



Accelerated Peer Review and Paper Processing Models in Academic Publishing

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Abstract

Some journals and publishers offer a free or paid rapid peer review service. In the latter case, such a service is offered at a premium, i.e., for an additional fee, and authors receive, in return, a privileged service, namely faster peer review. In the cut-throat world of survival in academia, the difference of a few weeks or months in terms of speed of peer review and publication may bring untold benefits to authors that manage to benefit from accelerated peer review. We examine the deontological aspects behind this two-tier peer review system, including some positive, but mainly negative, aspects. Some paid accelerated peer review services thrive. We examine the paid accelerated peer review services by Taylor & Francis, Future Medicine Ltd., Elsevier, and two stand-alone journals that are OASPA members. This suggests that there is a demand, and thus market, for faster peer review. However, this privilege risks creating a two-tiered system that may divide academics between those who can pay versus those who cannot. We recommend that those papers that have benefited from accelerated peer review clearly indicate this in the published papers, as either a disclaimer or within the acknowledgements, for maximum transparency of the peer review and publication process.

Keywords Academic publishing · Open access (OA) · Peer-to-peer · Peer review · Quality

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Introduction

The speed of publication of some papers in traditional peer-reviewed journals, including initial processing, may be unacceptably slow, and this may result in months-long desk rejections [1]. It might also lead to peer review processes that can last many months, sometimes even exceeding a year, or more [2]. There are many reasons why peer review may be slow [3]. Independent of the reason, these long periods can negatively impact an academic's career and demotivate them, especially if the experience is repetitive across different journals or publishers [4]. Journal editors thus need to handle submitted papers and screen them quickly and diligently. In our opinion, they also need to issue desk rejections within a reasonable amount of time (1–2 weeks), while the peer review process should not exceed more than one to two months for each revision step [2]. Although Nguyen et al. [5] suggested an optimal peer review period of six weeks, they did not seem to factor in several rounds of peer review and subsequent revisions of a paper. On occasion, there are some cases where the peer review period of hyperprolific authors may be below the mean of “regular” authors, and this might potentially be due to “favorable” or biased services if they are also editors of the same journal [6].

Understandably, traditional peer review most frequently involves tapping into a pool of voluntary (i.e., unpaid) peer reviewers [7]. If this choice is not available, some editors may even undertake their own peer review. Editors might also work voluntarily, even for a for-profit publisher, which will seek ways to innovate peer review and its publishing brand in order to attract authors and clients [8]. In such a situation, the scholarly publishing enterprise that is based on free labor might not be equitable or fair, and can result in formidable profits for some for-profit publishers [9]. Curiously, a recent assessment of costs during the publishing enterprise failed to factor in costs for payment of peer reviewers and editors, and made the assumption that such labor is free, i.e., “voluntary” [10].

What then is the current trend among journals regarding publishing speed? The latest (2018) version of the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE), Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ), Open Access Scholarly Publishers Association (OASPA), and World Association of Medical Editors (WAME) Principles of Transparency and Best Practice in Scholarly Publishing¹ only indicates, in principle #3 related to peer review, that a journal “should not guarantee manuscript acceptance or very short peer review times”. However, this principle does not address the converse, namely that a journal should not take an excessive amount of time, the corollary being that excessively long desk rejection periods or rounds of peer review should be considered poor, “undesirable”, or “worst” practices in scholarly publishing. In order to speed up the release of scholarly ideas to the public or community

¹ COPE: <https://publicationethics.org/resources/guidelines-new/principles-transparency-and-best-practice-scholarly-publishing>; DOAJ: <https://blog.doaj.org/2018/01/15/principles-of-transparency-and-best-practice-in-scholarly-publishing-version-3/>; OASPA: <https://wame.org/principles-of-transparency-and-best-practice-in-scholarly-publishing>; WAME: <https://wame.org/principles-of-transparency-and-best-practice-in-scholarly-publishing>.

faster, preprints have – to some extent – stepped in to fill in the gaps caused by these speed-related weaknesses of traditional peer review [11]. Preprints are the fastest outlet currently available because they allow manuscripts, and thus the information within them, to be released rapidly before they are peer reviewed. However, there are cautionary notes regarding this publish-instantly model [12]. Peer-reviewed journals and/or their publishers, have sought innovative ways to try and speed up peer review. One of those models is accelerated peer review (APR). In the next section, we discuss select extant APR models (free and paid).

