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Not for Free at All. Open Access Publishing and European Academia

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Not for Free at All

Open Access Publishing and European Academia

Abstract

The political demand that all results of university research be available through Open Access was a strategic decision that stakeholders have been required to embrace. However, Open Access is cost-free only for consumers, not for producers. Authors now need to not only produce excellent content but also secure financial support. Specific interest groups, in the interest of fair access to quality-assured publication, are establishing their own Open Access publication opportunities. This article sketches the emergence of the Open Access concept, its impact on the pressure to publish and career planning for young scholars, and the effort required to operate an Open Access journal (using the *Journal of Religion, Film and Media* as an example), focusing in particular on the workload associated with publishing one year's output and the input/output relationship under current academic conditions.

Keywords

Open Access, JRFM, Publish or Perish, COARA, DIAMAS

Biography

Christian Wessely has been publishing articles on media and theology since 1994. After completing his doctorate in theology with a dissertation on mythological structures in the entertainment industry, published by Lang in 1995, he pursued his postdoctoral qualification. In 2004 he completed his habilitation in fundamental theology with a thesis entitled "Gekommen, um zu dienen" (Come to Serve), published by Pustet in 2005. Together with Daria Pezzoli-Olgiati, he founded the *Journal for Religion, Film and Media* in 2015.

A Brief History of Open Access Publishing

Open Access (OA) publication plays a crucial role in the dissemination of academic research by making scholarly works freely accessible to a global audience. This model of publishing promotes the democratization of know-

ledge, allowing researchers, students, and the general public to access and benefit from the latest scientific findings without financial or legal barriers. OA publication also enhances the visibility and impact of research, enabling greater collaboration, innovation, and exchange of ideas within the academic community. Furthermore, it can facilitate socio-economic development by providing policymakers, practitioners, and entrepreneurs with information valuable for addressing pressing global challenges. As a result, the importance of OA publication extends beyond academia, influencing aspects of society and contributing to the advancement of knowledge for the benefit of all.¹

At least, that's the honourable and well-meaning theory which dates back to the late 1990s. Yet it was only in 2001 that sixteen individuals representing their respective organizations signed a declaration on the importance of the free distribution of knowledge, the so-called "Budapest Open Access Initiative" (BOAI).² Based on the documents created by BOAI, the Berlin Declaration on Open Access in Sciences and Humanities was developed in 2003. Initiated by the Max Planck Society and the European Cultural Heritage Online project, the Berlin declaration defines the goal of OA publishing. As of June 2024 it had been signed by almost 800 international institutions.³

In 2018, Plan S was launched by the national research councils of twelve European countries. The "cOAlition S", which is supported by the European Commission and has national research funds as its most important members, requires scholars to publish their results in an OA mode as a condition for receiving public funding. Plan S also defines a minimum of rights that are to be granted to the author, such as copyright, standardized and transparent publication fees, and certain incentives.⁴

OA publishing can have a remarkable impact on academic career possibilities. Given that in Germany (or Austria), for example, around 80 per cent of the academic staff are on temporary contracts, that job security

1 See the statement of the European Commission concerning the OA policy at <https://t1p.de/omcl1> [accessed 17 July 2024].

2 See Budapest Open Access Initiative 2002. It is remarkable that the European Commission has made Open Access mandatory for all Horizon 2020 projects and beyond; national funding agencies largely follow that example, e.g. the Austrian FWF, see Förderrichtlinien für Einzelprojekte, Version 4, 25, <https://t1p.de/q0coc> [accessed 17 July 2024].

3 Berlin Declaration on Open Access to Knowledge in the Sciences and Humanities 2003.

4 Plan S Principles 2019.

helps create healthy working conditions,⁵ and that the number and quality of published articles is a key factor in gaining one of those rare permanent positions, the increasing number of OA journals offers opportunities for academics to advance their career.

