might not be suited; we may not know until scholarly entrepreneurs try hard and fail to find subsidies.

Because both models have their place, I don't want to say that the advantages of no-fee journals mean that fee-based journals should give way to no-fee journals. Not at all. I just want to point out the advantages of the no-fee model so that it will be fully explored by journals that can't make the fee model work for them.

For example, we should remember that the Hindawi OA journal collection is already profitable, and that all the journals in the collection depend on author-side fees. This

means that author-side fees can not only generate enough revenue to pay the bills, but can also generate more. This is a signal success that we shouldn't try to undo. Instead, we should pursue no-fee journals alongside successful fee-based journals.

On the profitability of the Hindawi OA journals, see Paul Peters' comment on the Nature Newsblog, June 21, 2006.

http://blogs.nature.com/news/blog/2006/06/openaccess_journal_hits_rocky.html#comment-17436

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Rick Johnson once argued that university libraries should "adopt" journals in order to digitize their backfiles for OA and preservation.

http://eprints.rclis.org/archive/00007465/01/Open_Past.pdf

<http://legacy.earlham.edu/~peters/fos/2006/10/digitizing-journal-backfiles-for-oa.html>

That's an excellent idea. Likewise, universities should adopt OA journals in order to pay their expenses. One of my favorite examples is *Philosophers' Imprint*, whose expenses are covered by the University of Michigan. Its motto is "Edited by philosophers, published by librarians." The editors in the philosophy department and the "publishers" in the library are already on the university payroll and allowed to spend some of their time putting out the journal. As a result, the journal doesn't charge subscriptions on the reader-side or fees on the author-side.

<http://www.philosophersimprint.org/>

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I'm glad to see so many traditional publishers experiment with hybrid OA journals. But so far all of them are fee-based. I'd like to see publishers start experimenting with institutional subsidies as well. If a journal can't secure a permanent or renewable subsidy, it should try a temporary one. If it can't secure a full subsidy, it should try a partial one or several partial subsidies from several institutions.

The experiments could also run the other way. Universities, labs, libraries, societies, museums, foundations, learned societies, and government agencies should consider offering full or partial subsidies or forming consortia to offer subsidies.

There could even be hybrid OA journals that depend on subsidies rather than author-side fees. If a journal can arrange subsidies to allow (say) 20% of its research articles to be OA, then it could provide OA for that 20% and TA for the rest. Or it could provide no-fee OA to 20%, fee-based OA to another 20% (or whatever uptake it could generate), and TA for the rest. It could use any number of criteria or methods to pick the lucky no-fee OA articles—author preference, editor preference, length, use of multimedia, likelihood of citations, likelihood of interest from policy-makers or the media, or relevance for solving important scientific or social problems.

One more thing we don't know: how much experimentation has been stymied by the false belief that OA journals must use author-side fees.

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An institution can subsidize a journal without publishing it, for example, the way the Beilstein-Institut covers the costs of the Beilstein Journal of Organic Chemistry (allowing the journal to charge no author-side fees) while the publishing is left to BioMed Central. Conversely, an institution can publish a journal without subsidizing it, something we see at any OA journal published by a university press and using a fee-based model rather than a subsidy model. Or an institution can do both, for example, the way the University of Michigan both subsidizes and publishes Philosophers' Imprint.

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In an August 2004 report, librarians at Cornell envisioned that universities would trigger difficult political tensions on campus as they started to pay author-side fees and set faculty into competition for support from a limited fund. While I reject one of the main conclusions of the report (see SOAN for June 2006), its recognition of potential turf battles in the allocation of author-side fees is astute and needs wider discussion.

<http://dash.harvard.edu/handle/1/4391309>

Cornell Task Force on Open Access Publishing, August 2004 (see esp. pp. 10–11)

<http://web.archive.org/web/20041220211746/http://dspace.library.cornell.edu/handle/1813/193>

In a later LibLicense posting, Phil Davis elaborated on these scenarios, April 2006.