Accelerated Peer Review Models

To gain an appreciation of the possible models that offer APR, we turned to the list of large and very large publishers that are OASPA members.² In the next section, we highlight some of the most widely used APR models that we could identify. These APR models are in active use, i.e., extant. We recognize that this might not necessarily be an exhaustive list of APR services, but we feel that they allow us to offer a robust discussion of this topic by scrutinizing each APR model in some detail.

Taylor & Francis “Accelerated Publication”

The UK-based publisher, Taylor & Francis, a division of Informa, is a COPE and OASPA member that also has open access (OA) journals indexed in the DOAJ, so academics assume that they abide by the above-stated “Principles of Transparency and Best Practice in Scholarly Publishing”. Select Taylor & Francis journals offer an “Accelerated Publication”³ option to authors during submission. Regular papers pass through a “Standard Track”, which the publisher claims takes 14 weeks from submission to online publication, whereas papers that pass through “Rapid Track” and “Fast Track” take 7–9 and 3–5 weeks, respectively, to complete this process. There is no fee for “Standard Track”, but the fees for “Rapid Track” and “Fast Track” are US\$3900 / €3400 / £3000 and US\$7000 / €6200 / £5500, respectively for one paper.

In other words, for authors not willing to wait 14 weeks (roughly 3.5 months) for their paper to be processed – including peer review – in the regular publication pipeline, but having the ability to pay what some might consider as being very expensive premium services, reduces their waiting time by crudely one half to two-thirds. To its credit, Taylor & Francis claims that “In recognition of the time constraints required of them, reviewers of Papers taking the 3-5 weeks option are paid an honorarium of \$150 / €115 / £90 on completion of their review.” This suggests that some, but not all, peer reviewers are paid.⁴ Also to its credit, Taylor & Francis claims that there is quality control, in a section entitled “Ensuring quality”. As readers, regular

² <https://oaspa.org/membership/members/>.

³ <https://taylorandfrancis.com/partnership/commercial/accelerated-publication/>.

⁴ This information was not always public: <https://twitter.com/tandfonline/status/953987607993692161>; <https://ease.org.uk/2018/01/tandfreviewerpayments/>.

academics, or members of the public, the veracity of this claim cannot be independently verified.

We examine two statements made in that section. In the first, “Acceptance of articles in all journals offering Accelerated Publication is driven entirely by editorial considerations and independent peer review, ensuring the highest standards are maintained no matter the route to publication.” We believe that the term “independent” is unclear, and that peer review may potentially be biased, and the peer reviewer pool might thus be skewed, as we explain next. For example, when a reviewer is invited to review a paper, does the journal indicate to the reviewer, at the time of invitation, that they have three options, namely to be reviewers of the “Standard Track”, “Rapid Track” and “Fast Track”, and that only if they select the latter will they be remunerated? The second statement is a bit more worrisome: “Authors are only charged if their paper is accepted; there is no charge for using the service if the paper is rejected. We reserve the right to a partial charge if the author withdraws their paper.” There is no indication of the value of that “partial charge”, either as an absolute value or as a relative percentage, so this may be a violation of principle #8 of the COPE, DOAJ, OASPA, and WAME “best” publication principles, which states “Any fees or charges that are required for manuscript processing and/or publishing materials in the journal shall be clearly stated.” We believe that Taylor & Francis thus needs to clearly indicate the value and offer more details about the peer reviewer vetting and recruitment processes associated with these clauses.

