Open Access (OA) – Some experiences and conclusions

Paper presented at the Open Access Seminar in Falun, 30 November 2011

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November 2011

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Case 1: Journal of Official Statistics (JOS), www.jos.nu

The Journal of Official Statistics was started by a senior researcher, Dr Lars Lyberg, employed by Statistics Sweden, the central statistical office of Sweden. Lyberg was also the Chief Editor of the journal until last year. I have served as Chairman of the Board during the same period. JOS became a successful, scientific journal in its field, focusing on survey methodology and other topics of importance for official statistics. The journal has a number of distinguished associate editors, and a large network of referees. It was originally published as a traditional, subscribed printed journal. Managing subscriptions and editing, printing, and distributing a journal is rather costly, and when Internet became popular in the mid 1990’s, I suggested that we should consider transforming JOS into an electronic, open access journal, made available via the Internet free of charge. This would also solve another, rather embarrassing problem. With growing scientific status and popularity, JOS had become wellknown all over the world. However, universities, researchers, and students in developing countries could not afford to pay the subscription fee.

Another alternative that was open to us at this time was to sell the journal: a few internationally wellknown publishers were interested to take over our journal in order to broaden their total offers. However, these publishers were completely negative to the idea to publish an open access version of the journal on the Internet, in parallel with the subscribed, printed version. We decided to turn down the offers from the big international publishers, and to transform JOS into an open access journal, available free of charge on the Internet.

We decided to keep the printed version of JOS, which would continue to be subscribed at the same fee as before. This turned out to be a very successful choice, because very soon after the
electronic, open access version had been released on the website www.jos.nu, the number of paid subscriptions of the printed version actually increased by about 70% - in line with our own expectations, but contrary to the beliefs of traditional publishers. The explanation behind this paradox is that by publishing a journal free of charge on the Internet, the journal gets so much more attention than before, and some of the new readers actually want to have the printed version, although they have to pay for it.

JOS is now ranked as one of the top ten journals in its field, the only non-American journal.


In 2003 I became engaged by the Mid Sweden University to establish a new field of interdisciplinary research on Public Information Systems (PIS). The research field would cover information systems directed towards the general public, citizens as well as organisations and companies. It would include, but not be limited to information systems managed by public agencies. See Sundgren (2005).

The Mid Sweden University was at the time a new university, without a strong research tradition, and with very limited resources for research. I got the idea that starting a scientific journal covering the research field of public information systems, for which I was responsible, could be a good way of “kick-starting” research activities in a number of different ways. Being responsible for a scientific journal would place the university as well as the particular research field on the map. The journal would attract researchers from all over the world to submit manuscripts – provided that the journal became known and respected relatively soon. The work with the journal would have to be managed, to a large extent, by the researchers in my research group, and that would give them useful experiences of reading research papers, and hopefully encourage them to write research papers themselves.

After some discussions we decided to start a new journal called International Journal of Public Information Systems (IJPIS). Publishing a traditional, printed journal was out of question for cost reasons. Thus publishing an Internet version according to open access principles was the only realistic alternative. However, using this option would require only a minimal budget (in addition to our own work), and a minimum of bureaucracy.

I used my own, quite extensive network of research colleagues all over the world as a basis for recruiting respected associate editors and referees. They also helped to spread the word about the new journal and to encourage researchers to submit manuscripts. The active support from this network was important for ensuring the quality and good reputation of the journal.

IJPIS received many readers all over the world rather quickly, and submissions also come from many countries. The speed of publishing is a competitive advantage of the journal. Articles are published on the website, www.ijpis.net, as soon as they are approved. There is no need to wait for complete “issues”. We have kept the metaphor of issues of the journal, although the structuring of articles into issues is not really necessary, when you publish electronically only. Maintaining this old metaphor from the world of printed journals makes it possible to keep standard formats for references to articles (volume, issue).

Other advantages of publishing electronically only is that it is easy to publish revised versions of articles (while keeping the original versions as they are), and the possibilities to use
animated graphs and other multimedia techniques, which are not available for printed journals.

**Case 3: Researcher – user of the works of others**

As a researcher and author of scientific books and articles, I need to be able to search for and find relevant books and articles authored by others. And when I find potentially relevant works by others, I would like to be able to take a quick look at them to see if they are really interesting for me. All this is so easy to accomplish, if the works I am looking for are themselves available on the Internet, free of charge, without any log in procedures. And I can search and download according to my needs. These processes become seamless parts of my own research and authoring process.

In contrast, if the potentially relevant works by other authors are not available on the Internet for free access and downloading, I have to consider carefully whether to take the trouble to buy a book (from Amazon, for example), or to borrow a book or a journal from a library. The threshold becomes very much higher than if the work is available and free on the Internet, and in most cases, I will not take the trouble.

ISO standards is a really bad example of what may happen, if potentially important works are not available on the Internet. If you want to check whether a particular ISO standard would be relevant for something that I am doing, I will have to order the standard from ISO in printed form and wait for it to arrive. I hardly ever find that worthwhile. It is really a pity, since a lot of valuable work has usually gone into the creation of a standard, and it is really suboptimisation to try to get some relatively small revenues by charging for the outputs from this costly work, since the charging creates obstacles that drastically reduce the use of the standards.

