Diamond Open Access
Too good to be true?

Keynote, 9th Open Science Retreat: “*Diamond OA: Utopian Dream or the Only Fair Future?*”
Leibniz Information Centre for Economics

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About me

- Information Scientist & Sociologist
- Consultant and Lecturer on Open Science & Scholarly Publishing
- Open Access Coordinator at Saarland University, Germany
- Open Access Coordinator for the State Saarland
- Research focus
  - Open Knowledge & Open Access
  - Economics and policy of scholarly communication
  - Critical perspectives on publishing infrastructures

My starting point(s)…

I …

- consider market concentration/ domination by commercial publishers harmful and their profit margins hardly justifiable

- am active in Open Access since 2001 (manager of the first disciplinary OA repository in Germany)

- witnessed the hypes around alternative metrics, Green/Gold/Transformative OA, and the disappointment of the community when these waves of enthusiasm faded

- believe it is impossible that Diamond OA, with a share of only 6% of all articles in 2024 (OpenAlex data), will deliver the final blow to Closed Access

  Herb, U. (2025, Mai 15). Open Access Trends in Scholarly Publishing 2015–2024. *Pulse49.Com*. https://doi.org/10.59350/sdrv6-wft63

Background

- Library budgets under stress
- Growth of OA → Gold (APCs) & Hybrid (double burden)
- Transformative Agreements: costly, complex, little transformation
- Hope: Diamond OA = no subscriptions, no APCs

Spinning target

- “Diamond OA” is vaguely defined …
  - OA without APCs
  - Non-commercial
  - Scholar-Led
  - …
- Criticism often deflected by redefining the term
- Reputation remains key for researchers’ careers
- Without prestige signals, DOA journals risk being unattractive

Costs & Work

- Publishing costs hard to quantify
  - (rarely paid) editor-in-chief royalties,
  - editorial work,
  - managing not only accepted papers but also rejected submissions
  - additionally, reserves for technical improvements, opportunity costs, and scaling effects must be considered too
- Estimates: $200–700 per article (small journals), $90 to $652 per page, up to £3,000 (eLife)
  Waltham, M. (2010). Humanities and social science journals: A pilot study of eight US associations. *Learned Publishing*, *23*(2), 136–143. https://doi.org/10.1087/20100209
  Grossmann, A., & Brembs, B. (2021). Current market rates for scholarly publishing services. F1000Research, 10, 20. https://doi.org/10.12688/f1000research.27468.2
  Elife (2025). elife-rp.msubmit.net/html/elife-rp_author_instructions.html#process
  Research Information Network. (2008). *Activities, costs and funding flows in the scholarly communications system*. https://web.archive.org/web/20160308065623/http://www.rin.ac.uk/our-work/communicating-and-disseminating-research/activities-costs-and-funding-flows-scholarly-commu
- Costs depend on discipline, workflows, rejection handling
- DOA: small teams, high dependency, unpaid labor
- Unpaid work also exists in commercial publishing, but we should consider whether it is always wrong, or only when it occurs with commercial publishers.

Legal risks

- EU: Article 107 Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) bans state aid distorting competition
    - DOA in libraries → cross-subsidization by public funds
    - Commercial publishers (Elsevier, Wiley, Springer Nature) could take legal steps
- US: no TFEU equivalent, but antitrust laws (Sherman/Clayton Act) may apply

Stability

- Commercial publishers = centuries of continuity (Elsevier, Wiley, Springer…)

- DOA projects = often short-term, dependent on single funders

- Data: Of 13,889 DOA journals in DOAJ, only 54% published in 2024 - Feb. 25; APC-charging journals: 73%

- Risk: dependence on one funder → lack of stability
  - Cutting of funds of OA and OS in the USA
  - A bit dystopic: Only state-funded journals that publish politically opportune content will continue to receive government support.

It remains to be seen how stable and permanent public funding and the journals themselves would be.

Possible ways out

- Learned societies as highly prestigious DOA publishers
  - Might work in some fields, but is probably not a global solution
  - many Societies are commercial publishers often with hefty fees
- Tendering platforms (e.g., EU’s Open Research Europe model)
  - commercial and non-commercial as bidders
  - title rights would remain with the editors
  - the winning bidder is obligated to openly provide all relevant data at the end of the collaboration, ensuring the smooth transfer of content.
  - unlike Open Research Europe (ORE) such a platform would need dedicated staffing for nurturing new journals
- Reforming research assessment → rewarding DOA publications
  - potentially substituting one questionable relevance indicator (DOA compliance) for another (JIF)
  - may deter talent from countries not adopting these evaluation changes
  - enables gaming by authors – just as with any other metric

Conclusion

Diamond OA = appealing vision, but…

- Vague definition
- Underestimated costs & sustainability
- Legal competition risks
- Lack of stability & prestige

Question remains: “Too good to be true?”

Thanks for your attention

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