

What happens if you don't want to pay to publish?

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Suppose that you have never paid to publish your papers and you believe that it is wrong to do so.

You may have various reasons to hold this belief. Maybe you think that paying to publish lowers scientific standards and encourages predatory behaviors (of course, paying enough, one can publish whatever). Maybe you think that paying to publish negatively affects other virtuous forms of open access (if paying enough ensures access, why maintaining public repositories and free journals?). Or maybe you are concerned that paying to publish marginalizes researchers who cannot afford to pay, or, even more humiliating, forces them to live out of the charity of the publishers who may discretionally decide to waive the article processing charges in these cases. Or perhaps you gauge other objective facts (such as, an excessive pressure on academics to publish whatever, an overproduction of articles especially in some countries, the forceful pressure made by these countries to place some of their academics in editorial boards of commercial journals, the enormous flow of money that some countries are putting into publishing) and you end up adhering to the conspiracy theory according to which commercial publishers will be free (no matter what restrictions we believe we can impose) to increase the (already gigantic) processing fees as much as they want, because everybody will pay what they ask for, if careers, confirmations, and promotions are at stake.

Maybe you have all this in your mind, but this is not the point: here we do not wish to dive into the (rather obvious) reasons for which paying to publish is incontrovertibly wrong, since others with more experience than us have already thoroughly clarified this, see, e.g., [1, 3].

Here we just want to tell a story. The story of what happens if you do not want to have your article published with a gold-open-access agreement.

That is, suppose that an article gets accepted by a major commercial publisher and that, without you being consulted, without you knowing the costs of it, and without you agreeing, your university stipulated an agreement to let you, and everybody in your institution, publish open-access “for free.”

Given your aversion to the paying-to-publish idea, your consequent action is to ask to opt out of this agreement, believing

that this can simply be implemented while completing the online copyright forms.

But things are not so simple. The online form only allows you to choose the gold-open-access option, with the rather direct question “How would you like to pay for open-access?”. The platform does offer you a choice to answer, but the choice is simply between “I’d like to use my institution agreement” or “I have other funds for open access.” At this point, any reasonable person would just go for the first option. If someone else is going to pay, and if not accepting this will produce delay and bureaucracy, then why not, let’s let our institution pay. But sometimes you feel like a romantic weirdo, you think that maybe this is not OK, especially considering that universities often go through financial crises and restructurings, with people struggling to maintain their jobs (or losing their jobs overnight). After all, this open-access feature is not for free: we (our institutions, and therefore ourselves) are handsomely paying for it, rather than investing our resources somewhere else. These are the moments in which you think it is your duty to let your university become aware of its scientific and ethical responsibility. You decide to contact the publishers’ service desk explaining gently, but clearly, that you want to opt out from the gold-open-access option.

Done, problem solved, the service desk kindly provides you with a new link. But the link is still the same, you still have only the gold-open-access option, you can only decide if you want your institution to pay for it or you yourself pay for it in some other ways. This email bouncing goes on for several days, you keep repeating that, as mentioned already on multiple occasions, you don’t want your article to be published via the gold-open-access route, you want to opt out of the gold-open-access option, you won’t pay the article processing fee, you won’t use your research grants to cover it, you don’t want your university to sponsor it (and if all this sounds repetitive to you, believe me, it’s because so is this type of email exchange).

After several days, your request is escalated to a higher level and the publisher wants you to liaise with your institution, which has to approve. Involving your institution may be scary for some people. Suppose that you are under confirmation, or you would like to be promoted, are you sure you want to muck up? Remember all

the surrounding voices, speaking of task forces and expert panels with fantastic engagement initiatives, for the significant progress towards our strategic objectives. If you need to go for confirmation or promotion, remember what you have been told, just talk to your supervisor about volunteering to serve on a university committee. Don't mess up with decisions that wise people have already taken for you.

But you are a stubborn romantic weirdo. You go on. You contact the People in Charge of this process. You are asked to explain why you want to opt out. Well, you think there are tons of obvious reasons, but still you explain that your papers are already available for free from public repositories, and that you wish that your university spent its resources in more valuable ways, including supporting staff, research, diamond open access, green open access.

The People in Charge are surprised, their understanding is that the publishers provided opt-out options on their platforms (surprisingly, they are not surprised that the way this procedure is implemented makes it so unappealing to be essentially impracticable). You are now being informed that the negotiation with the publishers is not done by the university itself, but by a national council of librarians.

This sounds unexpected, since, given the use of the word "leadership" in your environment, you would have expected your institution playing the role of a leader, negotiating directly, maintaining full responsibility of the process, building virtuous examples for others to follow, without delegating to institutions that one cannot directly influence. But you look at the positive side. The existence of a national institution ideally solves every problem: rather than pursuing pay-to-publish agreements, a national council can invest to create public repositories for disciplines lacking them, and a set of brand-new diamond-open-access journals, led by prominent scholars, with top-class editorial boards.