This article discusses the pressures resulting from the imperative to publish Open Access on both young scholars and those institutions and organizations which produce OA journals, reflecting critically on developments in the publication market since the establishment of an OA publication requirement. It uses as an example the *Journal for Religion, Film and Media* to illustrate the costs of the OA model in terms of the financial and human resources required to produce a journal as well as the benefits of publishing OA, for example in terms of visibility.

The Pressure to Publish and Financial Burdens on Authors

OA publishing sounds like a positive and equitable model. To evaluate this model, we need, however, to take account of a number of factors. An important contextual element is that if they are to be offered one of those scarce permanent positions in academia, young scholars are increasingly required to have produced a high number of excellent publications, which in turn require research for which they may have had to secure third-party funding. Such third-party funding has become necessary because in most public universities the regular budget covers only the most urgent requirements such as teaching, staff, and materials.

The cOAlition S, whose members happen to be the main sources of third-party funding, have tied grants to OA publication of the results of the research they fund, bundling together the requirements to publish in high-quality journals and secure external grants. While grants generally cover at least some of the publication costs, they are difficult to obtain, even for good and, indeed, excellent researchers.

As Stephan Pühringer points out, the universities and young scholars have to pay a price for this highly competitive set-up in the scholarly community, not least in financial terms since they are now often responsible for covering publication fees. A young scholar in need of publications to secure a permanent position will find themselves either bound to publish in jour-

⁵ Reitz 2024, 7.

nals with which their host institution has some sort of relationship (membership etc.) or required to raise money to pay publication fees.⁶ According to Pühringer, the prevalent narrative of a fair competition within the scientific community based solely on scholarly excellence is a myth.⁷ The costs of this competition are not only economic but also social, psychological, and epistemological, and, last but not least, it is detrimental to innovation.⁸ This accords with a selection process tailored to the needs of the contemporary university system, with its focus on a small group of resilient experts who support the politically desired, and hence politically supported, university system. Susanne Pernicka and colleagues see a close connection between the criteria of excellence used in the competition for academic positions and the scarcity of permanent positions: “‘Few permanent positions’ sits well with the broad approval of the idea of ‘selecting the best’ and upholding ‘meritocratic principles.’”⁹

Scholars who do not publish in high volume in highly rated journals may face disadvantages or even the termination of their contract. Together with the increased pressure to publish, expectations regarding where scholars publish have dramatically changed. Today, the standard is to publish articles in renowned journals, and not, as previously, to publish monographs. A publication format is highly rated if it is peer-reviewed (for quality), in English (for dissemination), and indexed (e. g. in SCOPUS, Web of Science, ATLA, ERIH). And in addition, given the requirements of funding agencies, the publication also has to be Open Access.

At this point, it is necessary to distinguish between different standards in the OA culture. The model embraced by for-profit publishers is the gold standard: articles are freely available to readers but the authors are usually charged an article processing fee if the submitted article is accepted. The size of these fees varies: they typically range from around €1,000 (PLOS One

6 Cf. Pühringer 2024.

7 The Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA), <https://sfedora.org> [accessed 1 December 2024], and the Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment (COARA), <https://coara.eu> [accessed 1 December 2024], serve as examples of a different and I think better approach. Nevertheless, the decision about a candidate for a permanent position still largely depends on the candidate’s publications and network.

8 Pühringer notes the significant increase in precarious employment conditions, the high rate of dropping-out at the first opportunity among the best, opaque career prospects, and social selection. Cf. Pühringer 2024.

9 Pernicka/Reichel/Hefler 2017, 292 (translation: Wessely).

registered report article)¹⁰ to €5,000 and more (Wiley Advanced Science).¹¹ Although a number of gold standard OA journals offer reduced fees for scholars from, for example, Africa or Southeast Asia, these discounts are often insufficient given the funding situation of the scholars' institutions.¹²

A journal meeting the higher diamond (or platinum) standard focuses solely on scholarly quality, disregarding economic aspects, at least in that it does not charge authors. These journals are financially dependent on institutions like libraries, universities, scholarly societies, or funding associations, which may influence the general direction of the journal. Diamond standard journals are the exception rather than the rule, even though projects like DIAMAS¹³ are doing their best to change that.

