

Some pitfalls of OA discussions – an opinion piece

By Jan Erik Frantsvåg

After a career of listening to, and participating in, discussions about OA, I am amazed at how regularly the discussions fall into pitfalls, very often one of the following.

The first one is that when one starts a discussion about OA, it inevitably ends up as a discussion of how to cover Article Processing Charges (APC), alternatively how to stop the publishers from demanding too high APCs. Diamond OA, which comprises the majority of OA journals, and Green OA, are consistently overlooked in such discussions – no matter how energetically one tries to get the discussion back on track. Putting more effort into Green and Diamond, which are free to both reader and author, could save institutions much money, and could move the focus – and the power – away from the APC-based part of the OA publishing sector.

Another pitfall is the picture painted of societies and their publishing. I recently saw at a seminar that one of the speakers, when mentioning smaller publishers, added “societies” in parentheses to indicate that societies were the smaller publishers. I cannot speak for the Toll Access part of the industry, but I have done some number crunching on the OA part of the industry. The numbers from DOAJ (from June 2020) clearly indicate that – measured by the average or median number of articles published in the journals – societies are not the smallest. (Journals owned by societies, but published by others, are here not listed in the Societies column – here we look at publishers, not owners.) Societies are the smallest group of publishers measured by the number of journals they publish, but that I see as another debate.

Publisher category	OA publishers	Societies	Traditional publishers	Universities
Number of publishers	700	1,258	127	4,363
Number of journals	2,931	1,389	1,246	8,664
Avg. no journals per publisher	4	1	10	2
Articles (avg per year 2017–2019)	283,700	90,401	137,230	290,855
Avg. no of articles per journal	97	65	110	34
Median no of articles per journal	30	29	41	23

Table 1. OA publishers: Publishers that only publish OA; Traditional publishers publish both OA and TA – only OA journals included here. Classification according to Crawford (2020), unclassified (“Miscellaneous”) omitted. Article numbers based on average number per journal per year 2017–2019, not the number for a single year.

We see that traditional publishers have the largest journals, then come OA publishers and Societies – the medians are similar, but averages show that OA publishers obviously have some large journals. PLOS ONE is one of them, influencing the OA publishers’ average significantly on its own. The largest category, Universities, is the smallest both by average and median, significantly smaller than any of the other categories. Universities is the largest category measured by the number of journals, larger than the other categories combined. So why don’t we care about and discuss the challenges the university-based journals face, instead? Numbers indicate that Universities represent a larger number of articles than Societies and Traditional publishers, this should indicate that the challenges of university-based publishing would be much more important to solve. That the typical society publishing OA journals publishes only one journal, could be an argument for seeing societies as small publishers – but a typical society publishes just as many articles as a university. Discussing as if society-based journals are the ones in need of special care, ignoring the problems of the university-based journals, gives a false picture and may lead to wrong conclusions.

Then there is the much-abused concept of “not for profit”. At the same seminar mentioned above, a speaker from a scholarly society was introduced as representing a not-for-profit publisher. This is a – hopefully unintentional – mixing up of the not-for-profit character of the publisher, and the goals of their publishing activities. This organization spent more than EUR 1 million on charitable activities in 2018. It declares that producing high quality scientific journals is the principal means of achieving its objectives. So, the EUR 1 million was profits from their publishing operations. Calling this a not-for-profit publisher would earn a well-deserved F in any competent basic economics course. That an organization is not-for-profit is no guarantee they are a not-for-profit publisher. Most not-for-profit organizations engaged in publishing are very much-for-profit publishers – the fact that they do not send the profits to shareholders, but to other activities does not

change that. Having seen e.g. self-archiving policies of such publishers I have long ago concluded that they in many ways are no better than commercial publishers. And they use the same mechanisms, and often also pricing structures, as the major commercial publishers. To my knowledge, the only major publisher using a commercial income model that may classify as a not-for-profit publisher, is PLOS. They have nowhere to put their long-term financial surplus, other than their publishing activities.

Then there is the constant lamenting about the plight of the societies – that OA will make them unsustainable. (Which goes to prove my point in the preceding paragraph, that their publishing is for-profit.) Yes, it is clearly so that a number of societies stand to have their income reduced by a transition to Open Access, but we see that other publishers manage to create relatively good profits on OA publishing, so why couldn't these societies? Interestingly, societies often started with a view to create a community of scholars and produce a journal for the community. A British booklet on society publishing (Morley, 1963), does not mention the term “profit”. Cost control is what is important, and setting the right prices. The profitable journal, earning the society good money, is a modern animal, largely unknown until 50 years ago. Some journals, primarily professional journals for e.g. the medical profession, were probably profit-making earlier – as they could be vehicles for advertising and posting of vacancies, if published often enough and having a large enough audience in the profession. And journals owned by societies are not generally profit-making machines for societies today either: still hundreds of society journals are published for other purposes than profits. There were more than 1,000 such journals in DOAJ in June 2020 that did not charge an APC. A small sample reveals that some of them, published with larger publishers, receive funding from their society. In our debates, we need to discern between societies that live for their journals, and societies that live off them. And stop calling the latter not-for-profit publishers.

My point here is not to argue that OA is the solution to everything, but to point to common pitfalls that make an informed debate difficult. If we want a meaningful debate, we need to have useful facts – not common misconceptions and misunderstandings – as a basis for the debate.

We need to keep OA publishing that is not APC-based, and Green OA, in focus when we discuss OA. It is a problem that we focus on the problem of financing APCs, instead of spending energy on exploring the OA that is without APC and keep that in focus. We need to stop believing society-based journals have major problems, when university-based journals – which are many more – have problems that are just as big. We need to stop listening when publishers siphoning off profits to other causes than publishing, claim to be not-for-profit. And we need to ask societies to look at what the role of their publishing is – is it the goal of the

society or a vehicle for creating profits to be used for other activities(the financing of which do not belong in library budgets)?

References

Morley, F. (1963). Self-Help for Learned Journals: Note Compiled for the Nuffield Foundation. The Nuffield Foundation.