

A dissenting note on Article Processing Charges

Madhan Muthu and Arul George Scaria

This note is intended to convey our disagreement (and the reasons for our disagreement) with Sec. 4A(4) of the draft recommendations made by TG-1 on Access to Knowledge and Resources.

Current draft of Sec. 4A(4) reads as follows:

Article Processing Charges:

- (a) (ST) *APC payments by authors via grants is discouraged, but permitted for reputable journals only when there is no option. Green OA is preferred. The Government may negotiate with reputable Open Access publishers who charge APCs to remove the burden of APCs from researchers, either via a system where APCs are invoiced directly to the government, or via a subscription-like mechanism, so that Indian researchers can submit to such journals without being concerned about APCs. Predatory publishers must be strictly excluded.*
- (b) (MT) *The central payment system for APCs should be functional for all reputable APC-based journals, and payment of APCs directly by authors via grants should be discontinued, as payment by authors is not an acceptable policy.*

Sec. 4A(4) is referring to publication models wherein an author pays the article processing charges (“APC”) for publishing her manuscript and for making the manuscript open access through the publishers’ websites. There are different versions of this business model and this includes the gold open access model (wherein the journal follows this business model for all articles published in the journal) and the hybrid open access model (wherein a traditional subscription based journal makes certain articles open access in return for payment of APC). While the draft Sec. 4A is “discouraging” APC payments by authors, it is allowing the use of APC for “reputable journals” and it is also suggesting the shifting of APC burden from authors to the public by allowing the payments from research grants (in the short term) and payment by the government through a centralised payment system (in the medium-term). We suggest that public funds shall not be used for payment of APCs, whether directly or indirectly, through grants or a centralised payment system of the government, for the following reasons:

1. **APCs are exclusionary and elitist in character:** This model requires researchers or their institutions/ funding agencies/ government to pay to publish their scholarly outputs.

Researchers from most Indian research institutions and universities cannot afford to pay the exorbitant APC costs charged by journal publishers to publish their papers. This can further exacerbate inequalities in publication opportunities and career progress among researchers in India.

2. **This incentivises more disciplines to adopt the APC based publishing model by citing acceptance in some disciplines:** If Indian funding agencies offer to pay the APCs, either directly or indirectly through grants or centralised payment systems, most researchers (from all disciplines) will likely choose that option, as it would be the easiest path to publication.¹ In other words, any support for APCs by citing the acceptance of APCs in some disciplines, would incentivise more researchers and more disciplines to adopt this business model of publishing. This spillover effect is certainly not a desirable outcome from a policy perspective.
3. **Not all open access journals charge APCs:** According to the Web of Science data², roughly 20% of all papers published by Indian scientists in 2019 are open access. A considerable proportion of papers published by Indian authors have gone to open access journals that do not charge authors and readers. Only a small proportion of papers (predominantly in some fields) goes to journals that charge APCs and in such a context we need to ask why we should promote the private profits of those journals through public money. In this context, it is also important to remember that most stages of publishing doesn't involve any payments to contributors and this includes peer-reviews and editing.
4. **No additional benefit from the APC model:** Studies have shown that there are no discernible advantages (in terms of citations) for Indian authors who use journals that charge APC.³ In this scenario, it is not prudent for STIP2020 to directly or indirectly encourage authors to use public money to support APC journals. We also need to remember that our policy recommendations have already suggested a mandatory deposit of post-prints (final accepted version of the manuscripts). When the works of Indian researchers will be made accessible through this approach (which is generally referred to as the Green open access approach), no additional benefits will be received by additionally supporting the APC model.

¹ Open access: What price affordability? <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4144706/>

² Data as on 29th June 2020, gathered by Madhan Muthu using InCites.

