Plan S[how me the money]: why academic-led initiatives represent a more equitable, less costly publishing future

Plan S, announced last month, represents an exciting example of the scholarly community mobilising to create funding requirements that could lead to an open access future. However, the plan has also raised a number of legitimate concerns, not least the absence of any incentive for publishers to lower journal costs. ***Brian Cody*** *suggests how simple adjustments to the proposed article processing charge cap could encourage publishers to reduce costs and so free up funds for other open access projects. However, an arguably more significant step would be to decentralise the journal market and democratise the publishing process through commitment to academic-led initiatives, with scholars driving academic publishing rather than a handful of large corporations.*

Who will be able to afford to have their voices heard in the future of academic publishing?

This question has been on my mind given the Open Access Week theme of "creating equitable foundations for open knowledge", and given the uncertain impact of Plan S on the future of scholarly publishing.

Concerns that Plan S is not equitable

Many readers will know of Plan S, but for those who don't it is a commitment from (currently) 13 national research funding bodies in Europe to accelerate the move to open access. The key principle of Plan S reads:

> "By 2020 scientific publications that result from research funded by public grants provided by participating national and European research councils and funding bodies, must be published in compliant open access journals or on compliant open access platforms."

I recently wrote about the need for scholars and institutions to focus on collective mobilisation (starting journals, advocacy within their institutions, educating other scholars, etc.) in order to speed up the transition to open access, rather than on building new tools or finding additional funding. Plan S is an exciting example of the scholarly community (through national funding bodies) mobilising to create funding requirements that could lead to the open access future so many of us are working towards.

That said, there has been much criticism of Plan S. Many of the critiques touch on two key points: 1) how the plan's enactment could lead to more open access content but at the cost of increasing global inequity in authorship should high article processing charges (APCs) limit the publishing potential of scholars in some regions of the world; and 2) how Plan S might have unintended negative impacts across different scholarly fields.

Looking at the global research landscape, Danny Kingsley, Deputy Director of Cambridge University Library, recently noted how global inequity within academic publishing will shift from inequity in access to the final product to inequity in ability to be published. For low and middle-income countries, "instead of not being able to read research, academics in the Global South will be excluded from participating in the academic discussion".

Plan S has also been criticised because it would not apply equally across academic disciplines. Computational chemist Marcel Swart writes that potentially only 2% of chemistry journals listed in the Journal Citations Report are also listed in DOAJ (one of the potential criteria to have been floated as part of the Plan S requirements). This, Swart argues, would produce a disparate and negative impact on chemistry compared to other fields: "if the Plan S criteria would be applied today, 99% of these trusted journals would be out of reach for the researchers that are supported by the 13 cOAlitionS funders, which would create an unworkable and undesirable situation for chemistry research in Europe". Such concerns were mirrored in the Global Young Academy's recent statement that not all fields will be equally successful under Plan S:

> “The humanities and qualitative social sciences are particularly vulnerable, because scholars in these fields have limited access to (and often no need of) external funding and, thereby, do not have access to funding towards publication.”

One of the ten core principles of Plan S is to set a cap on the APC cost which, in theory, would prevent APCs from becoming exhorbitant. But there is concern that under Plan S APC costs will continue to ratchet up year after year due to pressure from publishers, exacerbating existing economic inequities. Curt Rice, Rektor of Oslo Metropolitan University, suggests the idea of an APC cap is inherently flawed as a tool for lowering the cost of scholarly publishing:

> “Although the fee cap for an APC has yet to be established, no matter what it is, it will always be a point of negotiation with the publishers and it will have to be revisited regularly, just like subscription costs. The simple and overarching problem with traditional publishers that Plan S cannot solve is that they have no incentive to lower their profit rates and will resist every effort pushing them to do so.”

Rice makes the point that an APC cap alone will not necessarily result in equitable APCs but may become a benchmark publishers keep pushing to raise. As the cap is pushed upwards, we will continue to see growing inequity in authorship separating scholars into groups of those who can afford to publish in the most expensive journals and those who cannot. Rice argues that what’s missing from Plan S and the current publishing system is incentive among publishers to lower journal *costs*.

Missing from Plan S: incentives to reduce costs

Under Plan S, there would be an *indirect* incentive to keep APCs below the cap, in order for the journal to remain eligible to receive submissions from authors covered by Plan S signatories. There would be another *indirect* incentive for journals to position themselves at lower APC price points to capture more submissions from authors who cannot afford the Plan S-defined cap but could afford some lower amount (e.g. some authors might be able to afford a US$500 APC but not US$2,500).

Yet Plan S does not provide *direct* incentives to reduce journal publishing costs, which seems a missed opportunity. One possibility would be for Plan S (or a future iteration) to set an APC cap that automatically reduces each year. For example, if the cap began at US$2,500 in 2020, Plan S could mandate that the cost decrease by US$150 each year, and ultimately drop to US$1,000 by 2030. This would incentivise publishers to aggressively innovate to find ways to reduce costs as soon as possible so they can benefit from the delta between costs and APC cap. This would also set in motion an industry-wide cost reduction initiative for the majority of publications that want to continue receiving articles from Plan S-funded authors.

Alternatively, Plan S funders could set a benchmark a different way: use the average APC across all articles in a given year as a benchmark for the following year’s APC cap. Given that at least some papers will be published in diamond OA journals, where there is no APC at all, and in journals with an APC below the Plan S-defined cap, the average APC would slowly ratchet downwards and create more pressure for publishers to reduce costs. For example, if 85% of articles were at the APC cap, 10% were at half the cap, and 5% were in diamond OA journals with no APC, the cap would drop by 10% the following year.

If the APC cap falls, Plan S funders could then allocate funds originally earmarked for APCs to instead fund OA projects directly. Plan S funders could reward low-cost journals by directly funding them. Additionally, they could help more journals convert to a diamond OA model. Funders could also form a funding partnership similar to the Open Library of Humanities model and, via an application process, support journals financially and/or via subsidised infrastructure (software, staff, hosting, etc.).

Academic-led publishing: equitable, reduced costs

Trying to reduce the cost of knowledge is a long-standing problem, and locking research behind expensive paywalls has long been a source of inequity within the scholarly community. Much of the existing economic barriers to knowledge are attributable to the centralisation of academic publishing among a handful of corporate publishers that also specialised publishing processes over the last 50 years. This is why many advocates for open access point to the need to reverse these trends through decentralising the journal market and democratising the publishing process itself. Bjorn Brembs, for example, has argued that high-quality journals can be published with a "costs per article range in the low hundreds [of dollars]" and cites examples of publishers publishing at this level today.

This Open Access Week, as we look to the future for more equitable foundations for open knowledge and consider the possible ramifications and possibilities of Plan S, it is important to emphasise the way academic-led publishing can lower costs and increase equity. Academic-led publishing broadly refers to research publishing initiatives wherein an academic organisation controls all decisions pertaining to research copyright and choice of publishing infrastructure.

Academic-led publishing initiatives decentralise and democratise academic publishing by involving more scholars at a local level. And academic-led journals tend to have lower production costs than traditional journals (e.g. independent journals in the Free Journals Network). Academic-led publishing is inherently more equitable because it creates room for more voices in publishing (more scholars driving academic publishing rather than a few large corporations), and those voices are members of the community itself.

Moving the centre of academic publishing from a few legacy publishers to a multitude of academic-led initiatives where costs are lower is an important step towards a more equitable OA future. I hope, this Open Access Week, the question of how to promote academic-led publishing is discussed at least as much as Plan S.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Impact Blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our comments policy if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

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