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Theological Librarianship Talks Open Access

Better Standards for OA Journals

by Brad Ost, Theology and Philosophy Librarian, AUC Woodruff Library, Atlanta, GA

The op-ed piece by Jeffrey Beall in the February 2017 issue of *Biochemia Medica*, followed by the announcement that Cabell's International (www.cabells.com) would be offering a subscription-based whitelist/blacklist of Open Access (OA) journals, has led to renewed discussion of deceptive practices within OA publishing. The reaction to Beall's at times provocative position has revealed a fault line among librarians and scholarly communications specialists. Some think his work was a helpful reference standing as a vanguard against an ever-burgeoning assault upon legitimate OA publishing. Others thought Beall was not only wrongheaded in his approach but also antagonistic to the whole OA enterprise. Every flavor in between has also been represented. Added to these are both favorable and unfavorable reactions to Cabell's creation of a similar list and its demand of payment for its use. What appears to be lost in this conversation is any reflection on how this diverse positioning affects the absolutely critical faculty perceptions of OA publishing.

Faculty communication is at or near the top of every academic librarian's list of daily challenges. How do we get faculty to recommend books? How do we get them to promote the library and its staff to their students? How do we get them to fully appreciate the value of all the library has to offer? And how do we get them to buy into OA publishing? The task seems Sisyphean at times. Most faculty members find that it's easier to stay within the mainstream of paywall publishing than to venture out into the uncharted and unregulated streams of OA. And they have good reason.

The publish-or-perish model is still the norm on most higher education campuses. And that pressure is compounded by the push to publish in prestigious and reputable journals. Despite training that explains the reputable nature of a high percentage of OA journals (especially in the STEM disciplines), and the worthiness of such a cause to the academic community, the trend toward paywall publishing persists. Faculty often acknowledge that the academic community could flourish to a greater degree under a legitimate OA model, but with a "not in my backyard" twist. After tenure has been achieved a faculty member might be a wholehearted champion of the OA cause — but not before. Added to all this is the deepening confusion over predatory/deceptive publishers and why there isn't some sort of universal standard that will make straight what now seems hopelessly tangled. The message faculty members seem to have settled on is "get your house in order before you ask me to risk my tenure hopes."

Librarians could do much more to assure faculty of the reliability and integrity of OA publishers by implementing a model similar to the one adopted in the creation of the Counter Compliancy project (I'm sure I'm not the first to suggest such a model for OA). As the Counter Compliancy website (www.projectcounter.org) states, "Counter is a non-profit organization supported by a global community of library, publisher and vendor members, who contribute to the development of the Code of Practice ... that enables publishers and vendors to report usage of their electronic resources in a consistent way." Eschewing both the lone-crusader and private corporation pay-for-play models, this new model could be created both by and for librarians, OA specialists, and OA publishers.

Under the auspices of, for example, an organization such as SPARC (www.sparcopen.org), and funded by institutions of higher education and grants, this model would reject the white hat/black hat dichotomy. Rather, a set of criteria would be established, similar to Cabell's listing (<http://www.cabells.com/blacklist-criteria>). If a publisher wanted to have the SPARC OA Journal of Distinction seal (similar perhaps to the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval!) placed on its masthead, it would fill out the necessary acknowledgments required for the criteria. SPARC would vet the answers, and if they were found to be truthful the publisher would get the seal. Publishers wouldn't be forced to apply for the seal and SPARC wouldn't be making any judgments about any who didn't apply. They would only be attesting to the worthiness of those who did get the seal.

Another organization that appears to be on the right track is Quality Open Access Market (www.qoam.eu), which provides scores for journals based upon academic crowdsourcing. Having this industry standard would turn a weakness

in the OA publishing model into a strength. It would also show faculty and tenure committees that the OA publishing industry could reliably police themselves.

If the Beall discussion has shown us anything, it is that a better compliance model is needed. When that has been accomplished we will have taken a huge step toward our collective goal of making research available to all.