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A Devil in the Details: Addressing Authors' Needs in Transformative Agreements

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Globally, transformative agreements (TAs) are reshaping institutions' relationships with publishers, by moving from paying to read (e.g., through institutional journal subscriptions) towards paying for an institution's authors to publish in select venues (see [Hinchliffe 2019](#) for details). While TAs may increase open access (OA) publishing and bring cost certainty for libraries, authors remain in the shadows; they are absent from TA negotiations, yet central to what TAs hope to achieve. The diverse factors affecting authors' publishing decisions will continue to bedevil OA initiatives if not addressed.

One might think that if more publishers offer OA pathways, more authors will select OA channels. Since TAs enable authors to release publications, at no personal charge, these agreements *should* foster increased uptake. However, as TAs address only one (cost-based) component of authors' decisions, encouraging them to publish openly is not straightforward.

We present several considerations shaping academic authors' decisions to publish where they do. As academic authors, ourselves, with expertise in information science (ie., a Professor and Research Development Advisor at a university in Australia, and a PhD-qualified Collection Strategies Librarian at a university in Canada), we are uniquely positioned to consider the issues from both institutional and scholarly perspectives. While transformative approaches to book publishing exist ([see this commentary from Martin Eve and Anthony Cond](#)), we focus on journals and the institutional, disciplinary, and individual imperatives academics must navigate in selecting venues for their work. Until broader scholarly publishing issues are addressed *alongside* TAs, participation in OA options by many academics may languish. TA negotiations must consider these issues and include provisions to address authors' needs.

The Open Access Imperative

Academics want to share their publications. Embedded in knowledge generation is an imperative to share innovations and benefit society. And, like librarians, academics are troubled by rising publishing costs and limits to collections budgets. Although many funders (e.g., [Wellcome Trust](#); [Canada's federal granting agencies](#); [Australian Research Council](#)) mandate OA, authors face many hurdles to comply. For example, not all publishers allow authors to release post-review versions of articles. Even when

allowed, this option is undesirable because errors are corrected, and substantive changes are made in the final steps before publishing; these changes are critical to the work's integrity. Embargo periods also limit authors' abilities to share openly.

Recommendations

- TAs must enable OA release of the final “version of record” of published works
- TAs must have limited (or no) embargo periods
- TAs must not pit institutional budgets against OA (e.g., by indexing costs to quantity of OA publications)
- Institutions must provide information to authors to become fully aware of the implications of OA options

The No-Cost Imperative

As OA mandates increase, while institutional budgets shrink, authors are burdened with publishing costs. Although some grant schemes support budget inclusions for publishing, grant competitions are fierce; only 5-10% of applications may be funded, with project budgets cut significantly. Some academics receive community or corporate funding, but these projects typically require brief reports and do not prioritise (or fund) publications. Many academics have no funding, especially in certain disciplines or early career stages. Even when publishing costs are budgeted and awarded, granting periods are short, with funds covering data collection and analysis. Most grants end before publications are accepted, leaving authors to pay costs personally. While universities often apply grant levies to cover indirect costs (often 30-50%), they rarely offer schemes for publishing fees. So, many authors opt for “free” publishing in subscription journals, even when they want to select OA options. If TAs are negotiated to support authors' needs, these agreements can remove cost burdens and enable OA adoption.

Recommendations

- TAs must ensure that authors will not pay any fees for article processing or OA
- TAs must clearly articulate the publisher's costs to publish, and the institution's costs to administer publications, to provide full transparency of each party's obligations under the agreement
- TAs must emphasise effective implementation that minimises procedural burdens for authors and other barriers to participation

- TAs must enable authors to demonstrate their eligibility to be covered by the terms of the agreement at any stage of the publishing process
- Institutions and publishers must proactively and clearly communicate TA provisions to authors

The Excellence Imperative

The phrase “publish or perish” implies academics must increase publication *numbers*, but academics must also produce *reputable* publications. Journal rankings (used as quality proxies) are intertwined with university rankings, which are trumpeted by governments and media, and used by students to select universities. Ranking methodologies shape publishing activities, as institutions climb the ranks and reward top-tier publications. For example, the [Academic Ranking of World Universities](#) counts highly-cited researchers, publications in *Science* and *Nature*, and publications in Science and Social Science Citation Indices. These and other systems (e.g., [Scimago](#)) produce lists of “elite” and Q1-Q4 journal ranks that inform venue selection. Although the [Leiden Rankings](#) measure OA, this is unusual. In countries with formalised research assessment (e.g., *Excellence in Research in Australia*; United Kingdom’s *Research Excellence Framework*), journal rankings influence outcomes and (therefore) venue choices.

