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Global Trends in Open Access: Green Open Access and Rights Retention Strategies

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Abstract

Recent developments in the global open access (OA) landscape have focused on the current state and challenges of Green OA and rights retention strategies. First, the progress of “Plan S,” proposed by the European research funding coalition cOAlition S, has been unsatisfactory on a global scale. Second, the two primary pathways to OA—publishing articles in scholarly journals (Gold OA) and making articles publicly available outside publishers’ websites (Green OA)—face specific issues and countermeasures in Green OA’s implementation of immediate OA. Notably, problems concerning university implementation systems and the business models of publishers and scholarly journals are particularly salient. Additionally, the circumvention of embargoes imposed by international publishing groups, resistance from domestic publishers, and countermeasures adopted by research institutes and higher education institutions have collectively created a new impasse. This article summarizes the complexity and persistence of achieving immediate OA through Green OA, which involves the ongoing contestation between publishers and research institutions versus universities.

Full Text

Preamble

World Developments in Open Access: Green Open Access and Rights Retention Strategies

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Abstract: Recent developments in global Open Access (OA) have focused on the current status and challenges of Green Open Access (Green OA) and rights retention strategies. Firstly, the progress of “Plan S”—proposed by cOAlition

S, the European alliance of research funding organizations—has been less than ideal globally. Secondly, the two primary methods for achieving OA—publishing through academic journals (Gold OA) and publicly disclosing papers outside publisher websites (Green OA)—face specific issues and countermeasures in implementing immediate OA through Green OA. Notably, problems with university implementation systems and publisher/academic journal business models are particularly prominent. Furthermore, the invalidation of embargoes set by international publishing groups, backlash from domestic publishers, and countermeasures by research institutions and universities have created a new stalemate. This paper summarizes the complexity and persistence of achieving immediate OA through Green OA, which involves a strategic game between publishers and research institutions/universities.

Keywords: Open Access; Green Open Access; Plan S; Rights Retention Strategies; Academic Publishing Game

1. Open Access Policy Developments

The policy dynamics of immediate Open Access (OA) reflect a global trend emphasizing both the sharing of research resources and cost control. These policies mandate that all research outputs produced with public funding must be promptly published online, ensuring that knowledge seekers worldwide can access and utilize these valuable resources without barriers or fees. The fundamental objective is to promote societal returns on research investment while curbing the continuously rising subscription fees and Article Processing Charges (APCs) that have burdened research institutions and scholars.

In this context, the European research funding alliance cOAlition S prominently launched “Plan S” in September 2018 to accelerate immediate OA through specific measures. After extensive preparation and discussion, the plan officially entered its implementation phase in 2021. However, its initially strong stance posed challenges for rapid global adoption, particularly as many non-European countries failed to respond promptly for various reasons.

Notably, this stalemate showed signs of breaking in August 2022 when the United States introduced a policy initiative similar to Plan S, signaling that immediate OA policies are gradually gaining broader global influence and acceptance. These developments reflect the research community’s growing consensus on open access and foreshadow more robust steps toward the widespread dissemination and utilization of research findings.

2. Methods for Achieving Immediate Open Access

Methods for achieving Open Access (OA) primarily fall into two pathways: publishing papers through academic journals (Gold OA) and publicly disclosing papers outside publisher websites (Green OA). These complementary approaches constitute the mainstream of current OA practice.

Specifically, Gold OA refers to authors submitting manuscripts to journals that inherently support open access. These journals typically publish papers in OA form on their websites after charging Article Processing Charges (APCs), making them freely available to global readers. This approach offers the advantage of rapid formal publication status and leverages the journal's reputation and influence for broader dissemination.

In contrast, Green OA provides a more flexible and cost-effective alternative. It allows authors to deposit the final manuscript or peer-reviewed version into institutional repositories, disciplinary repositories, or other public platforms after journal acceptance and publication, thereby achieving free open access. This method relies less on journal OA policies and more on support and promotion from authors' institutions.

Notably, within the Plan S framework, while the goal of supporting immediate OA is clearly stated and both Gold OA and Green OA are embraced, specific conditions have been set for OA publication in hybrid journals (journals containing both OA and non-OA articles). These conditions typically require hybrid journals to transition to full OA within a specified timeframe or establish clear boundaries and identification between OA and non-OA articles to ensure readers can distinguish and access genuine OA resources.

