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Letter to the Editor: An Indian Perspective on Universal Open Access Publishing: Think of the Fire before Venturing Out of the Frying Pan!

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► See the article “Independent, Publicly Funded Journals Adhering to Platinum Open Access Are the Future of Responsible Scholarly Publishing” in volume 35, number 4, e13.

Dear Editor,

We read with great interest the opinion article discussing the publicly funded platinum open access (OA) model of publishing, and its contemporary relevance.¹ We are clinician scientists from India, an emerging economy, however, still a lower middle income country.² In this letter, we share our viewpoints regarding this, from a regional standpoint.

The recent drive towards OA publishing, contributed in no small part by the emergence of plan S, is motivated by noble intentions. These include the desire to make all scientific knowledge freely accessible to everyone, with the ultimate aim that such knowledge can be best utilized for the betterment of mankind. The perceived reason for the emergence of the OA model was the need to improve access to subscription-based journals, for which libraries paid significant quantities of money. These costs, which had to be borne by the institutions hosting such libraries, were perceived to be a hindrance towards access to science, a significant proportion of which is publicly funded, conducted by scientists, a significant proportion of whose salaries are funded by public money. Thereby, it was considered reasonable to demand that all publicly funded research be published in OA journals.³⁻⁶ A critical analysis of the proposed plan, however, reveals significant concerns.³ First, there remain costs associated with scientific publishing, including, but not limited to, operating manuscript submission systems, editorial offices, copyediting, and printing copies for journals.⁷ Second, not all research that is published is funded research. Many a time, authors might conduct research, particularly observational research, investing their own time, while neither seeking, nor requiring, funding for the same. Third, studies are often

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published years after their completion, when it is likely that their funding might have ceased. This may particularly be true with respect to long-term outcomes of clinical trials.⁸ Fourth, the mandated shift to total OA, for journals publishing publicly-funded research, would inevitably result in development of mechanisms from the publishers of such journals to recover the costs of running the journals from some other source. A common source of such funds would be to ask authors to bear article processing charges (APCs), i.e., gold OA.⁹ Let us revisit the same arguments that we had earlier put forth for justifying the move to universal OA. Here again, the scientists, a majority of whom are publicly funded, conducting research, again a majority of which is publicly funded, have to pay APCs for getting their research published. Most authors who are able to pay APCs, would do so from money available from their research grants, or their institutions, which is, again, public money. Therefore, the public money being utilized for paying for subscriptions would now pay for universal OA.

On the surface, this may not appear to be a significant trade-off. However, the underlying assumption that public money, to either pay for subscriptions to journals, or to bear APCs (gold OA), is plentiful, may not be true in most parts of the world, including India.¹⁰ The reality is that of limited funding for research in countries like India, understandably so, in view of numerous areas of equal, if not greater, priority than research, such as defence, social upliftment, and healthcare.¹⁰ Therefore, enforcing a utopia of universal OA upon the whole world, could conceivably limit the ability of authors from the developing regions of the world to publish their research in reputable, international journals. Mandating a shift to pure OA would not take away the reality that publishing journals remains a costly affair for the publisher, therefore, such fees would, inevitably, be derived from APCs charged to authors. A significant fear amongst scientists from developing regions would be that they simply cannot afford such publication charges. Therefore, the spectrum of scientific inequalities in the publishing world, as alluded to by Gajovic,¹ shall inevitably widen, as scientists from developing nations may only be able to publish their work in national or regional journals. While most good-quality gold OA journals offer waivers on APCs for authors from lesser economically-developed regions not able to afford these charges,⁹ the reality remains that such waivers may not always be feasible, and APCs, even if subsidized, may be beyond the reach of authors from developing countries. As the index article has succinctly discussed,¹ even in a high income country like Croatia, there may be authors and author groups who have to think twice before considering payment of APCs.¹ As this particular article also mentions, many author groups might prefer to spend research funds to buy consumable items for research, rather than reserve such money to support gold OA.¹ Our own analysis of journals from Southern and South-East Asia, listed on the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ) as of 9th January, 2020, reveals that a majority of OA journals from this region do not charge APCs (**Fig. 1**). This possibly reflects the reality that most authors from these parts may not be able to afford APCs. Indeed, many society journals from India operate on the model of platinum OA, funded by the respective society while not charging the authors.¹¹

There is no easy answer to this conundrum. The reality remains that publishing is costly, and these costs have to be borne from somewhere.⁷ In this respect, platinum OA probably remains the most feasible middle path, wherein public funds (as cited in the example of Croatia¹), or national societies are able to bear the publication costs for OA. Further, we suggest that future iterations of plans for universal OA, while reasonably mandating publication of publicly-funded research as OA, should not mandate such journals publishing publicly-funded research to be purely OA journals. Otherwise, authors from vast stretches of the world may find their options to publish their work severely limited, and there remains a possibility that significant research from these regions may not get published. In view of the costs associated with publishing

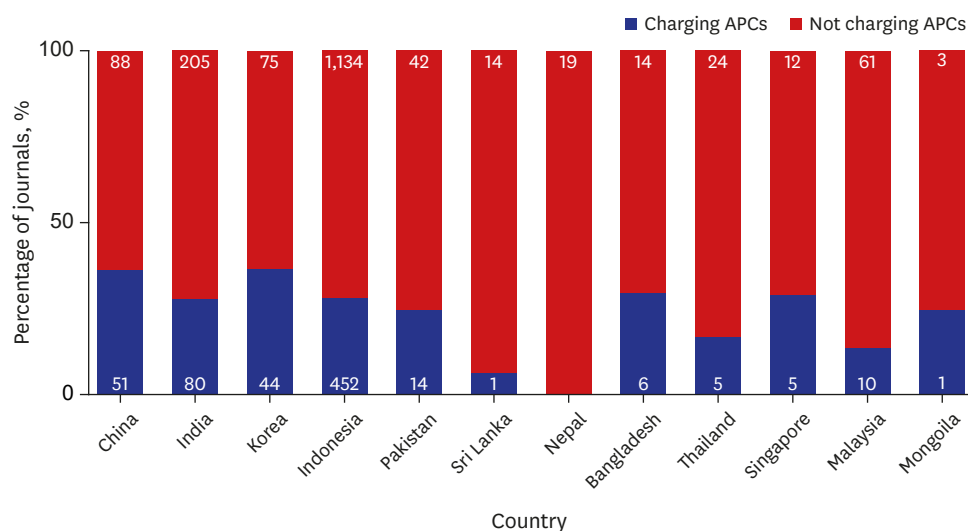


Fig. 1. Percentages of journals from South and South-East Asia, listed on the DOAJ, levying APCs. Numbers in the bar chart represent the absolute numbers of journals. No information regarding APCs was available for one journal each published from Pakistan, Thailand, and Indonesia. No journals listed on DOAJ could be identified that were published from Bhutan, Myanmar, Vietnam, Afghanistan, Cambodia, Laos, Timor-Leste, or Brunei. DOAJ = directory of open access journals, APCs = article processing charges.

research as OA, as well as with further editorial processes such as post-acceptance typesetting and editing, it may ultimately be more beneficial to authors from low- and middle-income countries if greater flexibility and diversity of the available publication models is maintained.

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