³ Use made of Open Access Journals by Indian Researchers to Publish their Findings <https://cis-india.org/openness/blog-old/use-made-of-open-access-journals-by-indian-researchers-to-publish-their-findings>

5. **Predatory publications:** The APC model, which is essentially a pay-to-publish model, has resulted in proliferation of dubious publishers and predatory journals all over the world.⁴ Unfortunately India is also the home to many such publications and publishers. It is increasingly becoming impossible to eliminate these publishers and their journals from the science communication. According to Cabell's international, in June 2017, there were 4,000 predatory journals on its list and it rose to 13,000 in June 2020.⁵ Despite whitelists and other measures, India hasn't been able to control the predatory journals menace.⁶ The draft Sec. 4A(4) may indirectly incentivise more predatory publications.
6. **It may jeopardise the existing science communication process:** Given the fact that bargaining with for-profit publishers has not always produced useful results⁷, and as we do not know if the publishers would provide transparent costing and pricing, making policies based on assumptions (and in favour of for-profit publishers) will jeopardise the existing order and system.
7. **Setting a wrong precedent and wrong message for the Global South:** India should be a role-model in evolving more equitable and fair publishing models, rather than becoming a country that supports inequalities in opportunities for publication. If India supports use of public money in paying APCs, either as part of research grants or through direct invoicing to the government, it would be setting a wrong precedent and message for the rest of the world. It is important to note here that any approaches we take in this regard are bound to make consequences not just for researchers from India, but also for researchers and research communication from other less economically developed regions in the world.^{8,9}
8. **It ignores the growing resistance from the scientific community:** It is a fact that for-profit publishers are trying to usurp the open access spaces to increase their profit margins by appropriating open access initiatives. This has also led to renowned scientists quitting the editorial boards of open access journals that charge APCs (frustrated with for-profit

⁴ Social Justice in Scholarly Publishing: Open Access is the Only Way
http://dst.sciencecentral.in/36/3/UAJB_A_1366194-Postprint.pdf

⁵ Warning over coronavirus and predatory journals <https://www.natureindex.com/news-blog/warning-over-coronavirus-predatory-journals-science-research-publishing>

⁶ Federal Trade Commission v. OMICS Group Inc., <https://www.ftc.gov/enforcement/cases-proceedings/152-3113/federal-trade-commission-v-omics-group-inc>

⁷ Heads I Win, Tails You Lose: The Intransigence of STM Publishers <https://cis-india.org/openness/blog-old/indian-national-academy-journals-december-2014-subbiah-arunachalam-perumal-ramamoorthi-subbiah-gunasekaran-heads-i-win-tails-you-lose>

⁸ Publication models in scientific publishing: to open or not? <https://www.rcpe.ac.uk/college/journal/publication-models-scientific-publishing-open-or-not>

⁹ Plan S and Open Access in Latin America: Interview with Dominique Babini
<https://council.science/current/blog/plan-s-and-open-access-interview-with-dominique-babini/>

publishers' intention).¹⁰ A policy document which we draft in 2020 cannot ignore this increasing resistance from the global scientific community.

9. **The myth of lower APCs:** PLoS like not-for-profit initiatives had at one point suggested that “APC would go down ‘and will continue to do so, asymptotically approaching zero’”.¹¹ However, the data shows that PLoS has raised APCs. In this regard, it is also important to take note of the failures of initiatives like PLoS which could not achieve what it intended to achieve.^{12,13}
10. **Protecting the self-respect of researchers:** Some of the scholars who support the APC model point out that not all publishers charge the same APCs to all researchers and show that waivers are provided to at least a section of researchers from the economically weaker backgrounds, on request. However, it is to be noted that these kinds of requests and “charity” can affect the self-esteem of researchers and there is no reason to beg for such charity when we have alternate models of scientific communication that protects the self-respect and dignity of researchers.
11. **Recognising the context and implications of the APC business model:** Hundreds of publishers have emerged around the world in the recent past and they publish thousands of gold open access journals. These journals know that “authors are more interested in publishing than readers are in reading”¹⁴ and are capitalizing the weakness of researchers. It has become impossible to control this growth, and it has become very difficult for scientists to differentiate the good from bad. The author-pay business model is only trying to ensure a second or alternate income stream for the established publishers, as they are aware of the fact that the subscription based business model may have to disappear in the long-run. All these journals have escalated the APC costs year after year.¹⁵
12. **Ethically suspicious:** ‘Paying to publish’ is an ethically suspicious step in science. As Prof. Balaram (Former Editor, Current Science) says, “[i]f you take money from an author to