The standard easiest to achieve but least recognized is the green standard, which requires the author to store their paper in a publicly available permanent repository after its publication in a traditional journal. Such repositories may be institutional (e.g. at a university), topic-centred, or a webspace provided by the author.¹⁴ The journal in which the work was originally published may set an embargo period, so although the repository can be freely accessed, it is usually not current. Access may become a problem in the long term if the repository is not maintained.

Adding complexity to the OA environment, predatory journals capitalize on the publication strategies developed in the wake of the public commit-

- 10 <https://plos.org/publish/fees/> [accessed 17 July 2024]. PLOS fees vary widely, depending on topic; they can be as high as €6,000 in PLOS Medicine when the author's institution is not a member of the "journals collective action community". In this way, institutions are encouraged to join this community.
- 11 <https://t1p.de/soiia> [accessed 17 July 2024]. Wiley provides an excel file at this page which can be downloaded freely; it shows that the publisher has a portfolio of about 580 journals with a range of publication fees. Like PLOS, Wiley provides APC discounts and membership deductions.
- 12 Some institutions, mostly educational, provide support for individual researchers who need to publish in these journals. Several journals have contracts with institutions which ensure special conditions or even free publishing for its affiliates.
- 13 The DIAMAS (Developing Institutional Open Access Publishing Models to Advance Scholarly Communication) initiative, founded in 2022, seeks to address this issue by coordinating quality standards and promoting greater efficiency amongst institutional publishers; cf. <https://diamasproject.eu/> [accessed 1 October 2024]. The EU-funded project will run until 2025; it is to be hoped that its results will lead to a sustainable implementation of the diamond standard. However, the great diversity of funding models is not conducive to this.
- 14 A self-provided webspace, however, would not be compliant with Plan S, which requires a trusted repository.

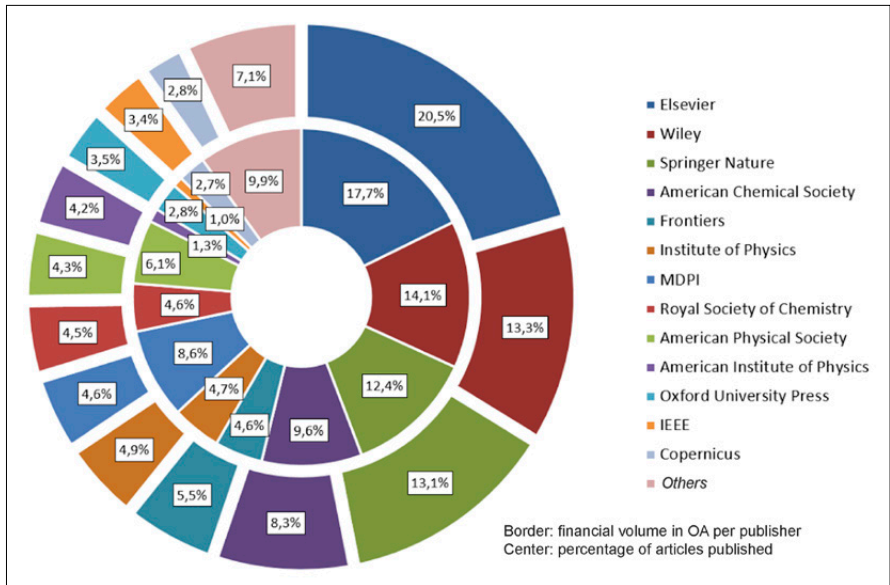


Fig. 1: Publishers' share of publications and total expenditure in percentages for the year 2023, Source: Jülich Forschungszentrum Zentralbibliothek, Open Access Barometer 2023.

ment to OA publication. They offer publication venues at cost to authors, but without providing services such as quality management, peer review, or distribution, unlike reputable gold standard journals. As a result, their model is effectively fraudulent,¹⁵ for scholars who have used a journal with a negative reputation may be ill advised to include a potentially decisive publication on their CV.

