

## Open access: good or bad

We read with interest the editorial by Balam<sup>1</sup>, and agree with some of the views put forward by the editor on the open access (OA) policy issue. However, we would like to highlight some of the drawbacks of this policy.

Since the onset of the OA policy, many new OA journals have emerged and a few are now being classified as top-tier journals, primarily because of their visibility and consequently higher citations. However, many good research groups still prefer to publish their findings in the standard, traditional, high-impact printed journals without possibly being aware or concerned that the accessibility of their articles to readers who are unable to pay for these journals is limited. Although this may be true, the interested researcher can always contact the authors for a soft copy of their published work. Since high-impact research is the target and aim of many specialized groups of researchers, who are really active in their respective fields, the availability of OA will not have any marked effect on interested researchers.

On the financial front, OA does not offer an economically sustainable model in the true sense of the word, considering the cost to be paid by the authors in getting their articles published. While the OA policy increases visibility of research articles, it will not encourage a significantly large group of researchers from getting their articles published in good

OA journals due to financial considerations. As a result, OA will be accessible only to a smaller cohort of researchers, who do not have financial concerns to worry about. This may inevitably mean that not all good research will be able to make its way into these journals. On the other hand, researches at the frontiers of science are carried out by specialized groups of scientists, fully active in their research and we believe these groups do not have any financial problems in getting accessibility to the printed journals in their libraries.

The OA policy has become a big enterprise now with the number of OA journals increasing exponentially. On an average, academic staff at a university may receive invitations from 5 to 10 OA journals in a week with attractive offers to get their research findings published in these journals. Some of these offers include discounts in publication fees up to 90%. Some even give an assurance that editorial decisions will be conveyed to the authors within two weeks. Some even offer 100% discount on the publication fee, if the author is able to recommend a colleague to submit his/her article to the same journal.

Some of the OA journals demand the membership of all authors to the journal's society as a pre-requisite to submit their articles for consideration. Once a paper is accepted, which seems to be more likely than otherwise for eco-

nomical considerations, the author has to pay the publication cost and in some cases, purchase a minimum number of reprints.

The number of articles published in a particular issue of some of these journals is more than a hundred. Considering a publication fee of a few hundred US dollars and the total number of articles in an issue, the financial gain to the publisher is very lucrative, which probably may not be different from the cost of printed journals purchased by academic and research institutes.

Bearing in mind the above arguments, we pose the question; will an OA policy for publication be a good way forward or a barometer for representing the quality of scientific papers? This can in turn determine the ranking of a university or the promotional prospects of an academic or researcher. Needless to say economic considerations have put the quality of research in the back seat in times when profits outweigh academic quality. Who should be blamed?

1. Balam, P., *Curr. Sci.*, 2013, **104**, 403–404.

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## Open access journals

Balam wrote in his editorial<sup>1</sup>:

‘I have often heard the cry in India that “government must mandate” that scientists publish their work in open access journals. This is a dangerous call, which may create an atmosphere of government control, which is likely to stifle scholarly work.... A little understanding may dispel many fears.... Stevan Harnad, a pioneer of the OA movement called the approach which uses repositories (often institutional) and voluntary self archiving as “green OA”. Open access “delivered by journals regardless of the business model” is termed as “gold OA”. Green OA can be delivered if there is institu-

tional will and community participation. Gold OA would, of course, be the most desirable...’

Balam has misunderstood:

1. The call is not for a mandate to publish in (gold) OA journals. It is a call to self-archive articles; authors are free to publish in any journal they choose.
2. That is what green OA means (whether voluntary or mandatory), and there is nothing ‘dangerous’ about it.
3. What is desirable is OA, not necessarily gold OA.

4. The way to provide OA is for institutions and funders to mandate green OA.
5. 20 years of evidence have now shown incontrovertibly that ‘voluntary self archiving’ and ‘community participation’ are not enough: what requires institutional (and funder) ‘will’ is to mandate green OA.

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