Open access publishing

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At least once a week I get an e-mail inviting me to become editor/reviewer or author of a scientific journal. They all are open access journals, which means that their content is available without restrictions or fees through the internet. This concept goes back to the Budapest Open Access Initiative (2002)[1], which stated the following: " its free availability on the public internet, permitting any users to read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to the full texts of these articles, crawl them for indexing, pass them as data to software, or use them for any other lawful purpose, without financial, legal, or technical barriers other than those inseparable from gaining access to the internet itself"[1].

The basic idea behind is that knowledge should be publicly accessible and no barriers such as subscription fees should prevent the dissemination of knowledge. This is a very noble and idealistic thought which has been perverted by many mechanisms. A famous American economist has once stated "There is nothing but a free meal!" This means that someone has to pay for it! In the classical world the publisher pays for the production cost, which includes the peer review system, which is usually done for free by voluntary reviewers, who are usually managed by an academic who acts as Editor for a symbolic honorarium. The financial source for such an allowance is usually the subscription fee. The negative side is that big publishers offer to University libraries only packages, which usually include many Journals that the university does not want. Knowing this, one can say that in the traditional way the academic and the scientific institutions widely support the worldwide dissemination of knowledge. So it is understandable that Universities usually like the open access approach.

However, the world is not just black and white. In the open access world there has been a reversal of financing practices. There the author must pay for the publication, which favors wealthy authors. The University of Florida (UF) has just launched an initiative to support UF members to publish in open access journals, which costs the UF 120'000$/year. It is substantially less than the cost of the traditional libraries. Furthermore, in the US grants traditionally pay for publication costs. But open access has also created "predator journals" where, with murky methods and shady or absent reviews, some publishers make fortunes on the back of the authors. Some of these Journals require submission fees, some ask for high publication fees, once the paper is accepted and some save by doing very sloppy reviews or none at all. The experiment of John Bohannon[2] clearly shows how dangerous this route may be. John Bohannon decided to create a fake paper with such grave errors that a competent reviewer should easily detect and thus recommend its rejection: "The Paper took this form: Molecule X from lichen species Y inhibits the growth of cancer cell Z. To substitute those variables I created a database of molecules, lichens, and cancer cell lines and wrote a computer program to generate hundreds of unique papers. Other than those differences, the scientific content of each paper is identical."[1] He then created fictitious authors and institutions mainly in the developing world by permuting names and inventing institutions. To camouflage his good English, he had Google translate it into French and then

back into English, based on a recommendation of some Harvard molecular biologists colleagues who had mock-reviewed the paper. Then these fake manuscripts were submitted at a rate of 10 per week to a multitude of journals. A few publishers requested a fee to be paid up front. Those were excluded from the process, which means that the remaining used the standard model: fee for publication after acceptance. If a journal rejected the paper it was also excluded from further actions. If the paper came back and the journal asked for revisions, the author complied. If it was accepted, the author withdrew the paper with the comment that an "embarrassing mistake" was found.

"By the time the Science went to press, 157 of the journals had accepted the paper and 98 had rejected it. Of the remaining 49 journals, 29 seem to be derelict: websites abandoned by their creators. Editors from the other 20 had e-mailed the fictitious corresponding authors stating that the paper is still under review; those too, are excluded from this analysis. ... Of the 255 papers that underwent the entire editing process to acceptance or rejection, about 60% of the final decisions occurred with no sign of peer review. ... Of the 106 journals that discernibly performed a review, 70% ultimately accepted the paper. Most reviews focused exclusively on the papers layout, formatting, and language"[1]

Even if some open access journals rejected these fake papers and J. Bohannon was criticized for not having a control group, this is bad news for the credibility of the scientific community. Therefore scientists should only submit to Journals they know, where the Editor is a known personality in their research field and where they know that a sound peer review process is performed, which is a laborious task.[3]

Dear Readers, I am proud to be Editor of a Journal that takes peer review very seriously!

Sincerely yours,

J-F Roulet

Editor-in-Chief

References

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