

Reggie Raju and Jill Claassen

Open access

From hope to betrayal

The Indian movie *Panipat: The great betrayal* tells the story of a small army going against a strong invading force. The intention of the small army was to forge relationships *en route* to engaging this mighty army from the North. Having “secured” allies to engage this common enemy, the army from the South began the battle. In the midst of the battle, significant members of the allied forces made alternate self-serving agreements with the mighty invading force. The small army from the south was crushed. However, the mighty invading force also suffered a loss—the events resulted in a loss of favor with the ruler that had led the army into India.

The authors liken this movie to the story of open access (OA) in Africa, where Africa is the small Southern army that is defeated by its “allies,” the founders and funders of OA. For Africa, the OA movement was viewed as a savior bringing hope for Africa’s inclusion as a knowledge producer. However, the founders of the OA movement reneged on the philanthropic pillars of OA in lieu of fast tracking the move to open. They found it opportune to introduce interventions that accelerated the Global North’s move to open at the detriment of the Global South. We, the authors, consider the situatedness of the interventions as the great betrayal to the openness movement in Africa.

This article examines key interventions by OA founders and funders such as transformative agreements (subscriptions) and the rights retention strategy (RRS) (copyright). We assert that these interventions gave rise to the transference from a *movement with a purpose to a movement for a process*. This transference consolidates the systemic inequalities that have resulted in the marginalization of African research voices. There is a desperate need to eradicate this betrayal and rebuild trust in the openness movement, at the same time ensuring Africa does not become a casualty to the “begging bowl syndrome.”¹ Stakeholders in Africa need to develop interventions to address the accessibility and scholarly dissemination challenges of African scholarship.

Transference from purpose to process

A quick examination of the Budapest, Bethesda, and Berlin Declarations (the founding declarations of the OA movement) highlight a core theme: the advancement of free and open scholarly literature. The Budapest Open Access Initiative (BOAI) specifically emphasizes scientists’ and scholars’ willingness to publish the fruits of their research in scholarly

Reggie Raju is director of research and learning services, email: reggie.raju@uct.ac.za, and Jill Claassen is manager of scholarly communications and research, email: jill.claassen@uct.ac.za, at the University of Cape Town Libraries.

journals without payment, for the sake of inquiry and knowledge.² BOAI specifically mentions removing barriers to literature access to accelerate research, enrich education, and share the learning of the rich with the poor and the poor with the rich. This philanthropic purpose is underscored by the pledge to lay a foundation for uniting humanity in a common intellectual conversation and quest for knowledge.

We assert that the foundational pillar of the Declarations was the advancement of the bidirectional sharing of scholarship (between both the Global North and Global South) and set in motion the above-mentioned philanthropic purpose. It brought hope to Africans for the improved exchange of research output for the growth and development of the continent. However, that hope was dashed by the very founders of the movement, who transitioned from *a movement with a purpose to a movement for a process*. To accelerate the move to open, they strongly supported the article processing charges (APC) model, conceptualized and rolled-out by commercial publishers. It was this movement for a process, that is, conversion to open (but shedding the philanthropic purpose) that burst the hope bubble. It compounds exclusion, elitism, marginalization, and knowledge colonialism. The OA movement is leaning away from “making open for all” towards “making open for the elite.” Hence, we assert that the OA movement has betrayed Africa.

There is a dire need for Africa and the rest of the Global South to drive the recapture of the philanthropic underpinnings and return to a movement with a purpose. Further, to eradicate exclusion, elitism, marginalization, and knowledge colonialism, Africa and the rest of the Global South need to contribute to the OA movement by removing the blindfold to the systematic inequalities that have engulfed the scholarly ecosystem.

African open access

We posit that for the OA movement to grow in Africa, it must develop a philosophy and purpose that is relevant to the African environment and its challenges. In the current OA landscape, Africa continues to endure the strangling of sharing of its science and the negative impact this has on the growth and development of the continent. The current discussion on transformative agreements and alternative subscription models demonstrates that the lens used to drive the OA movement is very much Global North-centric. The situatedness of the interventions continues to have the opposite effect of bridging the information divide, and the interventions entrench the one-directional flow of research.

