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Opinion

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Open Access Journals in the Middle East and Iran

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More than 15 years ago, influenced by the high penetration of the Internet and the worldwide web, open access (OA) publishers and journals were born.[1] Having great influence on scientific writing and journalism, OA movement should be considered one of the most important events occurred during the last decades. Many publishers have adopted OA policy either for profit (e.g., BioMed Central) or not for profit (e.g., Public Library of Science).[1] Numerous journals have also adopted the policy either completely or partially.

Various types of OA have so far been proposed[2]; important types of OA include gold OA, where authors pay an article processing charge (APC) to publish their article in an OA journal; green OA, where articles are self-archived in an institutional repository or disciplinary repositories like *ArXiv*; platinum OA (also called diamond OA), where articles are published in an OA journal without paying any APCs; and hybrid OA, which is a combination of subscription and gold OA models. The OA movement was meant to provide users publicly with free search of and access to scholarly publications and use them for any lawful purposes. However, it comes with many drawbacks discussed below.

Thanks to readily available inexpensive desktop publishing software platforms, publishing a full functioning scientific journal is now much easier than ever.[3] Almost 650 journals are currently published in the Middle East (http://applications.emro.who.int/library/imjournals/). Almost two-thirds of these journals are published in Iran (http://journals.research.ac.ir/). Many research institutions publish their own journals. For some incentives, even a single university publishes several journals. For example, currently Shahid Beheshti University of Medical Sciences publishes 62 journals (http://journals.sbmu.ac.ir/site/); Tehran University of Medical Sciences, 57 (http://journals.tums.ac.ir/). This large number of journals published by a scientific institution such as a university in a developing country, is because the *raison d'être* for scientific publishing in developing countries is quite different from that in developed nations.

Publishing a scientific journal by a research institution in Iran, such as a university, is considered a prestige and brings a lot of credit for the institution in its national ranking. The journal also serves as a forum for publishing the articles of the faculty members of the institution, an important item in their career promotion.[3,4] All, but a few, of these journals are OA. In fact, almost all biomedical journals published in the Middle East (and many other developing countries) have been published and distributed internationally gratis long before the era of the Internet, online publishing, and the OA movement. They have merely published

for enjoying the prestige and bringing promotion credit for the institution and the faculty members. After the introduction of OA movement, nonetheless, another incentive has come into play—making money.[3]

Soon after the introduction of OA movement, predatory journals came into existence. These bogus journals are a dire threat to the integrity of the scientific evidence and health of people by publishing every single manuscript they receive just for making money, no matter how the scientific merit of the article is.[5-7] These journals do not adhere to the minimum universally acceptable publishing standards; they do not use a peer-review system; nor do they even copy edit the published articles in most instances.

Many predatory journals have so far been launched and published in the Middle East and Iran. Sometimes, it is hard for an author to distinguish between a legitimate and a predatory journal.[8-10] Being under pressure of publishing their articles by the national rules set for fulfillment of graduation or career promotion, some of the postgraduate students and even university faculty members happily pay the APC and publish their articles in predatory journals.[11] Often, they even do not know that the journal is predatory. Worse, from time to time the accreditation committee evaluating the credits for promotion of the authors does not aware that the journal is predatory too and approves the articles.[5]

With introduction of OA movement, processes should be taken into effect to prevent any conflicts of interest. Some OA journals accept to waive the APC under certain circumstances. However, it should be assured that the authors' ability to pay the APC does not affect peer-review process and the likelihood of acceptance or rejection of their manuscripts. This is why in prestigious OA journals, the decision-making editors are blinded to the submitted manuscript APC status before making any verdicts about the manuscript. Considering the few number of staff (commonly two or three, at most) in journal editorial offices in many developing countries, institution of such an effective blinding process is very hard, if possible at all, and the temptation to receive the APCs would unconsciously incline the editor to accept the submitted manuscript for publication.

Some people mistakenly believe that having a good knowledge about the field of a journal is enough to be eligible as an editor for that journal.[12] For example, for many people a cardiologist is supposed to easily take over the position of the editor of a journal on cardiovascular diseases.[3,13] The truth, however, is that besides having an acceptable level of knowledge of the field of the journal, an editor needs to have other important skills.[14] Lack of these competencies would commonly result in publishing a substandard journal.

Some repositories, like PubMed Central (PMC), used to archive almost all journals if they could provide their full text articles in an acceptable eXtensible Markup Language (XML) format. Many journals in the Middle East, including numerous Iranian journals, could access the necessary technology to create the XML files and soon have been archived.[3] Articles published in the journals archived by PMC have a high visibility in the PubMed search and appear side by side to articles published in prestigious journals indexed in MEDLINE, the most important indexing system in medicine. This would cause an illusion for some people that journals archived by PMC and those indexed in MEDLINE have similar qualities. In fact, in many developing countries, these two systems are considered equal and journals indexed in either PMC or MEDLINE are treated similarly for ranking.

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With increasing number of journals launched in Iran, many private institutions and publishers were established to provide various services, including production of PMC XML files for these journals. Many OA journals published in the region that run by inexperienced editors, relying on the said private institutions and publishers, have enjoyed the opportunity of being "indexed in PubMed" (a common technically incorrect term used by many journals—PubMed is not an indexing system; it is just a portal) and published many low-quality articles and made money. All these ultimately have led to a decline in the standards of publishing even in some legitimate gold OA journals published in the region.

Fortunately, the PMC has adopted the policy of evaluating the scientific quality of all journals that apply for being archived in the system (although not as rigorous as MEDLINE has done) since a couple of years ago. Journals with very low quality could no longer enter PMC. Some low-quality journals archived by PMC were also delisted from the archiving system. In 2017, PMC delisted 14 Iranian journals re-evaluated for not adhering to the acceptable scientific and editorial standards.[15] Recently, some indexing systems, like Scopus, have also pursued the same strategy and delisted some of the low-quality journals published in the Middle East and Iran. Although some of the editors and publishers of the delisted journals have attributed these events to political issues, to be honest, I, for one, believe that in most instances, they, themselves, should bear the brunt of the situations they have for their poor work quality.

I believe under the current circumstances, to better use the limited resources exist in developing countries, the number of scientific journals should be limited[3]; the regulations encouraging the research institutions and universities to establish and publish journals for their credit should be revised; and, the national and regional auditing bodies should consider the standards set by Good Publication Practice more seriously and do not grant permission the low-quality journals to publish. Improving the standards of the journals published in the region would attract international authors. This in turn, increases the quality of the journals. In the meantime, efforts should be made to raise awareness of editors of the core competencies they need to better work in their capacity.[14] This can be done through running short courses by national, regional, and world associations of journal editors like the Eastern Mediterranean Association of Medical Editors, the Asian Pacific Association of Medical Editors, and the World Association of Medical Editors. Directory of Open Access Journals has started to re-evaluate the quality of journals in the directory and delisted those journals with substandard quality. The International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) can pursue the same policy to ascertain those journals stating that they follow the ICMJE recommendations (http://www.icmje.org/journals-following-the-icmje-recommendations/) really do.

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