

Let's talk about Open Access...

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The publishing landscape is in the midst of an undeniable phase of transformation. Similar to the seismic shifts caused by the move from print to online, the move towards open access (OA) is having a similar, if not more significant impact on the way that research literature is curated, disseminated and consumed.

For many the change is welcome and long overdue. In recent years the traditional subscription journal model has encountered increased frustrations for being too slow, too closed and at times, too elitist. So called 'native' OA publishers have emerged with alternative models, seeking to address these concerns head on. Most significantly, what OA has done is shifted the focus of the industry from a product industry centered around selling journals to readers, to a service industry, focused on selling services to authors. As Joe Esposito aptly describes it in his recent article for *The Scholarly Kitchen* 'publishing is a service for readers, open access a service for authors.'[\[1\]](#)

One of the positive impacts of shifting towards a service focused industry is an acceleration of service innovation. As article processing charges become the sole revenue stream for journals, publishers must compete to be the quickest, the most rigorous, with the most intuitive and user-friendly systems. As more OA publishers emerge, the greater the competition, and the greater the innovation.

During this time of market turmoil, the view from the desk of a fully OA publisher might at first glance appear a more comfortable place to be than the desk of a traditional subscription publisher. But for fully OA publishers, a new set of challenges have emerged. Despite addressing some of the frustrations within the publishing ecosystem, many are increasingly coming up against criticisms and resistance from a range of different voices, with some groups questioning their legitimacy. Often, this misconception stems from misunderstanding, not just of their business models and workflows, but of their values.

In 2021 OA Publisher **MDPI** celebrated its 25th anniversary. MDPI's mission has always been to put the author at the centre of everything we do. MDPI's focus on service can be traced back to the company's origins. MDPI's founder, Dr **Shu-Kun Lin**, felt that scientists deserved a better service from the publishing world, and he created an organization to fulfil this need.

In recent years MDPI have witnessed significant growth, and our focus on author service has contributed significantly to innovation and changing dynamics with the publishing industry. One of the most significant ways that MDPI have led the way in author services is in optimizing speed to publication. MDPI lead the market in terms of rapid publication, with a median time from submission to publication of 38 days in 2021. Despite setting the pace for publishing and addressing concerns about the journal model being too slow, OA publishers encounter scepticism over the ability to balance this speed with quality. Many query how quality peer review is possible in such a short time frame. The answer, at least on the part of MDPI, is investment in technology, but more importantly in people. MDPI now employ more than 5700 people worldwide. Each of our journals are supported by a dedicated team of internal editors. As an example, one of our flagship journals, *Sustainability*, is supported by a publisher, a publishing manager, 29 managing editors, 91 special issue editors and 83 assistant editors. Each submission we receive is assigned to an individual assistant editor, who oversees it throughout the peer review process, and if accepted, on to production and publication. By assigning a single point of contact throughout the process we are able to provide an efficient and personalised service to authors. We have also gone against the trend of outsourcing editorial and production tasks. All elements of our publishing workflow are managed in-house, enabling us to embed optimised systems and efficiencies. Our editorial workflow follows strict industry guidelines and is overseen by a Board of Scientific Officers. We are committed to being open and transparent about our editorial processes. For further information please visit the MDPI website - https://www.mdpi.com/editorial_process

Another often misunderstood element of the author focussed OA model is the relationship with rejection rates. One of the main drawbacks of the subscription model is finite page counts, which means that only a given number of submissions can be accepted and that certain submissions, irrespective of their quality or relevance, may be rejected due to lack of space. The OA model has no limits when it comes to page counts, and therefore is not constrained to publish only the top 10 or 20% of papers. This means that OA publishers never have to reject submissions on the grounds of lack of space, but purely on the grounds of the quality of the work submitted, offering the possibility of making available a significant body of work that might otherwise have gone unpublished. The reason that rejection rates come under increased scrutiny under the OA model is their perceived link to revenue growth. Many associate lower rejection rates with the drive to increase APC revenue, but in reality it is a reflection of an unconstrained digital publishing model striving to provide the best service to authors.

Another element of the OA publishing model that is often misunderstood is the Special Issue model, which focuses the commissioning and management of content by theme rather than in accordance with preordained publishing schedules. The work published by MDPI, for example, may fairly be described as topic- and project-based rather than exclusively journal-based. Special Issues and Topic collections permit wide-ranging discussion of specific subjects and have the potential to focus attention on those subjects more clearly than if the content had to fight for space within a periodically published journal. Research published in Special Issues is more visible and discoverable, and benefits from connection to a network of researchers who are all interested in a specific topic. MDPI has set rules that govern how Special Issues are commissioned and managed, to support quality even at large scale. With their facilitation of a more transparent and equitable form of knowledge exchange – agile, and planned around topics – Special Issues are an optimal way of organizing science in the digital age. Further insight into MDPI's approach to special issues is explored on the [MDPI blog](#).

Another dynamic that has been challenged by OA is the communication between publishers and authors. Under the subscription model, publishers traditionally promoted journals as 'products' to libraries, and a significant proportion of publisher's marketing campaigns were targeted at selling subscriptions to journals. Under the OA model, publishers are increasingly promoting their 'services' alongside their products. For an OA publisher, one of the main objectives of marketing is to encourage authors to submit manuscripts to their journals, usually in the form of calls for papers. At MDPI we use technology to make our marketing as tailored and relevant as possible, and are continually working to improve the accuracy of our campaigns, be that a call for papers, invitation to review, or invitation to guest edit a special issue. By making use of the wealth of data in our in-house systems [Scilit](#) and SuSy (MDPI submission system), MDPI editorial staff are able to use carefully curated keywords to help identify potential authors, reviewers and guest editors. Like all digital businesses, MDPI makes use of email to identify and communicate with customers. Our use of email is governed by strict internal policies and procedures. We appreciate this approach is not always perfect and understand that it can be frustrating to receive emails that are not in line with a researcher's expertise. We are listening to our communities and working to prioritize the development of technology and processes that will improve the targeting of any communication we send.

Finally, one of the most worrying misconceptions about OA publishing is that it should be free. It is important to remember that under the OA model, the submission, peer review and production process remain relatively unchanged. Publication (and preservation and maintenance of servers) is costly. Subscriptions paid for the costs associated with publishing but in an opaque way. The APC model offers a much more transparent business model. Many OA publishers provide much greater transparency on their costs at an article level, supported by industry initiatives such as the Fair Open Access Alliance - <https://www.fairopenaccess.org/foaa-breakdown-of-publication-services-and-fees/>

As the influence of OA publishers increases, it is important that we tackle any misconceptions head on. Ironically, this can be achieved by OA publishers 'opening up' and talking more about their ways of working, but it is also important for the industry as a whole to have an open dialogue about what this means for scholarly communications. At MDPI we are committed to listening to the community and invite both feedback and questions. We hope that this editorial is the start of an ongoing dialogue that will support continuous innovation of the publishing landscape.

[1] Esposito, J. (2021). Revisiting: A 2008 Look at Open Access. [Blog] Scholarly Kitchen. Available at:

<https://scholarlykitchen.sspnet.org/2021/10/29/revisiting-a-2008-look-at-open-access/>
[Accessed 8 Mar. 2022].

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