

The dynamics of open access publishing

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Being a librarian at an industrial research laboratory in Bangalore, my job is to provide quick access to information. It was one such routine request for information that served to raise many questions about the state of the open access movement in India.

It arrived by e-mail and the first look impressed me that this was an easy one. My user had requested for a paper published in *Resonance* in 1999. I had all the resources at my disposal to get it instantly. First, the journal was open access and the publisher, Indian Academy of Sciences (IASc), Bangalore had digitized back volumes and made them available on-line. This was my personal knowledge. Secondly, I had an internet connection with good bandwidth provided by my employer. I quickly browsed to the particular issue of the journal on the IASc website. To my disappointment the journal article was not linked to the table of contents.

My second source was Google. I searched and found the paper in SpringerLink! SpringerLink is a commercial publisher and content aggregator. When I tried downloading the full article, it directed me to a shopping cart. Why should I pay for an open access journal article?

It came to my mind that my employer had paid access to SpringerLink. I only had to login through the employer's gateway to get access. So I logged in and found the article. But as we did not subscribe to the journal, we did not have access to the full text. We would still have to pay for it. Disappointment and frustration again.

Eventually, I did find the paper though a Google search, in the Archives of IASc.

Being a strong believer of the open access movement, I found myself staring at some hard questions that I want to put to the open access and publishing community. Is not the aim of open access to make available content freely to the reader? If so, why are we placing our open access journals behind the walls of a commercial publisher? (Incidentally, the SpringerLink page ranked higher in the search results of Google than IASc archive page.) Why is the information that a journal is open access not visible somewhere on the commercial aggregator's site? (If I did not have prior knowledge that *Resonance* is an open access journal,

I cannot know this while viewing the page on SpringerLink.) If getting a higher readership by offering it through a commercial aggregator's site is the purpose, are there not other ways to do it?

Why is the IT infrastructure for journal publishing so poor? While commercial publishers talk about PURL (Persistent URL), DOI (Digital Object Identifier) and CrossRef, why do open access journals not employ Open Source Software and OAI-PMH (Open Access Initiative-Protocol for Metadata Harvesting)?

In my view, the open access movement in India should primarily focus in these two directions. While I cover all the points briefly below, I take on in a little more detail the problems of open access journal publishing.

(i) Policy decisions from academic and government bodies: Advocates of the open access policy mention two important areas that need to be addressed. First, research funded by public grants should be made publicly accessible. Second, grants themselves should accommodate the 'author-pays' model whenever required.

(ii) Technology implementation: Open access is a reality today only because the technology is available to make it happen. Given this fact, implementation of the necessary technology infrastructure should become a priority. There is no dearth of trained manpower in India to make it happen. They are only not in the right places and are not empowered to take or contribute to high-level decisions. (a) Institutional repositories: We need to develop and encourage institutional repositories at every research organization. With a number of open source software available and several interested library professionals, we have made considerable strides in this direction. (b) Open access journals: We need to publish Indian journals using tools that expose metadata with the OAI-PMH protocol. This is a method to get better readership and automated dissemination across many platforms like Oaister, and better visibility. There have been some sporadic initiatives in this direction (for example, *Medknow* and *Journal of Tropical Agriculture*), but more needs to be done.

One may lament that there are not many journals from India that can com-

mand the same respect ('impact factor') as those published from developed countries. But I am not overly bothered by this. The pros and cons of impact factors is a well-discussed topic. It has been established¹ that publishing a journal online not only improves its readership and citation, but also the number of submissions² to it, hence opening up the possibilities of better quality papers. It also discourages plagiarism, as papers that get published and indexed on-line can be easily retrieved.

Looking at the bright side, most of our leading journals are not published by commercial publishers, but by academies, associations and research organizations through the support of public funds. That removes the resistance by commercial publishers against open access routes.

On the downside, researchers are good at research, authoring, editing and reviewing but probably not publishing, with the use of IT. They may not have know-how or time to focus on the technologies of open access publishing. This is where commercial publishers are stepping in and taking a bite out of what could otherwise become purely open access and freely available source of scholarly communication. We need the implementers and we need them fast! Otherwise our journals will be gobbled up quietly by those with commercial interests.

Open access and its models are still in a state of flux. If we are lax, commercial publishers would step in to maximize profits rather than scholarly communication. Views and debates on the topic need to be louder, stronger and maybe even rougher. And there is a need for action because, after all, actions speak louder than words.

1. Sahu, D. K., Gogtay, N. J. and Bavdekar, S. B., In Fifth International Congress on Peer Review and Biomedical Publication, 16-18 September 2005, Chicago, USA; <http://openmed.nic.in/1174/>
2. Bavdekar, S. B. and Sahu, D. R., *J. Postgrad. Med.*, 2005, 51, 5-8; <http://hdl.handle.net/1807/6780>

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