Recommendations

- TAs must be scrutinised to ensure publishers’ elite and highly-ranked (Q1 and Q2) journals are not exempt or excluded from relief of all article processing charges and OA fees
- New TA negotiations must prioritise a variety of reputable publisher partners, including those that publish elite, prestigious journals
- Institutions’ OA guidance for authors must acknowledge journal rankings and knowledgeably advise on OA options within top-tier journals
- Institutions must ensure their academic support and reward systems recognise and enable OA and other open research practices

The Editorial Reputation Imperative

While librarians and publishers think about journals in packages and bundles (e.g., “big deals”), authors do not. Authors choose venues based on *journal-level* reputational

factors (for example, see [Niles et al., 2020](#)) that are not publicized or easily discerned. Over time authors gain (and share) insider knowledge of preferred journals. While publisher reputation carries some weight, journals do change hands; the journal's reputation is of paramount concern. Alongside rankings, authors consider the reputation of editors and editorial board members; whether a journal uses double-blind review; quality of reviewers' comments; turnaround time to publication; fit between journal scope and research design; potential readership; and career goals. Prior, negative experiences with a journal, and advice from trusted colleagues also influence selection. As journals dictate writing style, content, and formatting, one journal cannot be "swapped" easily for another.

Recommendations

- TAs must be negotiated with publishers representing a wide range of reputable journals
- TAs must ensure that if a journal transfers to a different publisher, articles submitted prior to transfer will be honoured under the original TA terms
- Institutions must liaise with disciplinary experts to ensure TA coverage of reputable journals

The Authorship Imperative

Authors commonly hold multiple affiliations and many change institutions during their careers. With increased precarious employment, early-career authors may hold several contracts while their papers move from submission to publication. Research students increasingly choose "PhD-by-publication," with papers submitted during the degree but finalised post-graduation. Affiliations denote employment roles, but also acknowledge research groups, adjunct appointments, visiting fellowships, and other relationships. Academics co-author with students and colleagues, and with industry, community, and government partners. These roles and relationships affect journal selection. Institutional tracking of affiliations is critical to document collaborations accurately, for formal assessments, rankings, and internal reporting. Publications affiliated to research centres and departments affect budget and workload allocations, while noting affiliations may be required for adjuncts and other roles. Collaborations also complicate author order, affecting the choice of corresponding author and payments of publishing costs. When publishing timeframes are long, and with multiple

organisations named, this makes for extremely complex and changeable arrangements from when a manuscript is drafted to final publication.

Recommendations

- TAs must define eligibility based on *any* author's affiliation with a participating institution, not just the corresponding author
- TAs must allow authors to update and correct affiliations when these change between time of submission and publication
- TAs must allow authors to change the corresponding author, as changes to affiliations may leave authors without access to email accounts, databases, or other resources required for finalisation
- Publishers' submission systems must support flexibility in author order and affiliation

Conclusion

Authors juggle many (competing) imperatives in bringing work forward to publication. To be successful, they short-cut the decision process by creating “go-to” lists of potential venues; these are journals they know are well-ranked, that they know will be hospitable to certain theories and methods, where the editorial stance aligns to authors' work, and with reasonable publication timeframes. Authors make these decisions as participants in the current scholarly publishing system, even as they are simultaneously aware of the inequitable, extractive nature of the system. What authors need is a comprehensive OA scholarly publishing system, where profit motives are excised, and where OA publishing is centred as meritorious. We applaud colleagues who are working toward this future, such as at [Utrecht University](#) and [Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis](#). There are also initiatives to rethink university ranking systems (e.g., [Gadd 2020](#)) and introduce [research assessment reform](#), which will alter the scholarly communication landscape. FORCE11 is one example of a community of key stakeholders who are attending to researchers' needs as they explore the future of scholarly publishing; their [Declaration of Researcher Rights in Negotiating the Future of Scholarly Communication](#) addresses several issues that should inform TA negotiations. At the same time, with TAs being signed all around us, we must ensure their everyday implementation matches their purported goals.

Authors are unlikely to become closely acquainted with TAs, except as they are directly affected by them. However, their needs must inform discussions about the future of TAs. Authorship is a complex endeavour, from author order, to who pays fees, to

institutional, disciplinary, and career expectations. Although librarians, consortia staff, and publishers are leading TA practices and policy development, it is authors who are on the front lines of navigating how these agreements change the publishing process. Although we recognize that some of our recommendations (if incorporated into TAs that index costs to number of OA publications) may lead to cost increases, we argue that libraries should not sign agreements that will become more expensive as OA publishing grows. We cannot risk pitting library budgets against OA imperatives. TAs must align with authors' priorities, alongside goals for OA, equity, and cost certainty, to meet all stakeholders' needs.