



## The political dimension of open access: knowledge as a public good or as a commodity?

La dimensión política del acceso abierto: ¿el conocimiento como bien público o como mercancía?

*Martinovich, Viviana*<sup>1</sup>

In October 2014, Nature Publishing Group and Palgrave Macmillan published the results of the Author Insights Survey, in which 30,466 researchers expressed their viewpoints on several subjects, among them, the reasons why they would or would not publish their work in open access journals. In the press release, publishers decided to disclose what they considered to be the main results. On the one hand, authors admitted that they were unaware of the requirements established by funders: “17% of the authors sponsored by Wellcome Trust and 25% of the authors sponsored by NIH did not know if their funders required them to publish open access.” On the other, the publishers emphasized that “40% of science authors and 54% of humanities and social science authors who have not published in open access say: ‘I am concerned about the perceptions of the quality of open access publications.’”<sup>(1)</sup> Overall, according to the results obtained, the survey seemed to reveal a negative perception about open access publishing from the authors’ point of view.

Nonetheless, after analyzing the complete findings of the survey,<sup>(2)</sup> the results show a different scenario: 57.4% of the authors polled who have published in open access journals mainly chose the option “I believe that research should be open access, so freely available immediately to all.” In second place, they chose the option “I believe open access publications are read more widely.” In the fourth place, they even chose: “I think open access publications generate higher citations.”<sup>(2 p.6)</sup> However, in the press release, publishers did not include these findings and so in a subtle way created a false association between *open access* journals and *concerns regarding quality*, implying that the type of access would affect the quality of the work published or the way in which “others” perceive the quality of the published articles.

There are other false associations of this type, like that found in the experiment carried out by John Bohannon and published in *Science* magazine,<sup>(3)</sup> in which Bohannon made up articles using fake information to send only to open access journals. For this purpose, he selected a large percentage of open access journals from the list issued and updated by Jeffrey Beall, a library scientist at the University of Colorado, in the USA. Beall’s list<sup>(4,5)</sup> includes publishers and journals known as “predatory,” which use open access as a front for conducting opaque practices, such as giving false publishing advice, advertising non-existent impact factors, blocking files to prevent plagiarism controls, sending article revision requests through spam emails,<sup>(6)</sup> among others. These practices are aimed at capturing authors who are pressured to publish, ready to pay, or have little publishing experience. This scenario enables predatory publishing to create a highly lucrative business financed by unaware authors.

<sup>1</sup>Managing editor, *Salud Colectiva*. Instituto de Salud Colectiva, Universidad Nacional de Lanús, Argentina. saludcolectiva@unla.edu.ar

A large percentage of the journals to which John Bohannon chose to send his fake article were included in Beall's list. However, findings were disclosed under the following title: "A spoof paper concocted by *Science* reveals little or no scrutiny at many open-access journals,"<sup>(3)</sup> which clearly reveals that the intention was to generalize the poor publishing quality and unethical practices of "predatory" journals to the entire universe of open access journals.

After examining Jeffrey Beall's blog and lists of "Predatory open access journals" a question arises: Why did he highlight the type of access to contents instead of emphasizing the economic model of these journals that prioritize profits over quality? If the journals are characterized by luring authors to then charge them a publishing fee without providing added value, why didn't Jeffrey Beall name them "commercial predatory journals"? In a recent entry in his blog, under the controversial title "*Is SciELO a publication favela?*" Beall states:

Scholarly open-access publishing has little value when it is effectively hidden and almost no one reads the published research. It is possible for a scholarly article to be open access but largely hidden from the world. [...] Commercial publisher platforms effectively help disclose and promote published research. [...] Commercial publishers work with databases to ensure their published content is indexed. They add value to published articles [...] thus; commercial publisher platforms are *nice neighborhoods for scholarly publications*. On the other hand, some open-access platforms are more like *publication favelas*.<sup>(7)</sup>

This opposition made by Beall has already received many criticisms<sup>(8-10)</sup> due to its clear intention to disparage not only open access, but also the projects of high sociocultural value in which profitability is not the main goal.

These examples that attempt to discredit open access initiatives are part of a deeper and less subtle dispute. On the one hand, there are those who believe that everyone has the right to acquire and create knowledge in an autonomous way and, therefore, information should be considered a public good which flows openly and free of charge. On the other hand, there are others who consider that only a few people are entitled to create and acquire knowledge and, therefore, the access to information should be controlled and intermediated. In order to do that, it is necessary to restrict information access, privatize it and turn it into a commodity.

