



Evidence Summary

Traditional Factors of Fit, Perceived Quality, and Speed of Publication Still Outweigh Open Access in Authors' Journal Selection Criteria

A Review of:

Solomon, D. J., & Björk, B.-C. (2012). Publication fees in open access publishing: Sources of funding and factors influencing choice of journal. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology*, 63(1), 98-107. doi: 10.1002/asi.21660

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Abstract

Objective – To determine the extent to which the open access (OA) status of a journal influences authors in their journal selection decisions and to analyze the sources of funding for the article-processing charges (APCs) applied in professional OA publishing.

Design – Survey questionnaire.

Setting – The international open access scholarly publishing sector.

Subjects – 1,038 researchers across all academic disciplines who have recently published work in open access journals that charge APCs.

Methods – Journals listed in the Directory of Open Access Journals were stratified into seven discipline clusters, and systematic random sampling was used where possible to collect a sample of up to 15 journals per cluster that levy APCs. For each individual journal, the authors of the 15 most recently published articles (working from 2010 backwards) were invited to complete a web-based questionnaire on the factors influencing their choice of journal and the source(s) used to fund processing charges. Additional background information about the authors and journals was also collected and merged with the survey responses.

Main Results – The results of the survey identified the fit of the article with the journal’s subject area, the perceived quality or impact of the journal, and the speed of the peer-review and publishing process as the dominant factors in the journal selection decision of authors. All three aspects were judged as either “very important” or “important” by 80% or more of respondents – significantly higher than the corresponding figure of 60% in relation to the open access status of the journal.

The analysis also indicated that two key elements appear to influence how APCs are funded: the research discipline and the country of origin of the author. The use of research grants to fund charges is more prevalent in scientific disciplines than in the humanities, whilst researchers based in lower-income countries more frequently identify APCs as a barrier than those in higher-income countries. Grants and institutional funding tend to be the primary sources of funding for journals with higher APCs, whilst personal funding is utilised more often in cases where the fee is less than \$500.

Conclusion – Despite the increasing focus on the accessibility and visibility of research, academics still appear to place a greater value on ‘who’ rather than ‘how many’ readers access their research, and consequently traditional factors still persist as the main determinants in an author’s choice of journal. The future success of the APC model, compared with the traditional subscription-based or hybrid models, will ultimately depend on the ability of authors to obtain the necessary funding to pay such charges, combined with the extent to which the quality of services offered by open access publishers is perceived as being commensurate with the associated publishing fees.

Commentary

The study deals with two emerging themes in scholarly publishing: how authors typically evaluate and select journals, and how scholars perceive the importance of a journal’s open access policy when submitting manuscripts.

These results lend resonance to the view that journal rankings and impact factors (often used as a proxy for quality) remain highly influential in the scholarly publishing environment.

While the intention of the study was to collect a representative sample from all disciplines, the difficulty encountered in obtaining sufficiently large samples outside the science technical and medical field, where APCs are less prevalent, highlights possible limitations in terms of the external validity and replicability of the results. This problem in itself flags opportunities for further research into why there is such a discrepancy in APC policies across disciplines, as well as the use of the APC as a proxy for the willingness to pay for publishing services, particularly with a view to estimating which services are valued most: visibility and dissemination, the peer-review process, reputation, or branding.

The authors state that the survey was piloted before distribution with 123 authors across 4 journals, but that no subsequent changes were made to the instrument. However, the study acknowledges the lack of clarity in phrasing one of the questions (concerning the maximum charge authors would be willing to pay), which led to some respondents misinterpreting the intended context. This casts doubt over how effective this pilot testing actually was, as well as the consistency and reliability of the questionnaire. A more rigorous approach in developing and testing the survey instrument may have anticipated such problems and yielded more precise answers, thus increasing the validity of the survey.

The concern that APCs are a more pervasive barrier for authors in lower-income countries and those working in certain disciplines where authors often pay charges from personal funds may ultimately lead to a bias in the volume or geographic distribution of the research published in open access journals if the APC model gains further traction. The overall awareness and recognition of these fees should ideally be made more explicit at funding agency and institutional levels, with more

visible supports put in place by both publishers and institutions for those working in areas where processing charges act as a prohibitive barrier to publishing in OA journals.

From the evidence presented, it appears that librarians still have an essential role to play in promoting the benefits of open access publishing to researchers, with almost 20% of authors indicating that the openness of a journal is of little or no influence when targeting a publication. Furthermore, as the authors included in the sample exclusively comprise those recently published in OA journals rather than those published in both OA and subscription journals, this may be indicative, *ceteris paribus*, that the figure across researchers as a whole is potentially even higher.

While the degree of openness may not currently be of intrinsic importance to authors, it is clear that those factors which are judged as critical are not exogenously determined. For

instance, open access channels may increase the potential fit of an article, as niche publishing becomes more feasible in the context of a zero marginal cost model that is not dependent on a high volume of reader subscriptions to fund it. Furthermore, a faster review and publication process is also an advantage offered by several open access journal publishers. Promoting and highlighting these endogenous relationships to researchers could prove to be a valuable tool for librarians in further leveraging the support of authors for open access publishing.

References

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