

## Special Forum: An Ethical Imperative of Open Access

# Open Access

## Some Risks, Drawbacks, and Benefits

by *Oliver Schulz*

Open Access (OA) has undeniably already significantly impacted the publishing world, and the movement seems to gain increasing momentum. In August of 2022, the White House announced that federal agencies should work toward policies “to make publications and their supporting data resulting from federally funded research publicly accessible without an embargo on their free and public release” by no later than December 31, 2025 (Nelson 2022). This will, without a doubt, change the publishing landscape, for more than 30% of all articles published in the USA between 2017-2021 were federally funded (Schares 2023, 6). Within this context of mandated change, is there also a moral or ethical imperative for librarians, especially Christian librarians, to support and advocate for OA? Considering the risks and drawbacks of the OA publishing structure is an important part of answering that question.

Not everyone has applauded OA efforts or the governmental legislation promoting OA. It is probably of little surprise that some authors have expressed dislike of OA because they see the financial burden of disseminating scholarship shift to the authors and their funding agencies. Kamerlin et al. (2021) argue that OA creates “financial hierarchies, in which only the best-funded researchers and/or institutions can afford to publish in desirable [i.e., the most highly esteemed] journals.” They also warn that OA will negatively impact “researchers from less affluent countries/institutions, including scholars in the global South” and that those researchers will be particularly “vulnerable to potential uneven, untransparent, and predatory behaviour [*sic.*] among journals and publishers” (635). In light of these concerns, promoting OA could be perceived as support for a system that remains exclusive.

The second point made by Kamerlin et al. (2021) certainly has merit. Biszaha and Schulte (2022) agree, explaining, “Predatory journals refer to unethical publishers intentionally subverting many of the established standards of scholarly publishing to churn out articles and collect associated fees quickly,” almost always publishing articles of poor to average quality (103). As a Christian, I believe that human beings are fallen creatures: somebody will find a way to abuse the system when an opportunity arises to gain money or power illegitimately. Even so, Biszaha and Schulte suggest that authors can consult with librarians to help identify predatory journals and find quality OA journal publishers instead (104-106). So, while the OA environment clearly has risks for vulnerable or uninformed authors, these can be overcome.

What about the criticism that too much financial pressure is placed on the authors, which leads to disadvantages for authors with limited funding access? While this argument makes sense, Kamerlin et al. (2021) appear to be incorrect when they assert that researchers in less affluent countries will be disadvantaged. Demeter, Jele, and Major (2021) conclude that “the proportion of open access journals was the lowest in the so-called developed world (with the lowest rates in North America, followed by Western Europe), with higher proportions in Asia, and Latin America having the greatest open access ratio” (378), a conclusion shared by Jeff Siemon at the 2021 Atla Conference (323). Authors in less affluent countries are more likely to publish via OA than those in wealthier countries.

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Despite the encouraging global OA publication rates, Kamerlin et al. (2021) are likely correct that by shifting the cost of publication to the producers of the information, researchers will experience financial pressure. Even if this is true, by focusing so strongly on this burden, authors overlook the reality that OA allows for much greater distribution of their work than is possible in traditional subscription-based journals. Owens and Thaw (2022, 23) argue that smaller universities will especially benefit from OA and that this could also incentivize authors; greater accessibility means a potentially larger readership. Researchers at smaller institutions in the US and worldwide cannot afford access to many journal titles because of high (and steeply increasing) subscription costs. (For an evaluation of rising journal prices, see Morrison et al. 2022.) Many of these small institutions are private, faith-based colleges and universities, creating a disadvantage for researchers and learners at these schools. However, institutions with smaller budgets are not the only ones who struggle with the traditional subscription-based publishing model. Between 2019 and 2020, the University of California (UC) system broke off negotiations with Elsevier, one of the world's largest journal publishers (Fox and Brainard 2019; Kell 2021). While OA was part of the disagreement, the breaking point for the UC system was Elsevier's insistence on raising subscription rates. Clearly, not only small schools struggle to pay for journals. Thus, while the cost of production may cause added burden to the information producers, OA allows for much greater distribution and consumption, benefiting less affluent institutions most of all.

Finally, as a Christian librarian, I want to serve my patrons as best I possibly can while being a good steward of the resources given to me. Over time, librarians have found ways to get the right resource into the hands of each patron. OA allows libraries to provide access to many resources more quickly and cost-effectively than was previously possible. Not only will (and does) OA save libraries significant funding in subscription fees, but OA can also reduce the number of inter-library loan requests that need to be fulfilled and the staffing required to process them. As the percentage of publications that are OA increases (cf. Schares 2023), even small libraries will increasingly have access to previously cost-prohibitive scholarship due to the direct or indirect cost of access.

Should (Christian) librarians support and advocate for OA publication? The advantages of OA far outweigh any pitfalls related to them. As a Christian librarian, I believe we should be good stewards of our time and the funds given to us. As with every new development in the world of information, there are risks that both producers and users of information will need to learn to avoid, but OA gives us the ability to provide more resources to more people in a timelier fashion than ever before. OA is here to stay, and faithful librarians should embrace the ethical imperative to promote and use this ever-expanding resource to serve our patrons well.

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