The proposal led by Aaron Swartz<sup>(11)</sup> is part of this dispute. In 2012, Swartz mobilized thousands of activists and managed to make the members of the US Congress withdraw their support for the Stop Online Privacy Act (SOPA) and PROTECT IP Act (PIPA). These bills were aimed at strengthening Internet regulation and controls in order to restrict and severely penalize the exchange of contents which are not of public domain. These bills were supported by many industries, among them Elsevier, whose support was publicly repudiated by thousands of researchers.<sup>(12)</sup> However, the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) – which is an agreement currently under secret negotiation among the member countries<sup>(13-15)</sup> – is a new attempt of the industries to stop the idea of free flow of information which underlies open access policies, free software, the *copyleft* concept and the Creative Commons licenses promoted by Tim Berners-Lee, Richard Stallman, Jimmy Wales, Aaron Swartz and Lawrence Lessig, among others.

In view of these circumstances, the huge scientific publishing industry is positioned as the owner of all knowledge that falls into its hands. This industry needs to lock out access to this knowledge in order to commercialize it and discredit anyone threatening its business model and its hegemony. Given this situation, it is essential to recognize and defend the strengths of the publishing production model in Latin America, for which open access is synonymous with free flow of knowledge understood as a public good and not as a business opportunity. It is a productive model that, because it is not industrialized, enjoys the privilege of establishing its own policies. Therefore, we should not change course by supporting those who pursue other interests. The world does not need more industrialized scientific journals; it needs more equitable, equal, collaborative, and decentralized alternative production models that open space for other voices to be heard.

How can we translate this perspective into the daily practice of the publishing sector? One of the greatest challenges is the integration and collaboration of work among publishers in order to share experiences and to generate technical publishing knowledge of our own, adapted to our resources, which include the new electronic publishing standards so as to increase the participation of Latin American journals in the databases considered international.

Electronic publishing is characterized by immediacy, which requires a reduction of the publication times and, consequently, an acceleration of the publication process. To achieve this immediacy it is necessary to increase publication frequency as well as to redesign all other processes. This is one of the challenges *Salud Colectiva* is working on. The first step was to increase the publication frequency to four numbers per year, which required, simultaneously, a decentralization of processes and the conferral of more autonomy to the people who participate in each stage. Therefore, it was essential to adopt a publishing management platform such as the Open Journal Systems (OJS). This open source software, created in 2001, which has a growing community of developers, was already being used by more than 7,000 scientific journals on a global scale<sup>(16)</sup> in the year 2014.

Another characteristic of electronic publishing is the interoperability of the publishing data among several information systems. OJS adds to the published files the code needed to interact with the systems programmed to "harvest" open files, which allows for a huge electronic distribution of the contents. However, there is another element which has turned into a requirement demanded by both the databases and the organizations that evaluate technological and scientific production of many countries: the Digital Object Identifier (DOI).

The technological resources, the people, and the knowledge required to adopt these standards no longer belong only to the publishing sector. These standards require the interaction among different areas: programming and computer systems, web design, technical editing, and scientific editing. If each journal tries to individually respond to these changes, their excessive efforts will overlap; however, if organized in a collaborative manner, these efforts may offer more consistent and effective solutions. At the Universidad Nacional de Lanús (UNLa), we started on the path towards more collaborative work by unifying the contributions of the IT Department, the Undergraduate Program in Computer System Analysis, the Undergraduate Program in Visual Communications Design, the Rodolfo Puiggrós Library, the Instituto de Salud Colectiva, and the editors of the scientific journals of our university. These contributions helped launch the new portal of the UNLa's scientific journals, "Arturo Peña Lillo,"<sup>(17)</sup> based in OJS. The new and completely redesigned publishing management platform of the journal is housed in this portal. We hope to be able to use this platform to share knowledge, interact, and communicate with all of the *Salud Colectiva* community.

We would like to express our gratitude to all the people who have begun this journey with us and who are aware of the importance of collaborative work and the power of its results; we would especially like to thank Dr. Ana Jaramillo, Rector of Universidad Nacional de Lanús, for all her support for our projects. We also want to thank all the community of *Salud Colectiva* for their constant interest and the participation. We encourage all of you to keep working together, to exchange experiences and to share knowledge...

