

## Assessing the Assessor: Using Journal Source as Proxy for Quality of Article Damaging Scholars' Career

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### **Abstract**

*Publishing in prestigious scientific research journals has become synonymous with the quality of the article, when really it is a flattering of a researcher's professional status. University promotion committees employ publication source as proxy of article quality to the detriment of some scholars. However, least discussed about publication source as proxy of article quality is the ulterior profit maximization motive by prestigious journals.*

*The purpose of this brief review article is to examine the adverse impact of using publication source as proxy of article quality for academic promotions. The farcical debate on Open Access versus Subscription-based scholarly publications ignores an important victim -- the researcher.*

*The dysfunctional nature of contemporary method of grading scholarly contributions, based upon source of publication, requires immediate re-evaluation to best recognize the fundamental purpose of promoting scientific inquiries. This will expand the parameters of the conversation, and stir up stakeholders into action by mobilizing resources to un-lease all potentialities of Open Access journals as scientific communication tool.*

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**Keywords:** *academic promotion; open access; closed access; scientific reporting.*

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Publishing in prestigious scientific research journals, which are mostly subscription-based, has come to be associated with the quality of the article, when it is really only a flattering of a researcher's professional status. University appointment and promotion committees utilize publications coming from prestigious journals as proxy for quality of articles, therefore publishing in such journals assure promotions through the ranks to professorship (Schekman, 2013). But because promotion guidelines are usually silent on the issue of source of publication, a scholar's career progression is left at the peril and sole discretion of promotion committees, making it extremely difficult to even challenge any adverse decision. Such practice may be ruining the careers of some scholars, as their progression through the ranks is hampered, depriving a good number of scholars from reaching the pinnacle of scholarship, to the incalculable loss to society.

The purpose of this brief review article is to examine the adverse impact of using publication source as proxy for quality of articles for academic promotion purposes. The debate on Open Access (OA) versus Subscription-based or Closed Access (CA) peer-review publications is briefly revisited, in attempt to unravel the real reason behind this intractable debate. It appears that the real driver of this debate is profitability, disguised as the absence of editorial quality for OA publications. For example, Elsevier, the world's biggest journal publisher whose core business is publication of scientific journals reported a huge profit of £724 million on revenue of about £2 billion in 2010, representing a margin of over 36%, which

was higher than those of Apple, Google, or Amazon for that year (Buranyi, 2017). The dysfunctional nature of contemporary method of grading scholarly contributions, based upon source of publication, requires immediate re-evaluation to best recognize the fundamental purpose of promoting scientific inquiries (Adler & Harzing, 2009).

This article contributes to the literature and identifies a gap regarding the adverse impact on the career progression of scholars, in an era where the advent of the Internet has irreversibly changed scientific communication, just like it has done to education with the distance learning model for the better. Hopefully, this dysfunctional nature of grading scientific contributions would be explored further by future researchers and rally the support of stakeholders (i.e., promotion committees, private business organizations, universities, policy makers) to the rescue.

### **THE ARGUMENTS FOR SUBSCRIPTION-BASED OR CLOSED ACCESS (CA) JOURNALS**

The major arguments often advanced in favor of CA journals are that they offer (a) quality editorial services, which results in efficient peer-review process, (b) low acceptance rate, which suggests that only the well-scrutinized articles make it to acceptance and publication, and (c) high impact factor or citation rate, suggestive of the fact that articles are cited often because of quality. For these reasons, cost of production is necessarily higher (Guttman, 2013).

Another argument of CA is that because publishers of OA demand fees before publication, it leads to conflict of interest (Guttman, 2013), as there will be financial motivation for OA journals to publish more articles, thus flooding the scientific literature with non-quality articles. That although, peer-review requirements are maintained, there is not enough structures in place to ensure that reviewers are not influenced by their publishers (Worlock, 2017). In other words, in the absence of prepaid publication fees, conflict of interest is removed from the equation, leading to publications of higher editorial quality. However, it is interesting to note that lately, certain OA Journals have started giving serious attention to the concept of editorial quality, low acceptance rate, high impact factor, and shifting its focus from author-sponsored publication fees to stakeholder-sponsored publication fees, such as private business organizations (e.g., Pareonline.net). This trend is fast undermining the very foundations of the core arguments of CA Journals.

