

Alchemists needed, to transform bronze to gold!

By Jan Erik Frantsvåg

Abstract

Much Bronze OA is of little interest from an OA point of view, but there is a subset of Bronze that has potential to be converted to Diamond OA. This is the kind of Bronze where the lack of a formal OA status is not due to economic considerations, but lack of resources and/or competence.

Keywords

Open Access, Bronze OA, Gold OA

About the author

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Bronze is a type of Open Access (OA) that is “on the fringe” of OA. It denotes content that is made freely available for reading on the publisher’s website, but without any OA-compliant licensing, re-use rights or promise of permanence. So, while it gives free access, it does not conform to any stringent definition of OA, as in the Budapest, Berlin or Bethesda declarations. It conforms, though, to what is termed Gratis OA (Suber, 2008).

This is a troublesome category, first defined in (Piwowar et al., 2018, p. 6). A report commissioned for the European Commission (Archambault et al., 2013) reported that nearly 50 percent of all articles were available OA – this included Gratis OA. The report noted that there was an element of transience in the availability of articles, i.e., articles that were OA at a given date were not necessarily OA at another date. The lack of reuse licensing and the transient nature of the

availability of content – which, due to the lack of licensing cannot be remedied by repositories or other mechanisms, it is available only as long as it suits the publisher – makes it difficult to see Gratis OA as really OA. We need to have a definition of what OA is and use that also in discussions. So, we should change “Bronze OA” to “Bronze” as this is not really OA.

Does this make Bronze uninteresting from an OA viewpoint? Not necessarily. Over years I have experienced much Bronze in the form of articles in toll access (TA) journals that have been made freely available for reading – not open access, but “Free access” as some publishers call it. This could be content editors deem to be of a more general interest, it could be marketing “teasers”, or there may be other reasons to make this content generally available. And, as previously stated, this is not necessarily for any long duration. This kind of Bronze may have its use – it does, after all, make scholarly content available for reading – but I cannot see this as an important variety.

But I have over some time noticed another form of Bronze, that I find more interesting from an OA point of view. I have come across a number of small professional society/union journals of the kind where most of the content is non-scholarly, but space is given also to scholarly articles. The journals I have come across are generally journals of societies that are a blend of professional and trade union organisations, primarily in health professions – The Journal of the Norwegian Medical Association is such a journal, it was Bronze but has now become a Gold (Diamond) OA journal. Typically, this kind of journal publishes a few scholarly articles per year which are made freely available. The intention is to have these articles permanently available and in reality no restrictions are put on reuse – but this is not formalized through e.g. explicit licensing. The publication costs are covered through the member dues, not by subscriptions or article sales – and authors pay nothing.

In other words, the distance from this kind of Bronze to Diamond OA – where neither authors nor readers pay – is not very big. But the editors and their staff are not geared to publish OA, they often will have little knowledge of OA and what it takes to be truly OA. And the publishing platforms are made for traditional magazine publishing on paper, not scholarly publishing, and do not include functions that are important for OA journals, such as DOI registration and citation upload to Crossref, links to ORCID, registration of content to DOAJ, etc., etc. Among platforms used for the online side of publishing, I have seen Wordpress and Drupal. The often small number of scholarly articles per year makes it difficult to expect journals to transition to OA on their own.

Could we endeavour to use some alchemy to transform this Bronze to Gold? What would it take? One thing is to help editors to become aware of the issue, another is to find practical solutions for them to transition their scholarly content to OA – the rest of their content is really not of interest to us.

Looking at the software for OA publishing that I know (OJS – Open Journal Systems), I cannot honestly see it as attractive for publishing this kind of society journal, where design and layout is of the utmost importance, and the print version is still important. Neither can I see it as very practical to publish OA within the confines of the publishing tools they use, it will be very cumbersome and need much extra resources.

So, how could this be done? For many reasons, I believe a separation of the formal publishing of the scholarly content, and the same content’s appearance in the society journal, will be the best approach. (I assume this has been done, by some journals, already.) This means the articles can be formally published using publishing tools geared towards scholarly publishing; and then re-published in a visual format better suited to the society journal, in the society journal – of course acknowledging the first publication and requiring the formal publication to be used for citation purposes.

Such a separation can also open possibilities for co-operation between a number of such journals. Co-operation is much needed in scholarly publishing, more so in such cases when the number of articles is small. One could have a national approach, creating a national scholarly journal with sections for the scholarly field of participating societies, leaving it to them to have control over the scholarly editorship. (I have on earlier occasions suggested this kind of co-operation, albeit on another scale (Frantsvåg, 2014) – as far as I know, there were no takers, but this should not mean this kind of thinking is impossible.) Or one could envisage an international co-operation with a common scholarly journal for societies in the same field in different countries, publishing content in different languages, with country editors. Structured use of institutional repositories, co-operating with institutions having such repositories, could also be a way of achieving the necessary effects. There are, in short, many possibilities that could be explored. The point is to pool publications and resources, to enable working at a larger scale.

Pooling resources one of these ways will make it possible to develop better competence in OA publishing, and to increase the visibility of the scholarly output to the scholarly community – without decreasing the visibility to the professional community. Scholarly OA publishing competence is something that OA publishing service providers like university/research libraries should offer to help such collaborative projects to acquire, or for the libraries to provide as a service. In short, institutions having such competence should, like alchemists, see it as their remit to transform these Bronze publications to Gold publications, identifying journals in need of transformation and trying to initiate cooperation. Many libraries have already helped TA or Bronze scholarly journals to Diamond or other variations of Gold, whereas such “mixed content” society journals have to a larger extent been overlooked. The time is ripe to start looking!

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