---

## REFERENCES

1. Bourke A. Open access to survey of 30,000 authors by Nature Publishing Group and Palgrave Macmillan [Internet]. Nature Publishing Group; 20 Oct 2014 [cited 10 Jul 2015]. Available from: <http://goo.gl/E3lGkf>.
2. Nature Publishing Group. Author Insights Survey 2014 [Internet]. 2014 [cited 10 Jul 2015]. Available from: <http://goo.gl/Q79isZ>.
3. Bohannon J. Who's Afraid of Peer Review? Science [Internet]. 2013 [cited 10 Jul 2015];342(6154):60-65. Available from: <http://goo.gl/5lwQt5>.

4. Beall J. List of predatory publishers 2014 [Internet]. 2014 [cited 12 Jul 2015]. Available from: <http://goo.gl/iWkM0u>.
5. Beall J. List of standalone journals [Internet]. 2014 [cited 12 Jul 2015]. Available from: <http://goo.gl/i7ACRO>.
6. Beall J. Criteria for determining predatory Open-Access publishers [Internet]. 1 Jan 2015 [cited 12 Jul 2015]. Available from: <https://goo.gl/22NVKG>.
7. Beall J. Is SciELO a Publication Favela? [Internet]. 30 Jul 2015 [cited 31 Jul 2015]. Available from: <http://goo.gl/xB5BL>.
8. Momen H. Jeffrey Beall y "Listas negras". SciELO en Perspectiva [Internet]. 4 Aug 2015 [cited 5 Aug 2015]. Available from: <http://goo.gl/iZHi0U>.
9. Velterop J. Los 'buenos' barrios cerrados de publicación de Jeffrey Beall. SciELO en Perspectiva [Internet]. 1 Aug 2015 [cited 5 Aug 2015]. Available from: <http://goo.gl/hgjVWP>.
10. Associação Brasileira de Saúde Coletiva. Moción de repudio al ataque clasista del Sr Jeffrey Beall a SciELO. SciELO en Perspectiva [Internet]. 3 Aug 2015 [cited 5 Aug 2015]. Available from: <http://goo.gl/no0Vmw>.
11. Knappenberger B. The Internet's Own Boy: The Story of Aaron Swartz [Video]. 2014 [cited 10 Jul 2015]. Available from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vXr-2hwTk58>.
12. The cost of knowledge [Internet]. 2012 [cited 10 Jul 2015]. Available from: <http://thecostofknowledge.com/>.
13. Electronic Frontier Foundation. What Is the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (TPP)? [Internet]. 2012 [cited 10 Jul 2015]. Available from: <https://www.eff.org/es/issues/tpp>.
14. Higgins P, Timm T. SOPA Is dead, says MPAA's Chris Dodd, but what comes next? [Internet]. 2 Oct 2012 [cited 10 Jul 2015]. Available from: <https://goo.gl/Zr3csN>.
15. Electronic Frontier Foundation. TPP: The biggest threat to the Internet you've probably never heard of [Video]. 2013 [cited 10 Jul 2015]. Available from: <https://goo.gl/yKNRst>.
16. Public Knowledge Project. Journals using Open Journal Systems [Internet]. 2014 [cited 10 Jul 2015]. Available from: <https://pkp.sfu.ca/ojs/ojs-usage/ojs-stats>.
17. Universidad Nacional de Lanús. Portal de revistas científicas de la UNLa "Arturo Peña Lillo" [Internet] 2015 [cited 1 Aug 2015]. Available from: <http://revistas.unla.edu.ar>.

---

#### CITATION

Martinovich V. The political dimension of open access: knowledge as a public good or as a commodity? *Salud Colectiva*. 2015;11(3):297-300.

---

<https://doi.org/10.18294/sc.2015.718>

The translation of this article is part of an inter-departmental and inter-institutional collaboration including the Undergraduate Program in Sworn Translation Studies (English < > Spanish) and the Institute of Collective Health at the Universidad Nacional de Lanús and the Health Disparities Research Laboratory at the University of Denver. This article was translated by Ayelén D'Apice and Amira Celeste Giudice under the guidance of Mariela Santoro, reviewed by Audrey Adler under the guidance of Julia Roncoroni, and prepared for publication by Micaela Ailén Calvezere Moriondo under the guidance of Vanessa Di Cecco. The final version was approved by the article author(s).