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Journal offers flat fee for 'all you can publish'

Latest venture is part of an explosion of ideas for open-access publishing.

Richard Van Noorden

12 June 2012 Corrected: 12 June 2012

Science-publishing ventures continually battle for market space, yet most operate on one of only two basic business models. Either subscribers pay for access, or authors pay for each publication — often thousands of dollars — with access being free. But in what publishing experts say is a radical experiment, an open-access venture called *PeerJ*, which formally announced its launch on 12 June, is carving out a fresh niche. It is asking its authors for only a one-off fee to secure a lifetime membership that will allow them to publish free, peer-reviewed research papers.

Relying on a custom-built, open-source platform to streamline its publication process, *PeerJ* aims to drive down the costs of [Print](#) research publishing, say its founders: Peter Binfield, who until recently was publisher of the world's largest journal, *PLoS ONE*, and Jason Hoyt, who previously worked at the research-paper-sharing site Mendeley. Their involvement is a major reason for the buzz around *PeerJ*. "I thought — wow — if the people I'm hearing about are working there — that's the sign of something happening. It makes it less crazy," says John Wilbanks, an advocate of open access and a senior fellow at the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation in Kansas City, Missouri.

PeerJ is just one of a flurry of experiments, encouraged in part by the gathering momentum of open access, that might shape the future of research publishing. "We are seeing a Cambrian explosion of experiments with new publishing models. It's going to be an interesting period for the next few years," says Binfield.

Binfield hopes *PeerJ*'s growth will resemble that of *PLoS ONE*, which went from publishing some 1,000 articles in its first full year (2007) to its current 2,000 articles a month. "*PLoS ONE* is publishing so many articles that it is stretching the boundaries of what is a journal — instead, it's becoming a large, peer-reviewed repository of research articles. We're setting ourselves up for exploring that future," says Binfield. But he adds that *PeerJ* will not need *PLoS ONE*'s volume of papers to be viable.

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Whereas *PLoS ONE* charges \$1,350 per paper, *PeerJ* users pay \$299 for unlimited open-access publications and submissions, or a smaller fee (\$199 or \$99) for a limited number per year. (All authors on multi-author papers must be members, although papers with 13 or more authors need only 12 paying members.) The journal, which received undisclosed start-up support from the venture-capital fund O'Reilly AlphaTechVentures in San Francisco, California, will be accepting articles from August.

"I thought — wow — if the people I'm hearing about are working there — that's the sign of something happening."

Despite the low publication cost, *PeerJ*'s founders promise that, as with *PLoS ONE*, articles will be peer reviewed for scientific validity — but not for importance or impact. Other open-access journals have also adopted this policy, including Nature Publishing Group's *Scientific Reports*. It marks a distinction from selective open-access journals such as the forthcoming *eLife*, which plans to publish only high-impact work. To avoid running out of peer reviewers, every *PeerJ* member is required each year to review at least one paper or participate in post-publication peer review.

Untangling user fees from the publication of individual articles is a significant innovation — but other radical ideas are in the pipeline. In high-energy physics, for example, a consortium called SCOAP³, which includes funding agencies and libraries, is planning to pay publishers for all the costs of publication, so that articles can be free to access and authors will not be charged directly. On 1 June, the SCOAP³ initiative said that it had sent out tenders to publishers to bid for these contracts, with services

expected to start in January 2014.

Other ideas under discussion include journals that charge for submissions rather than for publications; direct government funding for all publications; and research funders setting up their own publication infrastructure (much as some do with biology databases), says Cameron Neylon, recently appointed director of advocacy at the Public Library of Science in San Francisco, which publishes *PLoS ONE*.

No one knows what will work. But many say that the experiments now under way will help to reveal the true costs of sustainably publishing articles and research data. "*PeerJ* is part of the assertion that this can be done cheaper — and for that alone it will be interesting to watch," says Neylon.

Nature **486**, 166 (14 June 2012) doi:10.1038/486166a

Corrections

Corrected: This story originally stated that all authors on multi-author papers need to be paying members. In fact, all authors on multi-author papers must be members, but papers with 13 or more authors need only 12 paying members. It also said that *mBio* does not assess for importance and impact — it does. The text has now been corrected.

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Jeff Walker • 2013-04-09 07:42 AM

Well written ! This really is another very amazing and interesting publish. You ve provided the publish that s proportional to the interest. Thank you for this publish. I have to admit that it€™s very informative article.



Peter Freud · 2012-07-03 06:06 AM

I am not a scientist, but a simple businessman that does know a little about on-line publishing and the costs involved (not so much on science papers, but I have followed the business models the open access publishers are all trying out). My first impression is that scientists are surprisingly naive about what costs are involved in on-line publishing and happy to jump into any scheme that offers it for free – but there are always costs and they don't seem to realize what such a free offer implies for them.

