
Open-access more harm than good in developing world

SIR — The traditional 'publish for free and pay to read' business model adopted by publishers of academic journals can lead to disparity in access to scholarly literature, exacerbated by rising journal costs and shrinking library budgets. However, although the 'pay to publish and read for free' business model of open-access publishing has helped to create a level playing field for readers, it does more harm than good in the developing world.

Authors by no means have a level playing field, even in the traditional publishing model. The dynamics of peer review make it hard to ensure that publication of an article is a function of only its quality, uninfluenced by factors such as topicality or the author's name and affiliation. The open-access model makes the playing field for authors even more uneven.

Page charges may be waived for authors who cannot afford to pay, but a model that depends on payment by authors can afford only a few such waivers. And why should anyone want to survive on charity? The argument that it is the granting agency and not the author that pays does not wash either. If anything, the playing field for grants is even more uneven. Besides, this will undermine, rather than encourage, the whole area of grant-free research.

Page charges make extra difficulties for authors, while the old problems associated with peer review persist. They could be disastrous for the underdeveloped

world, encouraging people to remain as consumers (readers), rather than to become producers (authors) of knowledge.

A 'publish for free, read for free' model may one day prove to be viable. Meanwhile, if I have to choose between the two evils, I prefer the 'publish for free and pay to read' model over the 'pay to publish and read for free' one. Because if I must choose between publishing or reading, I would choose to publish. Who would not?

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