

The danger of universal gold open access

Björn Brembs 

Published August 30, 2013

Citation

Brembs, B. (2013, August 30). The danger of universal gold open access. *Bjoern.brembs.blog*.
<https://doi.org/10.59350/sqek8-kqr58>

Keywords

Blogarchives, Libraries, Open Access, Publishing

Copyright

Copyright © Björn Brembs 2013. Distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

*During my [flyfishing vacation last year](#), pretty much nothing was happening on this blog. Now that I've migrated the blog to WordPress, I can actually schedule posts to appear when in fact I'm not even at the computer. I'm using this functionality to re-blog a few posts from the [archives](#) during the month of August while I'm away. This post is from [November 7, 2012](#):

*

As a strong supporter of any open access initiative over the last almost ten years, there is now a looming threat that the situation may deteriorate beyond the abysmal state scholarly publishing is in right now.

Yes, you read that right: it can get worse than it is today.

What would be worse? Universal gold open access – that is, every publisher charges the authors what they want for making the articles publicly accessible. I've been privately warning of this danger for some time, and now an email and a [blog post by Ross Mounce](#) reminded me that it is about time to make my lingering fear a little more public. He wrote:

Outrageous press release from Nature Publishing Group today.

They're explicitly charging more to authors who want CC BY Gold OA, relative to more restrictive licenses such as CC BY-NC-SA. Here's my quick take on it:<https://rossmounce.co.uk/2012/11/07/gold-oa-pricewatch>

More money, for absolutely no extra work.

How is that different from what these publishers have been doing all these years and still are doing today?

What is so surprising about charging for nothing? That's been the *modus operandi* of publishers since the advent of the internet.

Why should NPG not charge, say, 20k USD for an OA article in *Nature*, if they chose to do so?

If people are willing to pay more than 230k ([\\$58,600 a year](#)) for a Yale degree or over 250k ([\\$62,772 a year](#)) just to have "Harvard" on their diplomas, why wouldn't they be willing to shell out a meager 20k for a paper that might give them tenure? That's just a drop in the bucket, pocket cash.

I'd even be willing to bet that the hard limit for gold OA luxury segment publishing will be closer to 50k or even higher as multiple authors can share the cost. Without regulation, publishers can charge whatever the market is willing and able to pay. If a Nature paper is required, people will pay what it takes.

If libraries let themselves be extorted by publishers out of fear they'll get yelled at by their faculty, surely scientists will let themselves get extorted by publishers out of fear they won't be able to put food on the table nor pay the rent without the next grant/position.

Who seriously believes that only because they now make some articles OA, publishers would all of a sudden become non-profit organisations?

I don't see anything extraordinary in this press release at all, completely normal and very much expected. In fact, the price difference is actually quite small.

I really have no idea what's supposed to be so outrageous about this?

Obviously, the alternative to gold OA cannot be a subscription model. I've written repeatedly that I believe a rational solution would be to have [libraries archive](#) and [make accessible](#) the fruits of our labor: publications, data and software. There can be a thriving marketplace of services around these academic crown jewels, but the booty stays in-house.

At the very least, if there ever should be universal gold OA, the market needs to be heavily regulated with drastic price caps below current author processing charges, or the situation will be worse than today: today, you have to cozy up with professional editors to get published in 'luxury segment' journals. In a universal OA world, you would also have to be rich. This may be better for the public in the short term, as they then would at least be able to access all the research. In the long term, however, if science suffers, so will eventually the public.

Every market I know has a luxury segment. I'll gladly rest my fears if someone shows me a market without such a segment and how it is similar to a universal OA academic publishing market. Until then, I'll be working towards getting rid of publishers and journal rank.