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Open access: who should pay ?

Posted by **Editor** on September 25th, 2013



It's been great watching the open access (OA) debate slowly but completely transform over the last two years. Back when [I started writing about OA \(http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/417576.article\)](http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/417576.article), the big question was still whether or not the world should go that route at all. At times it has felt like a long, hard road from there to here, but we now live in a world where the [US and UK governments have both officially declared their support for universal OA \(http://www.theguardian.com/science/2012/jul/15/free-access-british-scientific-research\)](http://www.theguardian.com/science/2012/jul/15/free-access-british-scientific-research), and [Europe's Horizon 2020 research program will mandate OA \(http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-13-786_en.htm\)](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-13-786_en.htm), while the European Research Council strongly [supports \(http://erc.europa.eu/sites/default/files/press_release/files/open_access_policy_researchers_funded_ERC.pdf\)](http://erc.europa.eu/sites/default/files/press_release/files/open_access_policy_researchers_funded_ERC.pdf) OA. The "whether to do OA" debate is over.

But the "how to do OA" debate rages on.

There are two principal approaches on the table, known as Gold and Green. Gold OA consists of publishing research articles in open-access journals. Green OA involves publishing in paywalled journals, but depositing the manuscripts in open repositories after an embargo, typically of 6 to 24 months. For a while, it seemed [the UK government was committed to a Gold-first approach \(http://www.rcuk.ac.uk/documents/documents/RCUKOpenAccessPolicy.pdf\)](http://www.rcuk.ac.uk/documents/documents/RCUKOpenAccessPolicy.pdf), but now [it's swinging back towards Green \(http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/business-innovation-and-skills/news/on-publ-open-access/\)](http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/business-innovation-and-skills/news/on-publ-open-access/).

The harsh reality behind publishing costs

The main argument for Green is that Gold is expensive. [The Finch Report \(http://www.researchinfonet.org/publish/finch/\)](http://www.researchinfonet.org/publish/finch/), which the UK government policy leaned heavily on, assumed average article processing charges (APCs) in the range £1500 – £2000 (about €1800 – €2400) – a heavy financial burden for research-intensive universities. It's hardly surprising that a lot of people reacted by asking who is going to pay?

There are five things to say in response.

First, we must not let the sometimes vociferous Gold-vs.-Green debate mask the strong agreement throughout the community that OA is the only [rational](http://cameronneylon.net/blog/network-enabled-research/) (<http://cameronneylon.net/blog/network-enabled-research/>), [ethical](http://www.theguardian.com/science/blog/2012/feb/10/parable-farmers-teleporting-duplicator) (<http://www.theguardian.com/science/blog/2012/feb/10/parable-farmers-teleporting-duplicator>) and [cost-effective](http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2012/12/19/taylor-cost-publish-gold-open-access/) (<http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2012/12/19/taylor-cost-publish-gold-open-access/>) way for research to be disseminated. Everything else is detail in comparison.

Second, lots of subscription journals *also* charge authors: page charges are not uncommon, and extra fees for colour illustrations are ubiquitous. It can cost an author more to publish behind a paywall than openly.

Third, the cost estimates in the Finch Report are hugely inflated – perhaps because of the editorial involvement of publishers who want to set expectations in their favour. [Research shows that the average APC of journals that charge them is only \\$906](http://www.openaccesspublishing.org/apc2/) (<http://www.openaccesspublishing.org/apc2/>) (about £570 or €680) – about a third of the Finch report's amount.

Fourth, most open-access journals don't charge APCs at all: [only about 29% charge a fee](http://crl.acrl.org/content/72/4/372.full.pdf+html) (<http://crl.acrl.org/content/72/4/372.full.pdf+html>) (although these journals account for about half of all OA articles). People often equate Gold OA with the payment of an APC – but it is not so.

Fifth, lots of journals that do charge APCs offer fee waivers for authors without access to publication funds. For example, [PLOS has a no-questions-asked waiver policy](http://blogs.plos.org/everyone/authors/) (<http://blogs.plos.org/everyone/authors/>), and [BioMed Central lets you make a pre-submission waiver inquiry](http://www.biomedcentral.com/about/apcfaq/waivers) (<http://www.biomedcentral.com/about/apcfaq/waivers>).

Putting all that together, it may not be surprising that though I've had articles published in half a dozen different open-access journals, I've yet to pay an APC.

Still, in a Gold OA world, *some* APCs will have to be paid, even if they're mostly much less expensive than the Finch Report indicated. We can't *all* take waivers.

Who should pay?

So where should the money come from?

There are three main options: block grants from funding bodies ([as suggested by RCUK](http://www.rcuk.ac.uk/media/news/2012news/Pages/121108.aspx) (<http://www.rcuk.ac.uk/media/news/2012news/Pages/121108.aspx>)), money taken from grants (which would be increased accordingly) or library funds.

My own view is that at the moment we should be looking at the second option, transitioning to the third as funds are increasingly freed by the cancellation of expensive subscriptions. Block grants may be simpler to administrate, but they suffer from an important problem: when researchers use slush funds to pay APCs, they are insulated from the costs, and have no incentive to favour better value publishers. But when researchers are spending their own grant money, an efficient market in APCs will develop, rewarding the publishers who give the best value for money.

But the end-game has to be re-routing the money libraries currently spend on subscriptions. The average cost to the world of a paywalled paper is about €3700 (this figure stems from [the STM Report for 2012](http://www.stm-assoc.org/2012_12_11_STM_Report_2012.pdf) (http://www.stm-assoc.org/2012_12_11_STM_Report_2012.pdf), which reports a total subscription market worth €6.7 (\$9.1) billion, publishing 1.8–1.9 million articles).

Once we stop pouring that money away every year, we can spend a tenth of it on Gold APCs, and invest the rest in infrastructure, staff and research.

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