Unsurprisingly, larger for-profit academic publishers have recognized the new environment as a business opportunity, a means not just to survive but also to thrive. In his article on author fees for OA publishing, Ángel Borrego states that “[d]espite praise for diamond OA journals, which charge no fees, most OA articles are published by commercial publishers that charge APCs

15 Cf. <https://t1p.de/nz4wc> [accessed 17 July 2024]. To identify a predatory journal, one should consult the database of OA journals (<https://doaj.org/>) and check whether a previously unknown journal offering a publishing opportunity is listed there. Nevertheless, the principle that an author should “publish only in already established journals” is in my opinion inadequate, as it channels research trends and overly restricts the space for meaningful innovations. New journals with potential in all conceivable areas of research continue to emerge, and they certainly deserve a chance.

[article processing charges].”¹⁶ Given that the OA movement aims to reduce overall costs and increase accessibility, the disproportionate number of profit-oriented journals charging author fees which dominate the market can hardly be called a satisfactory development. The OA Barometer of the Central Library of the Research Center Jülich shows that as of 2024, the big players amongst the publishing houses share 89 per cent of scholarly publications (fig. 1), which generates a significant narrowing and distortion of the market.

Open Access and Publishing Houses

Generally, the OA principle stands for unhindered reader access to any published content, be it in the form of a monograph or, more frequently, an article.¹⁷ As we noted, the vast majority of OA journals are published by for-profit companies, with a few prominent major players (fig. 1). All gold and diamond standard OA journals do provide some or all of the services a publishing house provides, amongst which (hopefully) are:

- Office management and correspondence
- Peer review (at least by an editor, in the best case by one or several peers)
- Feedback for the author
- Copyediting and proofreading of the finished manuscript
- Typesetting and the organization of galley proofing
- Printing, if print or print-on-demand versions are made available
- PR and advertising
- Inventory management and distribution
- Management of contacts with libraries, bookstores, download opportunities
- Enforcement of copyright and, if applicable, billing of royalties
- Digital infrastructure to make a manuscript available online, and related maintenance

¹⁶ Borrego 2023, 359.

¹⁷ The industry and other commercial stakeholders are thus able to access any results easily. Unfortunately, this is not true in the reverse direction – publicly funded science does *not* always have access, let alone free access, to the results of “private” research (e.g. industry-funded), even though they may have been achieved with the support of (indirect) public funding, such as tax relief.

These services do incur labour and other costs. Consequently, outside the OA market (and at least in most European countries), while the publication of an article is usually free for the author (with the costs incurred by the publisher covered by subscription fees), for the publication of a book, the author will be charged a printing subvention fee. The amount of the fee depends on the efforts the publisher will put into the publication and, to some extent, on the reputation of the author or the publishing house.¹⁸ In the case of both monographs and articles, a reputable publisher will insist on having the submitted manuscript peer reviewed, even if the author is particularly well-known or the project extremely promising.

Since OA journals do not charge subscription fees or sell individual issues, the production costs have to be covered by other means, for example through author fees, as mentioned above. This problem arises for non-profit and for-profit publishers equally. And so we are left with a central question: Is it possible to produce a diamond standard OA journal that offers authors cost-free publication while also upholding rigorous quality controls and delivering comprehensive publisher services? And a follow-up question: Is the investment worth it?

Case Study: *The Journal for Religion, Film and Media*

To answer these questions, I will explore here the publishing process of one particular journal and consider the costs and benefits. Having collaborated in planning and publishing the diamond standard OA *Journal for Religion, Film and Media* (JRFM)¹⁹ since 2013, I have gathered some knowledge of the intricate procedures required to establish and manage an OA journal.