We see some additional problematic issues with this situation. Firstly, not all Taylor & Francis journals have this premium option, potentially disadvantaging some journals, and their actual and prospective authors, relative to those that do provide “Accelerated Publication”. Secondly, not all authors have the financial ability to pay such a high cost, even for journals that do offer this service, so this may place “poor” (i.e., those who do not have the means to pay) authors at a disadvantage, relative to “rich” (i.e., those who do have the means to pay) authors. This two-tier system may potentially induce sociological or economic laddering among academics, literally dividing them into able-to-pay versus unable-to-pay (i.e., rich versus poor) classes. This in turn may induce a Matthew effect, in which differences between individuals or classes of individuals, become additive and widen [13]. In our opinion, there is also unfair treatment of peer reviewers at two levels: firstly, whereas peer reviewers that serve the most expensive premium service (“Fast Track”) are paid, peer reviewers in the “Standard Track” and lower-priced premium service (“Rapid Track”) are not, suggesting that remuneration for professional services (in this case, peer review) is neither equitable, nor fair, secondly, peer reviewers of the “Fast Track” premium service are paid pennies on the dollar, i.e., <4% of the income for this service. We believe that Taylor & Francis would do well to offer clear explanations, and examples, to dispel these concerns.

We draw attention to readers that the Taylor & Francis “Accelerated Publication” premium service was not always known as such. The precise dates when the model changed content and pricing, as well as if there might have been other intermediary models or steps, are unclear because none of the Taylor & Francis web pages carry any digital object identifiers (DOIs), despite being factual documents, so the modifications to those pages are not formally recorded.

To the authors' knowledge, at least one previous model existed before the current "Accelerated Publication", namely "Prioritized Service",⁵ in which the same three tracks ("Standard Track", "Rapid Track" and "Fast Track") were offered, possibly prior to rebranding as "Accelerated Publication". However, it was divided into three processes ("Submission to acceptance", "Acceptance to online publication" and "Submission to online publication"). Not only were processing times different to the current "Accelerated Publication", so too was pricing, as is evidenced in Fig. 1. The Internet Archive (Wayback Machine) suggests that the "Prioritized Service" website may have been erased sometime between April and October of 2017, leading to a 404 error until 2019, and then rerouted to the current "Accelerated Publication" from 2020 onwards. Whereas 53 journals, at least in 2016 (49 in 2017), had the "Prioritized Service", 48 journals currently have the "Accelerated Publication" premium service.

It is unclear why only 48 Taylor & Francis journals have this premium service ("Accelerated Publication"), if the editors of these journals selected this service voluntarily, or what the eligibility criteria for a journal to have this premium service are. It is also unclear if academic institutes that have deals related to APCs with Taylor & Francis, for Plan S compliance, also have similar contracts for this "Accelerated Publication" premium service, or if payment for APCs and "Accelerated Publication" are independent, with the latter being an additional add-on service. In other words, it is unclear who (authors, their institutes (and/or tax-payers), or funding agencies) pays for this premium service. Similar to the principle of financial transparency advocated for indicating who pays an APC in an academic paper [14], we are of the belief that the funder of this premium service should be indicated in a paper that has benefitted from it. Not only, published papers that passed peer review using this service should indicate this important fact, both in the HTML and PDF versions. Whereas in the previous "Prioritized Service", payment seems (as assessed by the language) to have been in the form of a pre-payment, in "Accelerated Publication", it seems that payment may take place after acceptance, although the precise timing of payment is not clear on any Taylor & Francis website.

Finally, whereas the previous "Prioritized Service" carried the possibility to contact a publisher representative (Charles Whalley, Managing Editor, Medicine & Health Journals), including his email, the current "Accelerated Publication" does not, suggesting that there has been an increase in communication opacity related to this service.

We are concerned that Taylor & Francis has not archived the "Prioritized Service" website, nor has it assigned a DOI to those documents, suggesting that it may be in violation of another COPE, DOAJ, OASPA, and WAME "best" publication principle, namely principle #13 related to archival of electronic content, although, admittedly, the currently stated principle is also deficient in that it is limited exclusively to

⁵ The original URL for "Prioritized Service" (<http://taylorandfrancis.com/partnership/commercial/prioritized-publication-options/>) is now defunct and is automatically rerouted to the current URL for "Accelerated Publication". However, some screenshots have been archived: https://web.archive.org/web/*/http://taylorandfrancis.com/partnership/commercial/prioritized-publication-options/ (2016–2021).

published content (i.e., papers) and not to general website content. For this reason, to address these deficiencies, a dual-DOI-based form of recording the “history” of any document, has been suggested [15].

