

# Thomas Eger, Marc Scheufen: The Economics of Open Access

On the Future of Academic Publishing. – Cheltenham, UK; Northampton, MA: Elgar, 2018. – X, 156 p.

## Book Review

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- 1 Open Access has been under discussion for over 20 years, when the Internet began its triumphal march as a medium of communication in science and humanities. Driven by the technical possibilities of a very simple and fast dissemination of scientific publications, consideration was given to replacing the previous publishing practice, which was dominated primarily by journals of a few major international publishers. The considerations in favour of Open Access were also fuelled by enormously increased subscription prices for academic journals, which not only place a heavy burden on libraries' acquisition budgets, but have also led to access problems to scientific publications, particularly at smaller or financially weak institutions.
- 2 In view of these problems, the advantages of Open Access are obvious. Nevertheless, it cannot be said that free access to scientific publications has established itself as the standard. It is not only the publishers who are blocking a change in their lucrative business model, there is also considerable resistance to Open Access within the scientific community itself.
- 3 This is where the study by Eger and Scheufen comes in. In a comprehensive survey conducted between 2012 and 2015, both authors interviewed almost 10,500 scientists from 25 countries about their practices and attitudes towards Open Access. The results of the survey may indicate how the various strategies and activities to promote and implement Open Access can be successful. Eger and Scheufen also consider respect for academic freedom as an important condition for a successful Open Access strategy.
- 4 The study consists of five parts. After a brief introduction, the market for academic publications and the Open Access movement in its history and actors are presented in detail. This is followed by an analysis of the survey results, which distinguishes between the golden and the green paths according to disciplines and countries. The following chapter then draws conclusions for the further Open Access strategy. The presentation concludes with a summary and outlook. Several annexes also contain statistical material and the study questionnaire.
- 5 Eger and Scheufen's introduction to the academic publishing market and the Open Access movement is solid and informative. It can also be read independently of the study as an introductory overview of the topic. It should be emphasised that Eger and Scheufen are not themselves actors in the Open Access movement, in contrast to academic

- libraries, for example. Both are clearly striving for a balanced presentation, especially of the so-called journal crisis, which is an important impulse for libraries in particular to participate in the promotion of Open Access.
- 6 In presenting the various ways and approaches for promoting Open Access, it is worth noting that authors also transfer the rights necessary for publication to an Open Access journal. This is common practice, but not necessary. If an author himself provides his publication with a suitable CC licence, the journal can also publish on the basis of this licence without having to obtain further rights.
  - 7 The presentation of the function and significance of the impact factor takes up quite a lot of space. Both authors take a critical view of this form of reputation measurement but point to the actual significance of the impact factor for scientific careers, for example. With regard to science management in particular, they also stress that the impact factor cannot be compared across disciplinary boundaries because of different citation cultures. The relatively low impact factors in the humanities are probably due precisely to the fact that science communication takes place not only via journal articles, but also to a large extent via books and anthologies.
  - 8 When describing the different concepts of Gold and Green Open Access, it is noticeable that long-term archiving is only mentioned as a particular problem in the Green Way. The long-term availability of content is also likely to be a challenge in the Golden Way, especially as Eger and Scheufen always point out in the course of their study that commercial providers could withdraw from the market if a journal is not profitable. In this case, who will keep the published content available?
  - 9 In their study on the practice of Open Access, Eger and Scheufen emphasise the importance of English as the lingua franca of academic communication. One consequence of this very international orientation of scientific publications was that there are hardly any national differences in the use of Open Access, apart from a somewhat higher use in emerging countries. However, for the humanities, which still publish quite frequently in the respective national language, the result is that there are country-specific peculiarities.
  - 10 The economy of Open Access also includes the legal and financial framework conditions for research. Here, Eger and Scheufen present legal measures such as the indispensable secondary publication law in Germany (§ 38 Abs. 4 UrhG) and comparable regulations in other countries. They also deal with Open Access mandates in connection with public research funding.
  - 11 The evaluation of the Open Access survey in 25 different countries has shown that it is not possible to talk about Open Access in general, but that the question of freely accessible publishing must be viewed in discipline-specific terms. Three clusters of cultures can be distinguished, namely Gold, Green and Grey. In the case of gold and green cultures, one path is particularly favoured, while no particular preference is discernible in the case of grey cultures, which include the humanities in particular. The impact factor, which plays an important role in the respective disciplines, is decisive for the classification in Gold or Green. If there are open access journals with a high impact factor, as is the case above all in the life sciences, there is a preference for the golden way. Where traditional paid journals with a high impact factor predominate, such as in mathematics, physics or economics, the green path tends to be followed.
  - 12 When it comes to questions as to why scientists decide in favour of or against Open Access at all, Eger and Scheufen were able to identify an existing awareness of the possibilities of Open Access, but in the end it is the reputation that a publication conveys that is really decisive for the choice of publication route, and in many disciplines this depends crucially on the impact factor.
  - 13 On the basis of the findings of their studies, Eger and Scheufen discuss the various instruments for promoting Open Access. They point out in advance that competition law instruments, as they are often called for, are not suitable means, for example, of solving access problems to publications as a result of excessive subscription prices.
  - 14 One focus in the analysis of possible instruments for the promotion of Open Access is on transformation processes in which the subscription of journals is converted to the payment of article processing charges (APC). Eger and Scheufen see some risks here. First of all, there is the danger of bureaucratisation if, after the review process, the own administration must also be convinced of the necessity of a publication, especially when the funds for publications threaten to become scarce. From the perspective of journals, they see this as a potential threat to quality because additional articles always means additional income, thus fewer excellent contributions may be published. At the end of this development is the problem of predatory journals. Only casually the problem is mentioned that in some disciplines relevant authors do not necessarily belong to a university or research institution, one thinks only of jurisprudence with its many authors from the judiciary. If in the future the publication of articles has to be paid for, will such authors no longer be found in academic journals?