Founded in 2014, JRFM is a cooperation between the universities of Graz (Austria), Munich (Germany), Hull (United Kingdom), Villanova (USA), Lausanne (Switzerland), and Åbo (Finland). It is published twice a year (May and November) and specializes in articles that focus on visual and audio-visual media, feature films, documentaries, advertising, interactive internet-based

18 If, for example, Scrooge McDuck wanted to publish a book titled *How to Make Money and Keep It*, he would probably have a choice between publishers eager to pay him to publish with them; however, if Ottilia Averagy would like to publish her thesis on *The History of the Toenail Relic of Saint Dionysius of Latrinia*, she is likely to be less fortunate, even though the scholarly quality of her work might be significantly higher than that of Uncle Scrooge's book.

19 <https://www.jrfm.eu> (production and main server) and <https://unipub.uni-graz.at/jrfm> (permanent repository) [accessed 17 July 2024]; ISSN 2617-3697.

media and other media of communication and their interaction with contemporary or historical forms of religion.²⁰

The technical infrastructure and required support are provided by the University of Graz; this includes the main server and the permanent repository. The complete production workflow is handled on the main server through the Open Journal Software by PKP.²¹ The four chief editors and eight members of the editorial board consider their work for the journal part of their scholarly vocation. Usually, at least one member of the editorial board is involved in any given issue as one of the issue editors; sometimes a member of the advisory board or an external scholar with expertise in the issue's main theme may also be involved as a co-editor.

The scholarly expertise of its editors and its advisory board is the main resource required for the production of a high-quality journal. In addition, the journal production requires services and material which have to be outsourced and funded, such as professional design, backup media, hardware used by the managing editor, and the (almost, but not totally negligible) domain fees. It is also desirable that the editorial board meets regularly in person to allow for a free and dynamic exchange of ideas, which is not possible to the same degree through video conferences, although those do have their merits, especially for an international team of collaborators.

The journal collaborates with various institutions to secure funding, which is provided by the hosting institution, the Faculty for Catholic Theology at the University of Graz, as well as the Department for Religious Studies at the Faculty for Protestant Theology at LMU Munich, the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at Villanova University, and the significant support of the Styrian Regional Government, Department of Science and Research. In addition, the cooperation with Schüren publishing house in Marburg, Germany, covers the print-on-demand version as well as most of the advertising and PR for the online version.

A considerable effort goes into producing an issue, in terms of direct and indirect expenses and also work hours. Beyond the costs for material and services mentioned above, the substantial labour hours required for production (fig. 2)²² highlight the extensive investment of time and human resources required to produce an issue of an OA journal.

20 https://jrfm.eu/index.php/ojs_jrfm/about [accessed 17 July 2024].

21 <https://pkp.sfu.ca/software/ojs/> [accessed 17 July 2024].

22 The numbers in fig. 2 represent the average calculated from the responses of individuals involved in the publication of the journal as requested by the author of this article in July 2024. Based on these responses, the overall work hours were estimated.

Subject	Hours per year	Hours per issue	Hours total (production of two issues/year)
Office management (including communication with authors and incorporation of corrections into proofs)	700		700
Issue editors (2)		90	360
Chief editors (4)		40	320
Review editor		50	100
Editorial Board (9)	8 (meeting)		72
Peer reviewing		70	140
Copyediting		40	80
Typesetting		24	48
IT services	20		20
Library services	25		25
Total			1,865

Fig. 2: The estimated total work hours required to produce two issues of JRFM (one year's production). The hours in bold are provided free of charge by scholars.

Importantly, the table only includes the work hours that are directly related to the production process. Not included are “optional” hours, such as for cover design, archive and backup management, or applications to be included in subject-specific indexes and databases, which are crucial for the reputation of an OA journal. The effort required for such applications varies greatly: for instance, while being listed in the DOAJ only requires demonstrating basic facts, an application for inclusion in SCOPUS requires measuring networking and, most importantly, reception (e.g. citations of the journal’s contributions in other scholarly publications). Meeting these requirements, or at least creating the conditions for meeting them, demands a considerable amount of time.

