

## The setback danger of offsetting

The blog of Stockholm University Press is open for guest posts to encourage an open conversation on current ongoing developments about Open Access (OA) in general and Library publishing in particular. The issue about offsetting deals is relevant to the Stockholm University Library, as we are currently piloting several such contracts ourselves within the BIBSAM consortia. You can read about the agreement [here](#), and a first evaluation about the deal [here](#). The views of Jan Erik Frantsvåg in the following text is entirely his own, and is not necessarily reflected in the activities of Stockholm University Library or Stockholm University Press.

[The below are my personal thoughts and opinions and do not necessarily reflect the opinions or positions of my employer – UiT The Arctic University of Norway – or other organizations where I hold office – e.g. SPARC Europe (Board Chair), DOAJ (Advisory Board member), OASPA (Nominations Committee Chair), Cristin/Ceres (OA expert group member)]

I am one of the firm believers in offsetting – i.e. converting subscription payments to become payments for OA Article Processing Charges (APCs) – as a way to create massive transition to OA in a short time, the only way to reach the ambitious goals of OA as the dominant mode of publishing science before the mid-2020s.

Paul Peters of Hindawi pointed to a dangerous side of offsetting [at the Berlin 13-conference](#): That of creating an even more uneven playing field between OA publishers and traditional publishers. How come?

Paul pointed to the fact that an offsetting deal would mean that authors would be able to meet demands (or wishes) for OA in traditional journals without any hassle and without any cost to them. Traditional journals also score highly when it comes to prestige and those sought-after metrics.

Compare this to publishing in OA journals – which to some appear as lower prestige (newcomers on the journals market, as they are) and the need for them to find a source of financing the APC (as authors are not as likely to pay for something with lower prestige). Now, I live in a part of the world (the Higher Education sector in Norway) where this is simple, but even here it entails paperwork and some waiting. In most other places, financing APCs is a problem, and entails work.

A large number of offsetting deals, without compensating measures, will ensure that authors become ensnared even more than today by traditional journals and publishers. We know that this means more costly OA – as the lowest APCs are with the new, all-OA publishers. This “black hole” gravitational effect towards traditional publishers could also mean the end of the all-OA publishers, and – over time – the re-enforcing of an increasingly oligopolistic market, with fewer and fewer sellers and ever decreasing price competition.

To combat this unwanted side effect of a development we are working for, we need to think through compensatory measures. I do not have all the answers, but I could think of some things we could do – others may come up with more ideas (I hope):

- We need to ensure that offsetting deals also cover OA journals from the same publishers, so those journals won't be starved to death,
- We need to establish high-level (country level) consortial agreements between science and the all-OA publishers like PLOS, Hindawi, MDPI, Frontiers, OpenEdition etc. ensuring

publishing costs are covered in such a way that this is just as hassle-free for authors as what is offered through the offsetting deals,

- We need to finance OA costs first, then see what is left for big deals with traditional publishers – not the other way around, as I suspect most do today,
- We still need to work to get rid of the metrics yoke that ties authors to traditional, toll-access publications,
- We should strive to establish more scholar-based publishing – journals, university presses etc. – on a large enough scale to make them sustainable,
- We should support alternative business models like those of Knowledge Unlatched or Open Library of Humanities to help create a diversity of solutions for the diverse needs of science,
- We should unsubscribe to the ingrained belief that products, services and business models created generations ago by traditional publishers under other technological circumstances will offer the best solutions for the science of the future.

Tromsø, April 19<sup>th</sup> 2017

PS: After submitting this manuscript to the SUP blog, I discovered I had written on this topic before – in a 2009 article in ScieCom Info directed specifically at what then was a new kind of licensing deal with Springer. See <http://journals.lub.lu.se/ojs/index.php/sciecominfo/article/view/1810>