Future Medicine Ltd. (Future Science Group) “Accelerated Review / Publication”

The UK-based publisher, Future Medicine Ltd. (part of the Future Science Group), has a similar service that Taylor & Francis offers, and uses a similar branding label: “Accelerated Review” or “Accelerated Publication”, depending on whether an author is reading the online submission system of a participating journal (Fig. 2A) or the online website that explains the service in greater detail (Fig. 2B) as part of the pricing guide.⁶ On that page, it is indicated that nine subscription journals offer this service at a cost of US\$3500 (US\$2800 for a separate set of nine subscription journals) and in both cases the value becomes US\$1170 and US\$980 when content is not externally peer reviewed (“e.g., editorials, commentaries and interviews”). The 15 OA journals listed also offer this service at a cost of US\$980. The advert for this service indicates that “You can achieve publication in as little as 6 weeks through our Accelerated Publication service (subject to receiving a signed Accelerated Publication agreement form on the day of submission). All articles are subject to our standard peer-review process and will be accepted or rejected based on their own merit.”

From the pricing guide page, authors interested in this service are directed to another website, where pricing is once again shown,⁷ albeit without any details about the discount prices for internally reviewed documents. The number of journals listed as being eligible for each service is different to those listed on the pricing page (9, 6 and 11 versus 9, 9, and 15 for subscription journals groups 1 and 2, and OA journals, respectively). This page indicates that a discount is available for authors who also select the OA option, but the size (%) or US\$ amount of the discount is not indicated clearly. As for the Taylor & Francis service, we argue that this might be a violation of principle #8 of the COPE, DOAJ, OASPA, and WAME “best” publication principles. While Future Medicine Ltd. or the Future Science Group are not indicated as a COPE member, one of its journals is, *Future Science OA*.⁸ Future Medicine Ltd. or the Future Science Group are also not indicated as an OASPA member,⁹ but some of its journals are indexed in the DOAJ, such as *Future Drug Discovery*.¹⁰ A Wikipedia page indicates that a few years back, Future Medicine Ltd. sold several journals to OMICS, which then “moved them to” the Pulsus Group.¹¹

⁶ <https://taylorandfrancis.com/partnership/commercial/accelerated-publication/>.

⁷ <https://www.futuremedicine.com/authorguide/submittrackarticle> (“Submitting & tracking your article”).

⁸ <https://publicationethics.org/members/future-science-oa> (the publisher is listed as Future Science Ltd).

⁹ <https://oaspa.org/membership/members/>.

¹⁰ <https://doaj.org/toc/2631-3316>.

¹¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Future_Medicine.

Prioritized Service		Standard Service
Fast Track	Rapid Track	Standard Track
Submission to acceptance :	Submission to acceptance :	Submission to acceptance :
2-3 weeks (1-2 weeks peer review, 1 week author revision)	5-6 weeks (3-4 weeks peer review, 2 week author revision)	Up to 10 weeks (8 weeks peer review, 2 weeks author revision)
Acceptance to online publication :	Acceptance to online publication :	Acceptance to online publication :
1-2 weeks (Proofs in 5 working days (on or before))	2-3 weeks (Proofs in 10 working days (on or before))	Up to 4 weeks (Proofs in 15 working days (not before))
Submission to online publication :	Submission to online publication :	Submission to online publication :
3-5 weeks	7-9 weeks	Up to 14 weeks
\$850/€625/£550 per printed page	\$400/€300/£260 per printed page	No Fee

Fig. 1 The precursor to Taylor & Francis’ current “Accelerated Publication” premium service was previously referred to as “Prioritized Service”, with different conditions and pricing. Screenshot date: February 5, 2022. Screenshot URL (July 14, 2016; under fair-use policy): <https://web.archive.org/web/20160714013305/http://taylorandfrancis.com/partnership/commercial/prioritized-publication-options/>

On the “Submitting & tracking your article” website, authors wishing to order this service are requested to download and complete a form and submit it with their submitted paper. Unlike the website, where it is stated that “can achieve publication in as little as 6 weeks”, the form indicates that “Accelerated Publication guarantees online publication within 6 weeks of first draft submission (subject to acceptance following peer review and article revisions).” This difference in wording is troubling because naïve authors might be confused into believing