Transformative agreements

Transformative agreements, or the model of “flipping” subscription journals to OA, were developed around APCs, a business model introduced by commercial publishers.

This “flip” model shifts prejudice from reading to publishing—communities can now read others’ research but cannot publish their research. Which of the two evils can be made palatable—a model that allows the rank-and-file access to nonrelevant research or a model that stifles relevant research dissemination because APCs are not affordable? The APC model, lauded by the Global North, simply shifts the accessibility problem from the end of the publication process to the beginning. This intervention introduces publication paywalls, rather than access paywalls.

At the center of the flip model is the conversion of the current subscription budget into an institutional APC budget. We maintain that converting subscriptions to APCs is not

“transformative” by any stretch of the imagination. In the African academic context, many institutions do not have subscription budgets. As such, engagements on conversions are an absurdity. For institutions with small subscription budgets, the ideal would be to have access to local research addressing local challenges. The cost of a handful of APCs in international journals may just be larger than an institution’s budget, which begs the question, What is being transformed?

Africa needs transformational agreements underpinned by processes that open channels for the dissemination of African scholarship. Improved access will contribute to an increase in research production, which in turn demands an increase in the venues to disseminate such research. There must be a transformation of the current publishing landscape (movement of process) into a landscape that is more inclusive (movement of purpose).

Rights retention

There is another intervention, conceptualized and rolled-out by funders, that contributes to the consolidation of a skewed and alienating scholarly ecosystem. Stephen J. Eglen³ asserts that Plan S’s rights retention strategy intervention is based on the principle that payment will be made to the publishers via APCs for the option to have the article available immediately on publication. This strategy includes journals that do not offer an APC option or have relatively long embargo periods. Participation in the strategy is via authors using the statement, “*A CC BY or equivalent licence is applied to the AAM arising from this submission,*” thus ensuring the retention of copyright.⁴

Despite funders’ powers, there are many Global North authors who have demonstrated their concern about the negative implications of this intervention, including desktop rejection of manuscripts.⁵ The STM Association claims that the RRS is not financially sustainable and undermines potential support for open access journals. Working on the premise that there are cost implications leading to the final publication of a journal issue, Simon Rallison, Deborah Baines, and Alex Stewart⁶ assert that publishers are concerned that the RRS raises a real risk: that is, if enough of a journal’s content is made free to access and reuse through the AAM/RRS route, libraries will cancel their subscriptions, thus undermining the journal’s financial viability at a critical point during the transition to the promised land of Gold OA.

The point raised by Eglen⁷ that “by working internationally to provide reliable scholarly communications infrastructure, we should be able to embrace forward-looking publishers and initiatives that help revolutionize publishing, rather than leaving us beholden at the hands of legacy publishers providing a limited service” is in alignment with the views of the authors.

We posit that RRS adds another layer of bias that solidifies the marginalization of research voices from Africa. In the current alienating scholarly ecosystem, there are myriad challenges that African researchers need to navigate to have their research published. When opportunities to get published are so limited, what rights retention are African researchers able to negotiate, when, for them, just getting published is an almost impossibility?

Returning to the suggestion by Eglen, the question that begs addressing is what needs to be done to revolutionize the publishing ecosystem. The founders of the OA movement and the funders need to eradicate scholarly biases, which have the domino effect of eliminating the betrayal. There is a need to engender a trust relationship for an inclusive publishing ecosystem.

Systemic inequalities in the scholarly ecosystem

The authors assert that turning a blind eye to the systemic inequities that seem to regulate the publishing ecosystem affirms this betrayal. There are conscious and unconscious biases that contribute to the marginalization of Global South scholarship: the systemic inequalities compound the information divide and continue to alienate research voices from the Global South.

Kwasi Boahene⁸ highlights these layers of inequality, stating that science still bears the imprint of colonialism. He shares that titles such as *Lancet*, *New England Journal of Medicine*, *The Journal of the American Medical Association*, *BMJ* are meant to serve a particular purpose and audience and, therefore, select researchers and research writings that fit that perspective....” This practice reaffirms the betrayal and derails the OA movement.

