

Journal subscriptions in the changing landscape: Are they needed?

An institute is judged by the availability of learning resources available for its students and faculty. All the ranking agencies, for example, the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC), in India, evaluate this as part of the teaching-learning infrastructure for grading the institute.^[1] The rationale for this requirement seems logical, because, without the availability of reading-learning resources, students and faculty cannot be expected to remain up-to-date and produce world-class research?

The traditional model for making learning resources available is by subscribing to scientific journals. However, this has always been an expensive proposition since quality medical journal subscriptions are extremely costly. In fact, the rising subscription costs led to what is known as the “serials crisis.”^[2] Continuing journal subscriptions became difficult for libraries the world over because the cost of subscriptions was much higher than the budgets of most libraries. This is known as “serials crisis” because all libraries have a section known as the “Serials Department” that handles subscriptions of periodicals, newspapers, annual reviews, yearbooks, and journals that are published and purchased indefinitely.^[3]

It was in the 1990s that the open-access (OA) model of journal publishing started. The *Journal of Clinical Investigation* probably became the first major biomedical journal to be freely available on the web in 1996.^[4,5] With the wide use of the Internet, OA journals started mushrooming. It is believed that the serials crisis also contributed to the growth of OA.^[6]

Over the last few years, OA journals have increased manifold and comprise the dominant portion of publications in any field. For example, in urology, there are more OA journals as compared to the subscription journals.^[7] What does this imply? For a student or faculty, the most important aspect is the availability of resources. With plenty of OA journals available, do we still need expensive subscriptions?

Some would argue that even today, the top journals in many specialties, including urology, are subscription based, like the *Journal of Urology*, *BJU International*, *European Urology*, to name a few. However, these journals have also transitioned to a hybrid publishing model where they publish some

articles as OA by charging the authors an article processing charge (APC). These charges are often higher in hybrid journal than in OA journals. For example, the *European Urology* charges US\$5000^[8] while *European Urology Open Science* charges US\$1800 as APC.^[9] Hence, hybrid journals earn both from subscriptions and from the authors (as APC), a phenomenon often called “double dipping.”^[10]

Journal subscriptions are usually done by educational institutions. Ask any professor as to what are the purposes of reading a journal. The typical answer would include that (1) it keeps one updated with the latest developments in that field, (2) to teach students how to think critically and prepare/educate them for doing and writing research, (3) articles are needed when one writes a research proposal and submits a thesis, and (4) articles are needed when one has to give a presentation in a scientific meeting. Now, can these needs not be fulfilled by OA journals? On most occasions, the article is not read in its entirety; it is the abstract of the article that is mostly read when one is writing a research proposal, thesis, or preparing a presentation for a conference. Journal clubs can be conducted using articles published in OA journals. While I have not evaluated this observation systematically, I have observed that most presenters in scientific congresses cite OA articles. In addition, data clearly show that OA articles fetch higher citations in published research.^[11]

Why are educational institutes investing heavily on purchasing journal subscriptions? I believe this is because this is an established practice for many decades and it is intuitive to continue this practice. Further, most Indian institutes are presently headed by academicians who, during their early careers, faced paucity in getting literature. These heads of institutions feel that their faculty should not face similar constraints. As a result, they often oversubscribe. Third, most rating and ranking agencies evaluate the adequacy of resources, thus forcing institutes to invest heavily in journal subscriptions. The library budgets of most Indian institutes of national importance are in millions of Rupees.

Recently, the Government of India, through the Department of Higher Education, initiated what is called the “One Nation, One Subscription (ONOS)” policy. This policy intends to ensure the availability of scientific research papers and academic journals for researchers of the entire country from April 2023. It is said that instead of purchasing individual institutional subscriptions, the government will negotiate with journal publishers, on behalf of all

Indian institutions, to have access to journal articles under a single centrally negotiated payment to be made by the government.^[12]

While the policymakers still believe in journal subscriptions, commercial publishers of subscription-based journals have realized that the days of subscription-based revenue for them are limited. Accordingly, they have already started developing ideas as to how to sell even OA journals. This model is based on what is called “transformative agreement.” In this agreement, which is made between the publisher and an academic institute, the institute pays a certain negotiated amount of money to the publisher of OA journals. Such institutes then get either a partial or complete waiver on APC for their articles in those journals.^[13] For example, a transformative agreement for an organization mentions, “Authors based at the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation in Australia may be eligible to publish open access in Taylor and Francis and Routledge Open Select (hybrid) journals at no extra cost.”^[14] All major publishers have developed a large OA portfolio of journals. For example, Hindawi (an OA platform) is owned by Wiley and BioMed Central is owned by Springer.

Journal subscriptions by government medical institutions use public funds. I strongly believe that subscribing journals under the ONOS policy for the entire country would be a costly exercise that will primarily benefit the publishers. There is a need to re-evaluate the current thinking about journal subscriptions. Furthermore, agencies like NAAC should reduce the weightage given to journal subscriptions when evaluating the institutions.

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