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”FREE” OPEN CHOICE – BEWARE OF GREEKS BEARING GIFTS

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Recently, we have heard of a number of licensing deals with Springer, where a part of the deal is that authors from the buying institution can opt for Springer's Open Choice at no extra cost, if they publish in a journal that offers Open Choice. This is – it seems – a three-year experiment. Springer probably wants to evaluate it before they decide whether to continue the offer. Chances should be good that other publishers will offer similar options in forthcoming big deals.

This might be a welcome chance for universities to try out a strategy to increase Gold Open Access. I see, however, two major problems that one should be aware of, if one wants to pursue such a strategy.

The first is the classic level playing field problem. In promoting OA (Open Access), we have tried to find solutions that would lead to authors facing equal costs whether they choose to publish OA or TA (Toll Access). The Springer offer (and probable followers) will suddenly create a level playing field between TA and Open Choice OA (under this or other names), but it will leave the field unlevelled between TA and Open Choice OA on the one side, and other OA options on the other. This will leave the smaller OA publishers, with no TA base or no package deal capability, in the open. Authors will prefer the "free" Open Choices, at least if they behave like the economists' rational economic man. Do we really want to play into the hands – and already well-filled coffers – of the major commercial publishers?

If we do this, we will make it impossible to start new OA publishing ventures. Thus we create a situation where the OA market too will be an oligopoly without any real and effective price competition. This is not in the interest of the scientific community.

Any acceptance of the Springer offer must be coupled to the establishing of mechanisms to cover other OA publication fees for authors, so that there will be a place for the smaller OA publishers. This is the only way we can create a sustainable long-term situation for the authors' institutions.

The other problem is that the Springer Open Choice deal will complicate matters even further when it comes to the effect of Open Choice (and similar options) on the pricing of big deals. The idea – at least, the demand from the buyers – has been that the uptake of Open Choice should lead to a decrease in subscription prices. There has been much discussion on whether such price reductions have been observed, or whether they have been just promises without much reality. Some reports indicate that some lower price growth rates may have occurred, but not much more. Non-transparent pricing is a part of the problem. Now, if Open Choice is included in package deals, what kind of price reduction should we expect? The publishers would say, possibly with some justification, that as they have received no extra remuneration, a price reduction would be unreasonable.

The only way the Springer offer could be of long-term advantage to the scientific community is if it is taken up on a large scale, coupled with funding of article processing charges for authors, so that both Open Choice and other OA publishing options experience profound growth. If so happens, in a few years we could all cancel subscriptions and packages, and have a functioning OA market with the necessary price, quality and service competition between publishers, small and large.

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