An example of conscious bias is exclusionary publishing practices. One of Africa’s leading horticulturalists tried to publish her research in well-recognized international journals with no success. Her manuscripts were not accepted, as she said, “not because the research was not good, but because they regarded the crops I was writing about as weeds.” For the African continent, research has “shown that African indigenous vegetables have a significant role to play in addressing three major problems in Africa—poverty, malnutrition and food insecurity.”⁹ This exemplifies how the gatekeepers of science have a very situated interpretation of excellence in science. The researcher found an African OA journal to publish her findings. The improved visibility and accessibility of her research has influenced the Kenyan government in its development of nutritious feeding schemes at Kenyan schools. Other East African governments have also adopted these feeding schemes.

As an intervention to address these systemic inequalities, the University of Cape Town (UCT) developed a continental platform,¹⁰ which any African academic or research institution can use to publish their journals and books. The platform was developed around the principle that the scholarly communication process is still, and continues to be, governed by the voluntary labor of academics and the library.

Instead of lamenting the betrayal, UCT developed the platform to demonstrate how structures that perpetuate inequality and exclusionary practices can be dismantled and contribute to revolutionizing the publishing ecosystem. Africa needs to take the lead to educate the founders and funders of inclusive publishing practices. There is a need for a scholarly ecosystem that advances decolonization, democratization of scholarship, de-northernization of the publishing landscape, and demarginalization of African scholarship—this will return the OA movement to a movement for a purpose.

Summation

The desire to accelerate the move to OA was extremely influential in guiding the transference from a movement for a purpose to a movement for a process. It is this transference that is at the center of the betrayal. The powerful and influential commercial publishing cartel has forced the other powerful force—the funders—to sing off their hymn sheet. In managing the publishing landscape, the cartel has guided the founders of the OA movement and funders to support interventions that left the African OA movement by the wayside. These interventions, coupled with turning a blind eye to bias, entrenched the alienation of African scholarship. We believe that the betrayal has also deprived the Global

North of critical research, as demonstrated with the horticulturalist example. UCT, instead of lamenting the betrayal, opted for developing an intervention that affirmed the need to resurrect the *movement for a purpose*.

Notes

1. Begging bowl is the dependence on charity or donation.
2. Leslie Chan et al., “Budapest Open Access Initiative [BOAI],” https://www.researchgate.net/publication/307696427_Budapest_Open_Access_Initiative_2002 (accessed November 30, 2021).
3. Stephen J. Eglén, “How will the Rights Retention Strategy affect scholarly publishing?” LSE Impact Blog, September 10, 2021, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2021/09/10/how-will-the-rights-retention-strategy-affect-scholarly-publishing/> (accessed December 5, 2021).
4. Shaun Y. Khoo, “The Plan S rights retention strategy is an administrative and legal burden, not a sustainable open access solution,” *UKSG Insights*, 34, no. 1 (2021), accessed December 5, 2021, <https://insights.uksg.org/articles/10.1629/uksg.556/>.
5. Desktop rejection is the rejection of a manuscript without being sent out for review.
6. Simon Rallison, Deborah Baines, and Alex Stewart, “The Rights Retention Strategy—What is it and why does it matter?” *Physiology News Magazine*, <https://doi.org/10.36866/122.11>.
7. Eglén, “How will the Rights Retention Strategy affect scholarly publishing?”
8. Francis Kokutse, “Racially biased academic publishing in need of decolonisation,” *University World News: Africa Edition*, June 17, 2021, <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20210616193333516> (accessed December 6, 2021).
9. Electronic Information for Libraries, EIFL Annual Report 2017: Seven years of EIFL’s work in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda, accessed December 6, 2021, https://www.eifl.org/system/files/resources/201805/openaccess_eastafrica_2017.pdf.
10. See <http://www.openaccess.lib.uct.ac.za/oa/continental-platform>. *zz*