A **Future Science Group Pricing Guide**

Journal	Open access	Accelerated publication	Color printing in journal print issue	100 black & white author prints	100 color author prints	Electronic access tokens	Enhance with a video	Feature on partner digital hub
<i>Subscription journals</i>								
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Biomarkers in Medicine • Epigenomics • Future Microbiology • Future Oncology • Immunotherapy • Journal of Comparative Effectiveness Research • Nanomedicine • Pharmacogenomics • Regenerative Medicine 	\$3,500/\$1,170*#	\$3,500/\$1,170*#	\$220 for the first figure and \$135 for each subsequent figure	\$510	\$660	\$150 per bundle of 50	See below	\$700

B

* Author Requested Speed of Review

* *Future Virology* offers an accelerated publication service, providing online publication within 6 weeks of agreement, subject to satisfactory peer review and revisions.

If you would be interested in this option, please use the following link to view our pricing for this service: [Future Science Group Pricing Guide](#).

If you would like to proceed with this option, then please download and fill out the Accelerated Publication Form from the [Future Science Group Author Guidelines](#) and upload it with your submission. Confirmation of the fee will be provided before we proceed.

Accelerated Review*

Standard Review

*To download the Accelerated Review Request Form please visit this page: [Future Science Group Author Guidelines](#). Please sign and upload the form with your submission.

Fig. 2 Future Science Group’s “Accelerated Publication” (A) or “Accelerated Review” (B), which refer to the same service, but using different terms. In (B), the online submission system for *Future Virology* was accessed (“Details & Comments” section). Screenshot date: February 8, 2022. Screenshot URLs (under fair-use policy): (A) <https://www.futuremedicine.com/pricing-guide>; (B) <https://mc04.manuscriptcentral.com/fm-fvl>

that acceptance is “guaranteed”, despite the stated clause. The form also does not indicate the exact value of discounts, but it does indicate that if the paper is not accepted for publication, authors will not be charged; however, if authors withdraw their paper at any time during peer review, then they are liable to pay 50% of the cost.

Additional ambiguities were found. An infographic on a “The peer review process” page¹² indicates that “accelerated review” is completed within 7 days (in contrast to an average of 29 days for the regular route), a value that does not appear on other websites or even in the application form. Whereas the page related to peer review suggests that the process can be “accelerated”, a production-related page¹³ makes no mention of any “accelerated” option. This suggests that “accelerated” is

¹² <https://www.futuremedicine.com/authorguide/peerreviewprocess>.

¹³ <https://www.futuremedicine.com/authorguide/productionprocess>.

limited to the peer review process only, but not to production-related processes following acceptance.

We could not find information on any page, or in the application form, indicating whether a portion of the price is paid to the peer reviewers (i.e., “royalty”), if these peer reviewers are part of a special pool of dedicated peers, or if they form part of the general peer reviewer pool.

The pricing guide page states that “If you have a query regarding our Accelerated Publication option, please contact Joanne Walker, Head of Publishing Solutions.” Given the multiple concerns expressed above, Joanne Walker was contacted on July 25, 2021 with a list of queries, and a reminder on February 8, 2022. No response, or clarification, has yet been received.

As for Taylor & Francis, we advise Future Medicine Ltd. and/or the Future Science Group to address these queries by the academic base, as clarity would benefit potential clients, i.e., authors paying for these services.

Elsevier’s “Fast Track”

The Netherlands-based publisher, Elsevier, does not seem to have a centralized platform or URL for its an APR service, like Taylor & Francis or Future Medicine Ltd. However, when “Elsevier Fast Track” is searched on Google, or “Fast Track articles” at Elsevier itself,¹⁴ there are ample clues that reveal that loosely, there may be two types of “Fast Track” services, free, and paid. For example, the journal *Tectonophysics*¹⁵ lists three types of paper, one of them being “fast track” papers, which it describes in its guide for authors (GFA) as “short, innovative, rapid communications, which will usually complete review within three weeks after submission.” The GFA also states that “editors will decide whether Fast Track submissions are indeed sufficiently innovative for such handling and in case of doubt communicate accordingly with the author.” A final description of this manuscript type in the GFA suggests that there is editorial bias and/or discretion as to which papers are considered for this category type: “Fast track papers will facilitate publication of discoveries in new and dynamic areas.” This focus on “latest” and “newest” concepts being prioritized for publication by editors seems to be supported in other Elsevier journals, for example, *Solid State Communications*, which in fact until 2016 at least used to indicate those papers that had received this prioritized service,¹⁶ as was even advertised by Elsevier via Twitter.¹⁷ The *Solid State Communications* GFA states¹⁸: “The Fast-Track section of *Solid State Communications* is the venue for very rapid publication of short communications on significant developments in condensed matter science

¹⁴ <https://www.elsevier.com/search-results?query=Fast%20Track%20Articles>.