¹⁰ BioMedCentral 2020 <http://mailman.ecs.soton.ac.uk/pipermail/goal/2020-June/005514.html>

¹¹ Should Indian researchers pay to get their work published?

<https://www.currentscience.ac.in/Volumes/112/04/0703.pdf>

¹² The OA Interviews: Michael Eisen, co-founder of the Public Library of Science

https://www.richardpoynder.co.uk/Eisen_Interview.pdf

¹³ Cameron Neylon, Advocacy Director at the Public Library of Science

<https://twitter.com/CameronNeylon/status/647818820082659333>

¹⁴ Interview with Vitek Tracz: Essential for Science <http://www.infotoday.com/it/jan05/poynder.shtml>

¹⁵ Frontiers 2020: a third of journals increase prices by 45 times the inflation rate

<https://sustainingknowledgecommons.org/2020/06/03/frontiers-2020-a-third-of-journals-increase-prices-by-45-times-the-inflation-rate/>

publish a paper, it is equivalent to an advertisement, even though the journal still goes through peer review".¹⁶

13. **Use of scarce financial resources:** Indian science has been facing a funding crunch for years, and it may become acute in the years to come (primarily due to covid19 related disruptions).^{17 18} Hence it would be prudent for Indian researchers and research institutions to use the Green route for open access more effectively, and refrain from paying APCs to journals and subsidising the non-Indian commercial publishers using public money.

14. **Defeating the principle of “what we publish should matter, and not where we publish”:**

As highlighted by different scholars,¹⁹ and funding agencies such DBT and DST²⁰, what should matter in science communication is what you publish, and not where you publish. Green open access allows researchers to communicate all their research findings to the public at large with negligible costs. On the other hand, the APC based models of publishing (particularly the hybrid open access model adopted by some of the traditional journals) are trying to reinforce the importance of where you publish, rather than what you publish. This needs to be discouraged.

As some scholars like Leslie Chan have [pointed out](#)²¹, "openness, when decontextualized from its historical and political roots, could become as exploitative and oppressive as the legacy system it seeks to displace". While everyone would agree that the subscription based model is an exploitative business model of science communication and that it needs to be changed, we cannot support a system that can further exacerbate the inequalities and unfairness in science communication in our efforts to increase access to knowledge resources. Hence we oppose the current version of Sec. 4A(4) which supports the APC based model of publishing and we suggest that STIP2020 should only support the building of collaborative, non-APC models of publishing.

June 29, 2020

Madhan Muthu and Arul George Scaria

¹⁶ Interview with P Balam: Open archives — the alternative to open access

<https://www.scidev.net/global/communication/feature/q-a-open-archives-the-alternative-to-open-access.html>

¹⁷ CSIR Scholars Complain They Haven't Been Paid for Several Months <https://science.thewire.in/the-sciences/csir-research-scholars-stipends-delayed-lockdown/>

¹⁸ Cash-strapped ICMR wants budget doubled <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/news/cashstrapped-icmr-wants-budget-doubled/article9072594.ece>

¹⁹ Research Assessment: Declaring War on the Impact Factor

<https://www.currentscience.ac.in/Volumes/104/10/1267.pdf>

²⁰ DBT and DST Open access policy

https://dst.gov.in/sites/default/files/APPROVED%20OPEN%20ACCESS%20POLICY-DBT%26DST%2812.12.2014%29_1.pdf

²¹ Whose Open Science? <https://zenodo.org/record/2596865#.XvmpuCgzbIU>