And when you finally get a printed book or article from a bookshop or a library, you realise how much you miss the possibility to search it electronically, to copy and paste citations, etc…

**Case 4: Researcher – publishing own works**

As an author of scientific works my top priorities are to get my works distributed and read by colleagues and other interested people. For my scientific career it may be important that my works are recognised and cited. All of this is tremendously facilitated, if I publish according to open access principles. This is rather obvious for most authors of scientific works, but traditional publishers still claim that they are able to distribute printed books and articles that they charge for, and to get those works read and cited, in a more efficient way than can be achieved by open access publishing via the Internet. More and more empirical studies are coming along that prove that these traditional publishers are wrong, that is, open access articles reach many more readers, get known and recognised much faster, and are cited more often. See Eysenbach (2006).

Thus it is a very destructive myth that open access publishing should be inferior in any way to traditional, print, and for fee (rather than for free) publishing.

**Why do some researchers still hesitate to use Open Access?**

There are a number of possible answers to this question:
1. There is a fear that Open Access journals have lower quality refereeing processes.
2. There is a fear that articles published in Open Access journals are given lower value when researchers are competing for academic positions.
3. There is a fear that mechanic algorithms for quality evaluations may favour articles published in traditional non-OA journals.
4. Some traditional publishers are so negative to Open Access publishing that they do not allow parallel OA publishing of the same or similar works.
5. Some publishers accept OA, but they charge the authors for publishing their articles.

More research is needed in order to verify or falsify the hypotheses stated above. However, the mere existence of these hypotheses discourage researcher to publish in OA journals, which in turn may give an unfair advantage to non-OA publishers. It is similar to a situation where a school with a good reputation may survive longer than it should, just because the best students choose that school – even if the quality of the teachers and the teaching of the school goes down.

As for argument (1) there is really no reason why an OA journal could not have a refereeing process that is as rigorous as that of a non-OA journal.

As for argument (2) the evaluators in a competition process for an academic position should read and make their own evaluation of submitted works, regardless of where these works may have been published.

As for argument (3) it is urgent that mechanic quality evaluation algorithms are redesigned, if necessary, as to not include criteria that has nothing to do with the quality of a published article as such. Thus an article should not automatically inherit the quality estimate of the journal, where it has been published – it should get a quality estimate on its own merits.

As for argument (4) it is undoubtedly widespread among strong traditional non-OA publishers not to accept parallel OA publishing and to make it difficult for authors to reuse even short passages or illustrations from a work that has been published with them. On the other hand, today most funders of scientific research, and most universities, require their students and employees to publish their work according to open access principles. It is difficult to understand how these two conflicting policies could coexist in the long run. Established authors could speed up the process in favour of OA publishing by refusing to publish in non-OA journals or books. I do this myself. To begin with authors should read all contracts presented to them by publishers very carefully before they sign, and they should ask to see the contracts at an early stage of the publishing process.

As for argument (5), there is no good reason why a publisher should find it necessary to charge authors. If the publishers are efficient and innovative, they will find alternative business models. If they are not efficient and innovative, the have no right to exist any longer. And by the way, it would be relatively easy today for universities and researchers to take care of the publishing themselves; cf the IJPIS case described above, where researchers at the Mid Sweden University could easily do most of the work with the journal themselves, as a natural and integrated part of their own research processes, supported by international colleagues who volunteered as associate editors and referees – as researchers always do, regardless of whether the journals they help are OA or non-OA.
The Publisher Paradox

This is what I call the Publisher Paradox:

- Authors of scientific articles do not get paid by their publishers.
- Referees working for publishers of scientific journals do not get paid.
- On the other hand, even authors and referees have to pay (themselves or via libraries), when they want to read articles in the same journals that they help with their unpaid work.

The only ones who get paid are the publishers and their employees. What are they paid for? In the old days, before electronic publishing and the Internet existed, it was easy to see that publishers had substantial costs for printing books and articles, and for editing these products, before they could be printed, etc. They also had to spend resources for marketing and distributing printed books and journals, and – not least – for charging the customers. Most of these processes have become redundant in the electronic world, or at least so simplified that they can easily be taken care of by the authors themselves.

The future

Here are some conclusions from the observations made in this article:

- Senior researchers and authors must set good examples by refusing to sign contracts with non-OA publishers who do not permit parallel OA publishing and/or permit authors to retain unlimited rights of (re)use of the material given by the author to the publisher for being published.
- Younger researchers should be further encouraged to publish according to OA. The duty to do so according to university policies, and rules set by funders like the European Union, should be emphasised, and the implementation of policies and rules should be monitored.
- Quality criteria should be designed so as not to favour authors using non-OA publishers at the expense of authors publishing according to OA principles.
- Destructive myths about OA should be destroyed by facts.
- Publishers must justify their existence by being efficient and innovative, by finding new roles and business models.

Personally I believe that we have only seen the beginning of OA publishing. There are several potential benefits from open authoring and publishing processes that have not yet been exploited, e.g. open collaboration via the Internet as regards the whole refereeing process. Authors could volunteer to publish early versions of their papers, inviting everyone interested, including formally appointed referees, to participate in the improvement of the submitted article, until it is formally approved and quality stamped.

References