¹⁵ <https://www.elsevier.com/journals/tectonophysics/0040-1951/guide-for-authors>.

¹⁶ <https://www.journals.elsevier.com/solid-state-communications/fast-track-communications/fast-track-communications>.

¹⁷ <https://twitter.com/elsevierphysics/status/1019879985933422592>.

¹⁸ <https://www.elsevier.com/journals/solid-state-communications/0038-1098/guide-for-authors>.

and materials physics. The goal is to offer the broad condensed matter community quick and immediate access to publish recently completed papers in research areas that are rapidly evolving and in which there are developments with great potential impact.” This transparency about which papers passed through “Fast Track” is not the case now, nor is it the case for *Tectonophysics*, suggesting that there has been a loss in the transparent declaration of those papers that were fast-tracked. The time advantage of “Fast Track” for *International Economics*¹⁹ is unclear because in the standard route, “the current turnaround time to a first decision is 39 days”, whereas in “Fast Track”, “a decision will be made within 6 weeks” (i.e., 42 days), which is actually longer than the standard route.

Some Elsevier journals seem to have abandoned this model. For example, *Chronic Diseases and Translational Medicine*, which was published by KeAi Publishing,²⁰ but was transferred to Wiley in December 2021, used to have a “fast-track publication service” that guaranteed “online publication within 10 working days of first draft submission” (Fig. 3). The first of two requirements for papers that qualified for this service suggested editorial nepotism or favoritism²¹: “The first author or the corresponding author is our editorial board member.” Concerns about this type of privileged behavior were expressed by Scanff et al. [6].

The above-mentioned cases are not exhaustive and merely represent a few random examples. The “Fast Track” model seems to have a long history, at least in three elite medical journals: *The Lancet* and *BMJ*, *New England Journal of Medicine* [16]. In fact, a small hint at *The Lancet* website suggests that reviewers of “Fast Track” papers are paid²²: “At *The Lancet*, we offer guidance for new peer reviewers, and a small honorarium for fast-track reviews and statistical reviews.”

While the above cases of “Fast Track” seem to indicate a free service to authors, some Elsevier journals offer a paid “Fast Track” service. As one example, European Urology, which consists of four journals, offers a paid non-refundable (in the case of rejection) “Fast Track Article” service²³: “If the editors agree that the manuscript is worthy of fast-track publication, the authors will receive an invoice for €1000 with payment instructions from Elsevier. If accepted for fast-track submission, an article will be reviewed within 72 h.”

Finally, an Elsevier book on COVID-19²⁴ advertised, on the first editor’s institutional website, fast recruitment and peer review²⁵: “Because of the urgent situation, we have arranged a fast-track review and publish period so your valuable contribution(s) are all welcome.”

¹⁹ <https://www.journals.elsevier.com/international-economics>.

²⁰ <https://www.keaipublishing.com/en/>.

²¹ <https://web.archive.org/web/20170630090147/https://www.keaipublishing.com/en/journals/chronic-diseases-and-translational-medicine/cdtm-news/fasttrack-publication-service/>.

²² <https://www.thelancet.com/peer-review>.

²³ <https://www.europeanurology.com/content/resources-for-authors#12000>.

²⁴ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/book/9780128245361/data-science-for-covid-19>.

²⁵ <https://lairlab.sdu.edu.tr/tr/haber/urgent-call-for-chapters-data-science-for-covid-19-elsevier-29987h.html>.

One would hope that papers and chapters in these Elsevier journals and chapters that were fast-tracked (free and paid) have been properly vetted and peer reviewed.

We welcome Elsevier's feedback on our observations, and clarifications, where needed.