### **THE ARGUMENT FOR OPEN ACCESS (OA) JOURNALS**

OA supports the idea that knowledge is not meant for those who can pay for it, but rather for everyone. Cost is the central argument pertaining to publishing in OA journals. It is relatively much cheaper to publish in OA journals than CA. On average, it costs US\$5,000 to publish in CA journal such as *Cell Reports* versus US\$1,350 in OA journal such as *PLoS ONE*. It is even lower for other OA Journals such as *PeerJ*, which charges a flat fee of US\$299 for unlimited number of articles (Noorden, 2013). Schekman (2013), a Nobel Laureate in Medicine, noted that it is the quality of the article and not the journal's brand that serves better the cause of science. Schekman further noted that CAs sell subscription rather than stimulating good research by intentionally causing artificial shortages by limiting acceptance rate, thus creating scarcity which in turn fuels demand.

Probably, the strongest argument for OA is its ability to rapidly disseminate scientific knowledge in an unprecedented manner. Thus, the turn-around time is fast, sometimes receiving editorial decision in as little as 7-14 days (e.g., *Researchjournali.com*), compared

with some CA journals that can take many months (e.g., *African Development Review*) after uploading an article into its Scholar One software. At such time-consuming rate, a researcher might not be able to publish many enough articles to inure to the benefit of the scientific community, and also will not be able to move up the scale of the academic promotion ladder. Both of which do not help the cause of science.

### **REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

A primary purpose of universities is creation and dissemination of knowledge (Rynes, Bartunek, & Daft, 2001). Thus scholarly publications are used to determine promotion for university teachers. A subset of this usage is the source of publication (i.e., OA versus CA journals), as a proxy for article quality. Some researchers (e.g., Finch, et al., 2017) have suggested that because academic promotion, especially to that of professor, tends to be based on academic contributions and prestige of the publishing source, once professorial rank is attained, there is the tendency to maintain the status quo by those professors and promotion authorities by reinforcing and maintaining those criteria, even though they don't really play any meaningful role in the quality of science. This they do within the context of their academic socialization (e.g., the route they have travelled themselves in reaching professorship) and institutional biographical factors (e.g., value that individual faculty ascribes to different mediums such as academic journals), which perpetuates an institution's promotion culture. For example, many universities assess scholars' promotion and compensation based upon the impact factors of journals, the highest considered superior (Aguinis et al., 2014).

Scientific research, to be of universal standard, requires easy access to the international scientific sources of information. While this access used to be a problem in the past due to high cost, technological advancement has significantly reduced this cost with the advent of OA (Dekeyser, 2012). Scientific research, especially in less developed countries is expensive (Van Helden, 2012) where, even currency exchange rate fluctuations can create major hurdle for some researchers if they have to make journal subscription payments. Eisen (2000) criticized CA journal publishers for the huge amount of money they charge, reviewers of those articles in them do not receive any financial compensation, and argued that researchers can get much better value by publishing in OA journals (as cited by Noorden, 2013).

The problem is that getting promotion authorities to accord OA publications the respect they really deserve is not quite forthcoming, probably because of the profitability issues that favor CA journals, turning them into powerful lobbyists for the status quo. For example, Guttman (2013) observed that "the scientific publication niche is a bottomless pot of gold" (p. 1), raking in more than \$9 billion revenue for the year 2011 from readers and universities from both CA and OA journals. Of those, 90% of the journals fall into the CA category. Therefore, the suspicion cannot be completely ruled out that the motive to invent "editorial quality" to conceal the more "precious gold" is bound to exist. This is strangulating scientific communication and killing careers of some scholars.

Selling scientific results of researchers that are submitted free of charge and reviewed by others with no compensation in peer-review publications is a very profitable business. Springer, the second world's biggest journal publisher, made 36% profit on revenue of US\$1.1 billion in 2011. However, this trend may be shifting: the UK government, emulated by the US government and other private charities are moving to change the rules by eliminating this inclination to making huge profits, at the expense of good science, in the dissemination of scientific knowledge and make it free and faster for all (Open access

scientific publishing, 2013).

OA journals earned \$172 million in 2012, an amount representing only 2.8% of the total average revenue of about \$6 billion dollars that journal publishers earn annually. Perhaps, most relevantly, OA publishers are now gravitating towards article reviews that place considerable weight on “accuracy” rather than “significance;” an approach that has also been adopted by the US based Public Library of Science (PLoS), a non-commercial organization that was one of the pioneers of OA publishing, with its acceptance rate of 80-90% (as cited by Open access scientific publishing, 2013).