- 15 When comparing the costs of traditional publishing to Open Access publication, it is interesting to note that Eger and Scheufen point out that a large part of the specific costs of traditional journals are due to licensing and access control. These aspects naturally do not apply to Open Access titles.
- 16 Eger and Scheufen see a danger that interesting content will not be published due to lack of funding if authors have to pay APCs for publication. This objection is not convincing, since every academic author will always have the green way open free of charge, so that publication remains possible in any case. However, quality control and visibility in the professional public will then be lacking. This function has been taken over by traditional journals and must also be available in an Open Access environment. In addition to replacing the reputation measurement that is so important for a career in many disciplines with impact factors, the authors also see this as the greatest challenge that any Open Access strategy must face. In addition, any strategy that really wants to serve science must respect academic freedom. In general, the two authors are critical of a legal obligation for Open Access.
- 17 Overall, Eger and Scheufen have published a stimulating book that not only provides information on the background to Open Access, but also, based on empirical findings, calls for a prudent approach that takes into account the actual motives of scientists and scholars in publishing. In addition to striving for reputation, this also includes quality control, the lack of which leads to a great deal of research effort for readers. Both authors obviously have solutions in mind that closely follow the established structures of journals and review procedures. This is understandable, especially since the proposals are discussed as a reaction to a survey, which of course reflects the use of current structures whose absence leads to great research and evaluation effort for readers.
- 18 But perhaps this result is too conservative. On the one hand, the survey period between 2012 and 2015 has to be considered. For Germany, the answers were submitted in 2012. It is doubtful whether this will reliably describe current publication behaviour. Here we need only think of the sharp rise in the use of social media since then. Perhaps it would also make sense to consider to what extent the journal format is still suitable for labelling publications as scientifically relevant. This question is all the more urgent since journals do not play such a central role in the humanities. Monographs are important here, which can of course also be published openly. Monographs, however, have been completely ignored Eger and Scheufen. By the way, the counterpart to journals would in this case be the publishing house. If you think all this through to the end, Open Access would be nothing more than an author-financed event, with the same publishers and the same journal titles all the time. Eger and Scheufen stress that Open Access is ultimately about readers finding the best and most relevant content. It is more about distinction and visibility structures. No empirical study can answer the question of how this is best achieved in an open publishing world. This calls for the power of visionary thinking, which in turn must be empirically supported so that it does not ignore the needs of practice.
- 19 Even if the transformation to APC while retaining classic journal formats probably does not represent the future of scientific publishing that corresponds to the possibilities of the Internet, the criteria developed by Eger and Scheufen for the success of Open Access remain valid in any case: relevant content must be quality-checked, searchable and permanently accessible, and at the same time convey the deserved academic reputation to its authors.