

COMPLIANCE IN A WORLD OF LIMITED CHOICES

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Few people would oppose the thought that research benefits from being offered to an audience as wide as possible. Rather than being restricted to a limited few having access to commercial, firewalled pdf depositories, scientific results benefit from being disseminated widely using open self-archiving depositories or open access licenses. It is therefore understandable that major funders such as NIH, the Wellcome Trust and the Research Councils UK have worked for some time towards explicitly stating in research contracts that research funded by them should be open access or self-archived in public repositories shortly after publication. These long-term aims of the funding agencies are no longer aims, they have become contract clauses and publishing open access is now compulsory among a wide variety of funders with more and more funders worldwide rapidly joining the movement. As a researcher, breaking these clauses by publishing in non-endorsed ways means that you risk having your current funds withheld and future applications turned down automatically. In other words, there will soon be no such thing as non-compliance. There may well be ways of trying to coax borderline, non-endorsed publishing strategies into being accepted by funders, but by and large, compliance will soon be universal.

In other words, as Frantsvåg points out in Sciecom Info (2013), there is little doubt that OA non-compliance will soon have dire consequences for researchers. Funders and universities will enforce these regulations. But there are questions to be asked. Given that funds are limited and publishing options are set by OA contract obligations, how will researchers select outlets for their papers? What consequences will these choices have for the journal diversity that we see today? Will the smaller, niched and often society-run journals survive when their publishers look into new ways of keeping publishing profitable? Or will pricing policies and contracts lock smaller journals into moribund, downward financial spirals while the rest of the publishing business splits into a two-tier situation with high-profile journals with high OA fees getting the best of the best and the remaining scientific output being published by aggregating journal models with

competitive OA pricing policies and streamlined, semi-automatic production. Inspired by the revolutionary publishing model invented by the Public Library of Science (PLOS) where primary PLoS journals exist in a symbiotic relationship with the aggregating journal PLoS One, we now find similar solutions being launched and actively promoted by the publishing industry, with titles such as Ecology and Evolution by Wiley-Blackwell, Perspectives in Science by Elsevier, and Nature Communications by Nature Publishing Group. At the same time, niched society journals are generally unable to offer either the large-scale production advantages of the aggregating journals or the reputation of the highest-profile journals. But how did we arrive at this situation? Are there ways of ensuring that the diversity survives? Or should we accept that the majority of smaller journals are lost, that this process towards a two-tier situation is inevitable?

To look into this, we need to move back in time to the point where small, niched journals chose to join major publishers and why they did so. Not long ago, all journals were print only and the incentive to have online presence was rather weak. But the emergence of the portable document format, the PDF, greatly simplified the process of offering online editions. The way of distributing these editions took quite some time to settle and early attempts of distributing pdf versions of journals included mailed CDs and USB sticks. But the most efficient way soon became the commercial online depositories that were created by Blackwell, Springer, Elsevier and other publishers. Library access to these online journal depositories was negotiated and restricted to those paying for the access or receiving complimentary access courtesy of the publishers. For smaller journals, participation in the consortia deals that publishers established with libraries meant that their publications became easier to find online than if they would create their own depositories. Journals would be found more easily, published papers would be read and cited more, and researchers would preferentially select journals that combined attractive pitch of their content with good

online presence. This synergy would in turn lead to a significant impact on the scientific community for journals as well as for researchers.

With a rapid movement towards using pdfs rather than printed editions, subscribers and libraries wanted to drop print subscriptions to reduce costs. But publishers argued that this would endanger the negotiated consortia structure as profitability risked being lost if libraries were allowed to drop print editions. So in many cases, libraries were locked into revised consortia models where combined pdf and print edition subscriptions were non-negotiable. You could drop the print edition but pricing would not necessarily go down. Situations such as these, where production costs went down because of reduced print runs and an increased focus on pdf editions, but where consortia subscription fees continued to increase gradually led to the emergence of the open access movement.

The response by the publishers to the open access movement is still evolving but some general patterns emerge and this is where the problems for the small and specialized, society-run journals surface today. While high-profile journals can motivate considerable OA fees because of their impact on the scientific community and publisher-owned aggregating journals cut OA fees and combine this with determined promotion, other journals are handled quite differently. For subscription journals included in consortia deals, the solution offered by publishers is commonly a hybrid OA model where authors may pay for having their articles OA in journals whose vast majority of papers are non-OA. The OA price tag is generally high, surprisingly similar between journals, and leads to OA manuscripts being hidden in primarily non-OA publisher depositories (albeit free for download). Paying for the subscription to hybrid journals that have OA content already paid by researchers is controversial and the inclusion of such

journals in consortia deals is likely to be questioned in due time. Another sign that the hybrid model is being questioned can be seen when university OA subsidies from e.g. Lund University are being offered to true OA journals only.

Interestingly, if hybrid OA prices could be set at a level that suited authors while still being enough to secure long-term economic viability of journals, then this could initiate transitions from hybrid models to full OA models. If OA prices are seen as reasonable, then the subscription model could be dropped. But this is where things become complicated. Although there may be hints of flexible OA fees coming in a not too distant future, OA hybrid fees are set purposely high by publishers to act as an insurance in the unsecure scientific publishing market. So the small and specialized, society-run journals that once joined the publishers consortia models to get access to the high-quality online depositories and subscription models now commonly face a dilemma where online depositories are well visited, but the only OA option available is a hybrid model which is seen by researchers as being too expensive. Movement into OA-compliance is difficult and the only available way is often to allow self-archiving after an embargo period which is seen as too short by the publishers and too long by funders and the research community. At the same time, publishers promote the two-tier model, direct the best papers to high-profile journals and try to coax as much of the remaining scientific output into aggregating journals. It is not a bright future for smaller journals unless they are allowed to influence their pricing policy more than they currently are. So – researchers will definitely be able to find scientific outlets that comply with the requirements set by funders. But they may find that the journal diversity that has been around for quite some time is being reduced drastically.



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