OA journals have been growing quite rapidly: in May 2004, the Directory of OA Journals (DOAJ) listed 8 business journals. Two years later, in May 2006, this number had increased to 26, and three years later it had increased to 83 business and management titles, with additional 84 economics title. Other databases, such as Ulrich’s Periodical Directory recorded 113 scholarly OA business and economics journals in May 2009, with 59 of them being refereed. Open J-Gate recorded 536 OA titles under “Business, Economy, and Management,” of which 191 were refereed (Ball, 2009).

OA journals indexed in Web of Science and/or Scopus compare favorably with the same scientific impact and quality as CA Journals (Christer-Björk & Solomon, 2012) and the future of scientific research lied in OA (Finch, 2012). Yet, inspite of such observations, academic promotion committees are still stuck in a consciously or unconsciously disproportionate reliance on CA journals, to the detriment of both academic promotion and the very cause of science.

The much touted higher editorial quality of CA journals is open to suspicion, given that reviewers, without any realistic monetary compensation to serve as motivation, would be less inclined to give of their best (i.e., quality, faster, and honest reviews). To elicit the best from the reviewer, get him to see the peer-reviewing as some kind of a substantial source of income, rather than token honorarium, if any at all. It is interesting to note that some researchers found that editorial quality of some scholarly contributions are not without serious compromise. For example, Taschner (2007) provided a very disturbing account by noting that papers submitted for review may not even be read by the reviewers, but rather sent to their friends among them for their opinion regarding suitability of those articles for publication (as cited by Gernert, 2008).

Some studies (Boss & Eckert, 2003; Schekman, 2013) have noted that the assumption of relating quality of individual articles based upon the impact factor, although it is encouraged by many journals, is wrong. This factor, which was invented in the 1960s, is a rough determination of the frequency of citation of articles in a given journal by other articles. It is an average, which does not really determine the quality of the individual article. To Shekman (2013), an article may be cited several times not because it is of quality, but it may be because it is eye-catching, provocative, or plain wrong. For this reason, certain journal editors have made it a practice of accepting those articles that fall under such categories, hoping to increase the impact factor.

Shuttleworth (2009) noted that because no uniform grading system exists about the quality of peer-review, it is difficult to judge the expertise and quality of the peer-review or the editor, as different journals have different standards. Shuttleworth further noted that article review decisions can even be determined based upon the country of origin, irrespective of the

quality.

## **DISCUSSION AND WAY FORWARD FOR OPEN ACCESS JOURNALS**

Science is not a certain or established system or statement (Popper, 1995). Thus the peer-review system or mechanism only attempts to augment the reliability of scientific inquiries and can hardly be said to be flawless. Because the double blind system is rarely used, due to its impracticality, there are often accusations that papers are judged on the reputation of the author instead of quality. An excellent article authored by a lesser-known researcher can be rejected, whilst a poorer but non-controversial article written by a well-known researcher can pass through the peer-review process with ease (Shuttleworth, 2009).

Perhaps for OA Journals, to enhance its prestige among the comity of scientific communication, it needs to expand its indexing of articles. For example, Ball (2009) observed that for the rapidly expanding number of OA journals, especially business ones to gain more credibility in the academic and professional environment, free availability on the Internet is not adequate; there must also be some kind of a “one-stop-shopping” component whereby, researchers can easily access and retrieve the wide range of OA journals for research and study through appropriate indexing by commercial journal indexing databases, such as ABI/Inform or Business Source Complete. The implication of this indexing is that it increases exposure of the journal and draws higher citation levels, if that is what it takes for a journal to become prestigious.

## **CONCLUSION**

The whole process of publishing an article, especially in subscription-based journals, is quite time consuming and expensive. Papers can be held up for several months with editors, whilst they undergo extensive reviews, sometimes just waiting to find reviewers. In an environment of “publish or perish,” the progress of a researcher needing to publish the minimum articles to meet promotion requirements may be severely curtailed. It also slows down the number of scientific publications. Thus, OA is a most complementary, if not the best scientific reporting avenue for the digital age, just as distance education has come to ease the pressure on traditional “brick and mortar” education delivery that requires heavy investment in infrastructure. Policy prescription: all stakeholders, including promotion committees, private business organizations, universities, policy makers, should re-double efforts to un-lease all potentialities of Open Access journals as scientific communication tool. This will not only help the cause of science but also save the careers of scientists.

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