

Publish, but do not perish in the open access model

War stimulates scientific research. Vennevar Bush was President Roosevelt's top advisor on matters of technology in the Second World War, and one of the pioneers of US radar research. In 1945, he speculated that one day, it would be possible to sit down at a desk or machine that would house or access all human knowledge. He called this machine a memex, a portmanteau of "memory" and "extender" or "memory" and "index", and described it as desk and camera combination that could record anything a user wrote, and then link it to other pieces of information indexed in its storage space. This essay prefigured hypertext, the personal computer, the Internet, the World Wide Web, speech recognition and online encyclopedias.¹

The general public has had access to the web since the late 1990s,² and this has almost inevitably led to the notion of open access publishing. Open access implies free (at point of access) retrieval of scholarly and peer-reviewed research online. This form of open access is technically known as gold open access publishing and is only possible due to the very cheap distribution and dissemination of such materials online. The main advantage is that such material becomes instantly available.

However "open don't mean free" since overseeing the peer-review process, information technology (hardware and software) outlays and online publishing costs must be contended with.

Thus, established publishers who have moved to the open access model typically charge authors fees in the region of £1000 or more for the publication of a paper once a paper has been through the mill of the conventional peer-review process and has been accepted.³ Clearly, open access proposes a redistribution of costs – "there ain't no such thing as a free lunch".⁴

The model has worked in the main.⁵ However, the principal disadvantage is that with the prevailing publish or perish mentality, it is easy for a new journal to start up and shortly become inundated with authors who need their work to be published in order to further their career.

Fees are therefore easily levied by publishers and paid up by authors, often from research funds.

Indeed, this author's email (and I am sure, the readers' too) frequently receives invitations for the submission of papers to newly fledged, open access journals. It is only when one scrutinizes the fine print that the nontrivial publishing fees become apparent.

Established publishers are therefore concerned that the lure of lucre may compromise the peer-review process and allow the publication of substandard papers by unscrupulous publishers. Shut one eye – as long as the author pays the processing fee. Such attitudes will inevitably diminish standards, and authors publishing in unprincipled journals may not find their work well regarded.

Readers are exhorted to vet the vehicle for their publication with care. Lists of such "predatory" journals and publishers may be readily found online.

References

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