Another factor which adds to the work hours involved in the production of an issue is searching for qualified and cooperative peer reviewers. With the proliferation of publishing platforms such as OA journals and with peer review now widely considered the standard for scholarly quality, the demand for peer reviewers has grown, and they, too, are under increasing pressure. Thus, substantial efforts are often required to recruit the necessary number of reviewers for each issue, especially since writing (double-blind) peer re-

views, while central to academic responsibilities, is unpaid and lacks public recognition (although it might be recognized as a service to the profession).

Consequently, all OA journals grapple with the enduring challenge of securing funding to support their operations in the long term and achieve financial stability – a problem to which a perfect solution remains elusive, given that currently, funding agencies for example might finance the foundation of a journal or particular projects to improve its operations but not its long-term production.

And the Output?

The dissemination of articles from OA journals cannot be controlled after their publication. They are downloaded, included in other repositories, circulated as email attachments among professionals, read online, etc. As for JRFM, in addition to its main server, there are repositories at the authors' respective universities and a number of other free repositories which include material from each issue (select articles or the whole issue). Download numbers thus provide only limited information about the distribution and reception of the published articles and issues.²³

The following numbers, which only include the downloads from the main server at www.jrfm.eu (rounded for the reader's convenience), show a clear tendency. The first issue, published in November 2015, generated approximately 300 downloads in the first month. Currently, the average download of 2,500–3,000 articles in the publication months (May and November) and 1,500–2,000 in each of the months in between is relatively stable. The year 2023 saw a total of 17,897 downloads of abstracts (fig. 3) and 26,043 downloads of individual article files (fig. 4), adjusted for the statistical outlier in November.²⁴ According to internal statistics, the journal's "bestseller" was downloaded more than 5,250 times, while other articles hover around a few hundred or fewer downloads. However, this statement is misleading, as the downloads are calculated over the entire publication period and therefore

23 The main server at <https://www.jrfm.eu> has maintained detailed statistics since the system update in 2017. Thus, even though the diffusion of JRFM articles cannot be reconstructed precisely, it is possible to make an educated guess about tendencies and the journal's general development.

24 The unadjusted numbers are 25,015 abstracts and 27,916 articles downloaded. Adjustment by adding the average of the months without November as the November value.

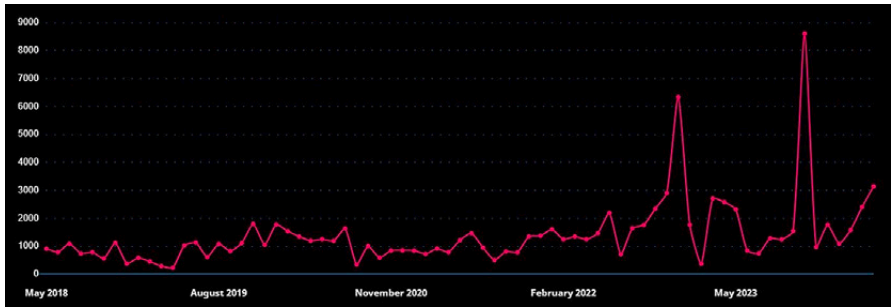


Fig. 3: JRFM download statistics (abstracts).²⁵

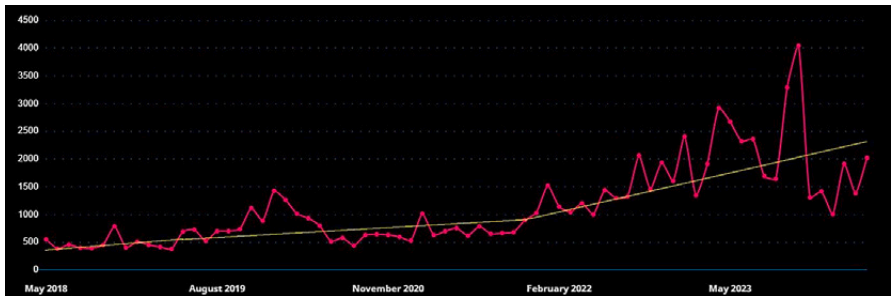


Fig. 4: JRFM download statistics (article files).

it is difficult to compare data from the latest issue with those from, for example, 2017.