3. Issues and Countermeasures for Immediate OA via Green OA

Several key issues have emerged in advancing Green OA for immediate OA, primarily concentrated in university implementation systems and the business models of publishers and academic journals.

3.1 Issues and Solutions in University Implementation Systems

At the university level, archiving research outputs such as papers typically falls to librarians who carefully register these works in institutional repositories. However, as immediate OA policies are comprehensively implemented—particularly when all publicly funded research outputs must be registered—this traditional system faces unprecedented pressure. Librarian workloads will increase dramatically, while ensuring timely and accurate registration and efficiently managing and maintaining vast institutional repositories become urgent challenges.

To address these challenges, universities need to optimize their internal management systems, increase training and support for librarians, and introduce more advanced technological tools to improve archiving efficiency. Additionally, establishing interdisciplinary collaboration mechanisms and encouraging scholars to actively participate in archiving their own outputs represents an effective approach to alleviating pressure.

3.2 Issues and Solutions in Publisher and Journal Business Models

The rise of Green OA poses a severe challenge to the business models of publishers and academic journals that rely on subscription revenues and “embargo periods” (time-limited access restrictions) for income. Traditionally, these institutions generate revenue through subscription services and access restrictions, but Green OA promotion enables large-scale free public access to research findings, directly impacting their economic foundation.

In response, governments and research institutions actively advocate for all academic journals to transition to OA models. However, this transformation is not straightforward, particularly for large commercial publishers, which have begun exploring new business models such as requiring authors to pay Article Processing Charges (APCs) to maintain operations. This approach has sparked controversies regarding fee reasonableness, fairness, and potential exacerbation of academic resource inequality.

Therefore, publishers and academic journals must actively explore diversified revenue models while maintaining academic quality. This may include developing value-added services, strengthening cooperation with research institutions, and expanding into international markets. Simultaneously, governments and research institutions should provide necessary support and guidance to promote healthy and sustainable development of the academic publishing industry.

4. Invalidation of Publisher Embargoes and Publisher Pushback

Publishers typically require authors to transfer all property rights in publishing contracts, thereby establishing embargoes. However, Plan S overcomes these embargoes through rights retention strategies.

4.1 Publisher Pushback and Researchers’ Dilemma

Although Plan S’s rights retention strategy opens new pathways for immediate OA, many publishers have not openly opposed it but instead employ more covert tactics. They privately pressure submitting researchers, attempting to obstruct compliance with Plan S requirements. This strategy places researchers in a difficult position, caught between publisher pressure on one side and OA policy mandates from funding agencies on the other.

4.2 University Countermeasures: “Institutional Author Rights Retention Policy”

To counter publisher embargoes and copyright transfer requirements, universities have begun implementing Institutional Author Rights Retention Policies (IARRP). These policies aim to ensure that researchers retain sufficient rights when signing contracts with publishers to publicly disclose research findings in OA form in a timely manner without affecting academic publication. IARRP

implementation provides researchers with strong support and helps break publishers' monopolies over research outputs.

4.3 National Countermeasures: “Secondary Publication Right”

At a more macro level, some countries have employed legislative measures to counter publisher embargoes. They have established secondary publication rights, allowing authors to register their OA papers in public repositories even after transferring copyright to publishers. This measure not only strengthens researchers' rights but also promotes widespread dissemination and utilization of research findings.

4.4 Further Publisher Pushback: Introduction of “Article Development Charge” (ADC)

Facing dual pressure from universities and national-level policies, publishers are seeking new countermeasures. For example, the American Chemical Society (ACS) has proposed requiring authors to pay an “Article Development Charge” (ADC). By paying this fee, authors can publicly deposit their paper's final manuscript in repositories without embargo. While this measure provides authors with more options, it has sparked widespread discussion regarding fee reasonableness, whether it increases author burden, and whether it might hinder OA policy implementation.

5. Conclusion

The process of achieving immediate OA through Green OA reveals a complex and intricate game between publishers and research institutions/universities. Although publishers often appear to compromise and accept rights retention strategies publicly, their behind-the-scenes resistance never ceases. They leverage their dominant position in academic publishing to maintain traditional copyright control and profit models through various means, stubbornly resisting rights retention attempts. This resistance manifests not only in invisible pressure exerted on authors but also in subtle contract terms and passive responses to OA policies. Therefore, achieving genuine immediate OA requires overcoming numerous obstacles, balancing interests among all parties, and promoting profound transformation of the academic publishing system.

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