Stand-Alone Cases

Within the OASPA journals, we identified select cases that could be considered as APR models, but which we could not identify as being a model that spanned multiple journals within these publishers' journal fleets.

European Heart Journal, published by Oxford University Press, offers a fee-free "Fast Track Review Process"²⁶ in which, at the editors' discretion, and following the application via email, an author needs to convince the editors that their original would merit this APR route. Approval of this service is communicated to the authors within 48 h, and if approved, peer review is then completed "within 5 consecutive days", and if accepted, published online within 10 days. We feel that there is ample space for subjective selection and preferential treatment. No costs are indicated, so it appears that this choice is based on merit only. There is also no indication if peer reviewers are paid for their additional speed and loyalty.

Acta Acustica, published by EDP Sciences, used to offer, as recently as 2017, a paid (€350) "Fast Track" service.²⁷ That service can no longer be found in the current instructions for authors,²⁸ suggesting that it was scrapped. "Fast Track" articles were limited in size (maximum of 4 pages), their selection was made by editors, the target was submission to online publication within 20 days, only "minor" edits were allowed, and payment had to be received prior to publication online.

Finally, in neither of these two stand-alone journal cases, was there any indication – in the form of an editorial note or instructions for authors – that any paper that has passed through any of these APR models, that such a service has been indicated, or acknowledged. The onus of proof lies with the authors, the editors, and the journal's publishers.

Conclusion, Limitations and Future Directions

We believe that as they currently stand, these models have several aspects that are unfair, unbalanced, and/or opaque, and may also enter the realm of exploitative publishing [17], while serving little to respect the principles of transparency needed to drive reform in academic peer review [18]. As we have recommended several times, when publishers and journals implement APR, they should include a section

²⁶ https://academic.oup.com/eurheartj/pages/General_Instructions#3.2.

²⁷ http://www.acta-acustica-united-with-acustica.com/fileadmin/Dateien/Instructions_for_Authors/AAuA_Instructions_for_Authors.pdf.


²⁸ <https://acta-acustica.edpsciences.org/author-information/instructions-for-authors>.

Fast-track Publication Service

Fast-track Publication Service

For manuscripts of clinical importance and urgency, *Chronic Diseases and Translational Medicine* offers a fast-track publication service to shorten the time from decision to publication. Fast-track publication guarantees online publication within 10 working days of first draft submission.

To be considered as a fast-track manuscript, your work must meet one of the following requirements:

1. The first author or the corresponding author is our editorial board member; 
2. The manuscript is submitted with the comments from reviewers of other SCI journals.

How to submit:

[Online submission](#);

All fast-track articles must be accompanied by an application to the editor.

Fig. 3 A journal previously published by Elsevier / KeAi Publishing, *Chronic Diseases and Translational Medicine*, used to include a clause for inclusion in the “fast track” service that gave special privilege to editors. This would be unfair to regular authors. Screenshot date: February 8, 2022. Screenshot URL (April 17, 2019; under fair-use policy): <https://web.archive.org/web/20190417072925/http://www.keaipublishing.com:80/en/journals/chronic-diseases-and-translational-medicine/cdtm-news/fasttrack-publication-service/>

explaining it to authors in sufficient detail, and clearly indicate, in the acknowledgements, when they publish papers that have been peer-reviewed based on APR. In the eyes of readers, this would fortify the credibility of the article as well as the journal and publisher.

This paper highlights select extant (and some extinct) APR models in which authors can opt for a faster peer review service that is either free, or paid. While we limited our search to only a subset of OASPA members, we recognize that similar services might exist for smaller publishers that are OASPA members, COPE member journals, or other journals published by university presses or societies. Our search was often a very manual and tedious task, so any future work that might try to identify APR models more widely would be a challenging task. We also believe that it would be very important to examine papers published by papers offering (or having offered) APR services to better appreciate if those papers have indicated that such a service was used.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest The first author was banned in 2015 from submitting to any Taylor & Francis journals in response to the author’s criticism of several of the publisher’s editorial and publishing processes, including the APR critiqued in this paper. That ban was not made public by Taylor & Francis. Other than this, the authors declare no conflicts of interest of relevance to this topic.

Ethical approval The opinions expressed are exclusively of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the affiliated institutions, in the case of the second author.

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