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Going for True Gold: Why the Norwegian Research Council is Taking a Stand Against Hybrid OA Journals – A guest post by Jan Erik Frantsevåg

3rd February 2015

By [Guest Author](#)



Jan Erik Frantsevåg is the open access advisor at the Arctic University of Norway and is responsible for both the university repository and [publishing operations](#). Jan Erik is active in a range of open access projects including RoMEO for Norge and [ScieCom Info](#). He's a member of the [DOAJ Advisory Board](#), and Chairman of the board of [SPARC Europe](#).

The Norwegian Research Council (NRC) released a new funding scheme for article publication charges (APCs) for author pays, open access (OA) articles, in June this year. In short, the NRC will refund up to 50 % of APC costs incurred by Higher Education (HE) institutions to the institutional publication fund – provided that such a fund exists. No fund, no refund, is the message from the NRC. Or, rather: Get yourself a fund! It is clear that the NRC sees the creation of institutional publication funds as an important step towards an OA future and as a policy to foster the establishing of those funds, this is likely to be highly effective. In the HE sector, funds are widespread, 15 funds have been established so far and all major institutions have one. For sectors outside of higher



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education (For instance, health), publications funds are not as common and so the NRC plans to work out mechanisms for partial APC refunds without insisting on a fund.

The thinking behind a 50 per cent figure – which will be given no matter who originally financed the research – is that the NRC pays for about half of all research in Norway, so therefore, they should shoulder half the cost. The mechanism also addresses concerns about “post-project” publications, the cost of which cannot be charged to grants once their respective projects are concluded.

The NRC’s policy is that all publications arising from research that it funds should be OA, but they have previously shown no preference for Gold or Green. The new scheme could be seen as a change in attitude and a strong preference towards the Gold OA path.

There are limits to what the NRC will fund, though. They have two clear rules:

1. Journals must have a minimal level of quality assurance, for instance through adequate peer review. This requirement is feasible because the Norwegian financing system already has an accreditation framework for journals. This takes care of the quality aspect.
2. The journals must be listed in the DOAJ. This means that delayed OA, and more strikingly hybrid journals will not qualify for funding.

While some international funding agencies have [expressed concern about the cost of hybrid journals](#), few are as direct about discouraging their use by authors. We see internationally that many funders, including [RCUK](#), will fund APCs for any kind of OA, including hybrid. The NRC’s stance is not surprising for Norway, however, the rule against hybrids is consistent with most Norwegian institutional publication funds.

In Norway, only one major fund (University of Bergen) will fund hybrid, and this is said to be an initial, exploratory phase to discover what authors want. Undoubtedly, authors like hybrid. Hybrid options enable authors to publish in traditional, high-impact journals, which are looked on favourably by hiring and tenure committees, where they have a record of being peer reviewers and editors, rather than having to publish in newer, often less prestigious journals. From administering our fund, I know that many authors see hybrid as the ideal solution, satisfying their need to enhance their CV, while at the same time conforming to OA mandates. In other words, many researchers find OA a good cause, but not good enough to interfere with the demands of their personal career progression.

So why doesn’t the NRC (or the Norwegian publication funds in general) think hybrid a good idea?

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There are 3 main reasons:

1. The double-dipping issue. Publishers have told us that with increasing take-up of the hybrid options, subscription prices will decrease. “Decreasing subscription prices” is an animal described in theory, but never observed in the wild, as far as I know. We are in no doubt that, if we support gold OA publication in hybrid journals, we actually will pay double, both APC and subscription for the same articles. The model also puts a greater financial burden on early adopters: since any proportional price reductions would be spread amongst all subscribers, institutions that contribute APCs to the hybrid model will only save a small fraction of those costs recouped in reduced subscription prices
2. The budget issue. [Hybrid APCs are generally higher than Gold OA APCs](#) – I would consider 50 per cent higher on average, a reasonable estimate. This means that within a limited budget (and let’s be honest, all budgets are limited) you get more OA articles by only financing Gold OA.
3. The conservation issue. Funding the hybrid model effectively supports traditional publishing models and preserves existing structures. While our goal is not to punish traditional publishers, we are actively encouraging alternatives. Models like author-pays Gold OA cause publishers to compete for authors, thereby driving down the aggregate cost of publishing to the academic community. Only by letting publishers compete for authors, can we keep publisher’s profit margins at an acceptable level.

What could Hybrid Publishers do to Make Hybrid More Acceptable to the NRC and Norwegian institutions?

I think a major point would be to create mechanisms so that those who pay for hybrid are the ones who benefit financially from it. E.g. by deducting hybrid costs from “big deal” payments, so that institutions only pay once. If OA can be gained at zero or small cost to the institutions, hybrid would become economically feasible. The [“Gold for Gold” model from the Royal Chemical Society](#) is an interesting example in that our subscription payments may be used to “free” a number of articles in the journals in question.

A final objection to the hybrid model is the lack of filters and discoverability. Looking at the small number of hybrid articles we have discovered among articles published by our authors, and also those funded by the University of Bergen fund (The one Norwegian fund that supports hybrid) we find that it is impossible to filter for OA content or search by access status. This lack of discoverability means that hybrid doesn’t work in terms of dissemination of research; and no-one should want to pay for something that doesn’t work.

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Douglas Carnall

The mention of Norway's accreditation framework for journals piqued my interest. Undoubtedly new open access journals (and authors contemplating submissions to them) do face a problem of reputational assessment, and the current systems designed to address this globally are clumsily monolithic. Beall's list seems potentially idiosyncratic, posing the problem of its own accountability, while OASPA suffers from the intrinsic weaknesses of any nascent trade association.

Can you offer more information about these Norwegian accreditation processes, and their outputs?



Jan Erik Frantsvåg

Sorry to be late, Douglas - didn't see your comment until today.

I have made a post on my private blog to explain a bit about the system, hope this helps - but feel free to come back to me for more.

<https://jefrantsvag.wordpress.com/2015/02/05/the-norwegian-accreditation-system-for-scientificscholarly-journals/>

Best, Jan Erik



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[...] and the journal must be listed in the DOAJ, which means hybrid journals are disqualified. More here. Source: [...]

Douglas+Carnall



Thanks, really useful blog post, which you should certainly publicise on the openaccess and openscience lists.



The EC FP7 Post-Grant Open Access Pilot: An Attempt to Implement Fair Gold Open Access | UKCoRR

[...] applying no funding cap to their eligibility criteria, European funders like the German DFG, the Norwegian Research Council, the Austrian FWF and the Dutch NWO will all either rule out or restrict funding for hybrid [...]

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