The increase in download numbers undoubtedly reflects the growing tendency to use OA publication, a trend also indicative of reading behaviour. Additionally, it indicates the expanding dissemination of JRFM. The noticeable increases in download numbers occurred in close temporal proximity to the journal's inclusion in prominent indexes; a correlation is therefore likely.

The fact that the journal is Open Access has not only contributed to its increased dissemination but is also connected to its visibility beyond the Anglo-European sphere, as the geographical diversity of readers and authors has significantly increased over time. Depending on the issue topic, up to 40 per cent of the downloads are initiated outside the Anglo-European area. As for authors, in 2017 JRFM published ten articles in the thematic section, one of which was authored by a non-Anglo-European; in 2023, five of fifteen

²⁵ The articles' statistics were only implemented with the update in May 2018, so these numbers correspond to the period between May 2018 and May 2024.

articles in the thematic section were written by authors with a non-Anglo-European cultural background.

Thus, while the publication of an independent OA journal such as JRFM requires considerable investment in terms of finances and human resources without long-term financial stability, the fact that it is freely accessible both to readers and to authors results in a broad international dissemination, significant reception (as indicated by download numbers), and diversity both in the scholars who publish in the journal and in its readership.

Conclusion

The realm of Open Access publishing is multi-faceted, with both challenges and benefits for the academic community. While Open Access does lead to a substantial increase in dissemination and visibility for authors and their scholarship, sustaining such platforms often relies on assistance from institutions like universities and their libraries, which provide server support and technical resources, and on funding by the same institutions, public or private research funds, or other institutions interested in supporting the local academic community and its research.

The main advantage of founding an independent OA journal is certainly sole control over all aspects of the journal, from the determination of editorial direction to the identification of strategic objectives and maintaining financial responsibility. However, this final aspect is also a disadvantage, because significant financial resources must be raised for production processes that have to be outsourced. Hence, it is important to create awareness of the importance of the publication at the institutional level and to convince relevant stakeholders of its unique selling points. Only as long as the institution fully supports the project and as long as basic funding is secured can such a project be operated professionally. Also, the risk of relying on the cooperation of specific individuals within the academic community should not be underestimated. Processes that work well with a particular constellation of collaborators may have to be reorganized when other individuals become involved. Thus, advantages and disadvantages must be carefully weighed up when considering OA publication as a model in general, and a specific OA journal in particular.

In some sense, the example of JRFM reflects the broader current developments of OA. The general tendency towards OA publishing is a blessing

especially for a research field that is international and intercultural, such as religious studies and theology. Providing a publication opportunity without financial barriers for scholars from all regions of the world is an essential component of an open academic culture. However, while Open Access is a noble goal and has the potential to democratize the spread of information and foster scientific advancement, it also presents numerous logistical and financial challenges that need constant attention. Initiatives such as DIAMAS play a crucial role in guiding this development in the right direction. However, the long-term success depends on the political will to permanently implement these structures. Therefore, it is essential to enhance networking and lobbying on a supranational level among the networks of diamond standard OA journals if the ideals of Open Access are to be achieved.

Off the Record

If you, dear reader, are asked to provide a peer review for an OA journal, especially one that relies on a business model that does not seek profits, we encourage you to think twice before turning down the request. Our experience indicates that it has become more challenging to find suitable peer reviewers than to find good authors, and a good journal is in urgent need of both.

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