First off all, to set-up and staff a professional publishing house to process, edit, publish and maintain articles requires 10's if not eventually 100s of million dollars of long-term investment/commitment. Processing, publishing and maintaining a single paper (such as a scientific article) on a website that grows content and activity around it (because they want to use the content to create alternative revenue) on a secure system for life will eventually cost the publisher \$1000s, not \$100s, for each article. So they might as well make it free from the start because charging a member \$259 for life is a negligible contribution anyway.

This is a venture capital backed scheme, so they must know about these costs (they would have had to disclose it to their investors) and are gambling on having millions of scientists sign up and hoping that their other schemes they want to build on top of all these users will work very soon (on their website, they claim B2B and author services).

Now this will take a few years, even if they are highly successful. This means that they have to have enough investment from the VCs to stick it through the "valley of death" until their alternative business kicks in. Apparently they have \$950K – which, without a doubt will be spent in the first year, if not in a few months just on setting up and building the kind of website that will stand a chance of achieving what they hope to achieve. Perhaps scientists don't know (but it is public information) that Plos had a NIH grant of around \$10M to start and actually went to the verge of bankruptcy and was forced to move to PlosOne, so that they could increase volume to cover their overhead costs.

Silicon Valley is a great place for high risk ventures because VCs don't care if 19 out of 20 ventures fail, but it seems to me, for scientists it is a huge risk and leap of faith to put their valuable research work anywhere near such a scheme. I doubt scientists are big gamblers, they probably get excited because they just don't know these things.



Richard Van Noorden · 2012-06-14 12:43 PM

Update on my previous note. I was referring to a different aspect of Brazil's research funding system, which is that the government pays for recognized academics to have access to research journals. But these journals are not free to everyone.

The one that Kenneth Camargo is referring to is a model in which particular Brazilian science journals are made free to all, via public payment. This is indeed a third model (perhaps along the lines of the SCOAP3 consortium).



Richard Van Noorden · 2012-06-14 12:36 PM

@ Kenneth Camargo

Yes, thanks for reminding me about the way Brazil does it. I had seen this in part as a variant on the subscriber pays model: the paying subscriber is the government. However, you are correct to say that this is another model, and this perhaps should have been included in the article.

Brazil's government-pays method is not necessarily a step beyond PubMedCentral, as I understand it. Correct me if I am wrong, but the Brazilian system only gives access to recognized academics – it does not give access to anyone who isn't an academic, even in Brazil. The point of the NIH mandate and PubMedCentral (and indeed PLoS ONE and PeerJ) is that the research paper is opened up to everyone.



Vipul Mehta · 2012-06-13 08:32 PM

It seems to me that people worry too much about the "publishing model" and not enough about the quality of what they are publishing. Journals following any model that publish mostly good papers will be successful, if by "success" you mean advancing science and having a reputation for doing so. For that you need very good reviewers who provide rigorous and fair reviews, and decent editors. If by success you mean publishing lots of papers and collecting lots of fees, then "publish everything" models that have low standards and modest fees will do fine.



Richard Van Noorden · 2012-06-13 08:34 AM

Thanks for your comments Johannes!

1. No. The life time user fee for unlimited publications is \$299, as the PeerJ website makes clear: \$259 is a promotional offer to encourage people to sign up before September.

2. PeerJ did not disclose their start-up funds to me at the time I interviewed them, but I've now confirmed with Pete Binfield that the initial start-up funding received from O'Reilly Alpha-Tech Ventures was \$950,000.



Johannes Goller · 2012-06-13 05:59 AM

Two comments:

1. The life time user fee for an unlimited number publications is \$259, not \$299, according to the PeerJ website

1. The initial funding received from O'Reilly Alpha-Tech Ventures is said to be \$950k, according to this blog



Mahendra Singh · 2012-06-12 09:47 PM

Sounds like an idea that makes sense economically. Fee of \$299 seems quite reasonable even for those from developing countries. My only concern is this low cost should not adversely affect peer reviewing process resulting in low quality publications. Overall, its an interesting and financially viable business model. In this environment of thousands journals available on one particular subject, readers seem less interested in paying for reading an article coming from a not-so-reputed research group than the group itself being more interested in publishing that data at any cost.



Kenneth Camargo · 2012-06-12 09:06 PM

Dear Sir,

You state at the beginning of the article that there are basically two models for science publishing: "Either subscribers pay for access, or authors pay for each publication €” often thousands of dollars €” with access being free". This leaves out the model adopted by the Brazilian scientific community – a publicly funded portal that does not require payment from authors, nor readers. In a sense, it is a step beyond PubMed.

The description and history of the portal can be seen at <http://www.scielo.org/php/level.php?lang=en&component=42&item=1>

It is currently being expanded to include books as well.

Best regards,

Kenneth

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Nature ISSN 0028-0836 EISSN 1476-4687

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