You receive some information that should make you appreciate the value of the agreement: there is no new money being introduced into the system, it is just repurposing the existing money to facilitate open access (that is, up to yesterday people were complaining about the "exorbitant" fees paid to publishers [2], but now it seems we are relieved that we pay the same fees, for something we can have by other means, in a period in which our resources were so scarce to lose valuable staff).

Then, you are shown why your behavior is detrimental for the open science cause: if you choose not to take advantage of the open-access arrangements, it means that your paper remains behind a paywall and a greater portion of costs are being used to pay for reader access rather than publishing. You don't understand why this is so, since your paper is already available on arXiv and can be freely downloaded by everybody. Also, you start thinking that refusing to publish under this agreement may be the only way to make People in Charge aware of the boundless dangers entailed by these policies.

By the way, you are also notified that the gold-open-access agreement is what the powers-that-be wanted (and a word should be enough for the wise).

Yet, you persist, and try to figure out how much your institution pays for gold/green/diamond-open-access schemes, but this remains a bit foggy, in spite of statistics on library expenditure being publicly available. The lack of transparency in these costs is probably only due to your lack of financial competence; rumors, however, estimate the agreement to be of the order of a dozen million dollars.

You are made aware that many of your colleagues do not self-archive their preprints, yet it seems we don't have any indication about the cause for this.

The publisher then makes another clear point, stating, once again, that, choosing open-access, your article will benefit from greater visibility, which can result in increased readership and citations for your research. The publisher also informs you that if you still don't wish to publish your article open-access, you must request funding from your organization and respond to the email that you have just received by confirming that you don't wish to publish open-access. Your institution will then be informed of your decision, and they can decline your request.

This is not the end of the story yet, but we would spare the reader on how time-consuming it is to go through again a number of internet links that keep you directing to the gold-open-access option, how many emails you still receive promoting the gold-open-access agreement, how worrisome it is to discover that the procedure requires you to accept a (temporary?) agreement that you don't want to agree with, and that a number of bureaucratic operations still have to be performed before ending this tedious story.

In the end, you just hope that someone important enough has now understood how forceful the gold-open-access rhetoric is, appreciating that getting rid of this invasive blueprint is essentially impossible, takes too much time, too much work, and virtuous people who really want to promote free science for everybody happen to be considered as retrograde weirdos.

The agreement certainly stemmed from good intentions, but this story could indicate that universities need to take a step back, overhaul the whole procedure, involve different people, build a different vision and a totally different plan to genuinely deal with open science.

People in Charge should consider that the way this agreement is implemented risks to kill all sorts of virtuous, truly open, behaviors (obviously, if someone pays for our papers to be "openly" published, why bothering with self-archiving and building free journals).

Our managers should keep in mind that their staff have the scientific stature required for diamond and green open access to prosper. What we need is that our managers stop placing pay-per-publishing models at the same level (or higher) than the brave enterprises for free, and authentically open, science. Rather than sponsoring the commercial gold-open-access journals, you start

thinking that your institution should just allocate the same amount of money, rhetoric, and workload:

1. to support the disciplines for which green/diamond open access is a consolidated standard, because they can exemplarily lead more ethical publishing procedures;
2. to “gently” invite people to post their preprints in public repositories: this is important (to have research not hidden by paywalls controlled by commercial corporations) and can be easily implemented, for instance, by linking promotions, awards, and access to funds to preprint archiving habits, as much as promotions, university awards, and access to funds are presently linked to “students experience” and “industry engagement”; it would also be important to change the rhetoric related to people who don’t have the habit of self-archiving their preprint (presently, many consider this as a “different culture,” rather than an unacceptable lack of culture which reinforces the dominant position of commercial publishers and, consequently, heavily impacts everybody’s resources);
3. to build new, high-quality journals managed by academics, supported by public universities, and completely free for everybody;
4. to use a correct language and appropriate adjectives, distinguishing between the irreconcilable models of publishing after the payment (by individuals, grants, or universities) of publication fees (that is, pay-to-publish or gold open access), the procedure of posting preprints on free public repositories (green open access), and journals completely free for authors and readers (diamond open access) – rather than employing an all-inclusive “open” umbrella;
5. to state clearly that no, it’s not OK to pay to publish, and no, not everybody does so.
But, after all, you are just a stubborn romantic weirdo.

References

- [1] C. Cassidy, ‘Exorbitant’ fees paid to academic publishers better spent on Australian research and education, report finds. *The Guardian* (20 March 2024)
- [2] R. Gadagkar, [Open-access more harm than good in developing world](#). *Nature* **453**, 450 (2008)
- [3] R. Gadagkar, [The ‘pay-to-publish’ model should be abolished](#). *Notes Rec.* **70**, 403–404 (2016)

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