<http://web.archive.org/web/20060524070725/http://www.library.yale.edu/~llicense/ListArchives/0604/msg00132.html>

I concede that these scenarios are ugly, but I still want universities to join foundations in their willingness to pay author-side fees, and to start thinking about allocation procedures that faculty will accept as fair. But part of our thinking should be that no-fee OA journals will make *this* problem disappear. To the extent that no-fee journals spread, universities will not have to pay author-side fees or adjudicate disputes between rival professors applying for limited funds.

On the other hand, tensions might merely shift from individual faculty seeking subsidies for articles to departments or research centers seeking subsidies for journals. The problems may be tractable: after all, libraries currently pay more (much more) for journals in some disciplines than others without triggering campus wars. Or they might be as difficult and ugly as Cornell predicted for author-side fees. Whether support for one kind of OA journal will be easier—financially or administratively—than support for the other is one more thing we still have to learn. And there's

some urgency about it because the money now spent on subscriptions will be needed, long-term, to pay for the OA alternative, and the transition is already under way.

Apart from fairness issues, supporting some number of no-fee journals should be less bumpy than paying the author-side fees incurred by individual faculty. The expenses will be more predictable. Hence, at least in this respect, universities should find it easier to put journal subsidies into the budget than author-side fees—though I hope they will do both, as money is freed up from subscriptions.

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One silly criticism of author-side fees is that they're just subscriptions under a new name, especially if the money to pay them comes from the library's serials budget. It's silly because it overlooks the role of *open access*, the whole point of the new model. Author-side fees may be payments that help cover journal expenses, like subscription fees, but they pay for open access, not private use and consumption. Hence, they make a journal's contents freely available to everyone, including those who don't pay fees.

As no-fee OA journals spread, including the kind supported by institutional subsidies, we should expect to hear a new version of the same silly criticism: institutional subsidies are just subscriptions under a new name. The answer is the same: yes, these are payments that help cover journal expenses, but they pay for open access, not private consumption. For example, if a no-fee journal uses an institutional-subsidy business model, then only one institution has to make the payments for everyone else to have access.

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I'm not committed to the term "fee-based" OA journal and would welcome a better one. But in the meantime, it's infinitely better than the term "author pays." First, it's not false or misleading. "Author pays" is false for the majority of OA journals that charge no author-side fees, and false or misleading for most of the remaining OA journals whose fees are often waived or paid by sponsors on the author's behalf. Second, it's not as frightening to authors or as helpful to the anti-OA FUD campaign. Third, it pairs up nicely with the "no-fee" OA journal, helping us communicate the true diversity of the OA journal landscape.

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It used to be very hard to tell whether an OA journal was fee-based or no-fee and impossible to search for one type or the other in a given field. But just last month the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ) added features to help on both fronts.

<http://www.doaj.org/>

[...] The announcement (October 14, 2006) of the new service, and most of the blog and listserv discussion, have focused on the new visibility of hybrid journals in

the directory. But in my view the new visibility of no-fee journals is at least as useful. With the help of the DOAJ's new service and some old notes, here are some representative no-fee, peer-reviewed OA journals from 22 different fields.—My apologies to good no-fee journals not on this list; I had to keep it short. This is a glimpse of the continent we need to explore. [Here omitting the list of journals from the original article.]

[Note added in 2009:] Since this article appeared in November 2006, newer studies have confirmed and extended the finding that most OA journals charge no publication fees. In November 2007, Caroline Sutton and I found that 83% of society OA journals charged no publication fees. In December 2007, Bill Hooker's survey of all full-OA journals in the DOAJ found that 67% charged no publication fees. In March 2008, Heather Morrison found that 90% of the psychology journals listed in the DOAJ charged no publication fees. In May 2009, Stuart Shieber found that 70.3% of all full-OA journals in the DOAJ charged no publication fees.

http://dash.harvard.edu/bitstream/handle/1/3746501/suber_news115.html#list

<http://legacy.earlham.edu/~peters/fos/2007/12/new-data-showing-that-most-oa-journals.html>

<http://poeticeconomics.blogspot.com/2008/03/less-than-10-of-open-access-journals-in.html>

<http://blogs.law.harvard.edu/pamphlet/2009/05/29/what-percentage-of-open-access-journals-charge-publication-fees/>

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By: Peter Suber

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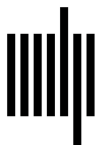
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