Challenges Confronting No-Fee Open Access Journals

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Introduction

A variety of factors help to explain the growth of no-fee or so-called "diamond" open access (OA) journal publishing. For many who are involved in this form of publishing, the compelling factor is the defining no-fee aspect: specifically, there are no fees for access, authorship, or publication. This resonates with those who understand the benefits of making research and scholarship openly available, and with those who are disillusioned with a commercial sector that has long exploited the scholarly publishing marketplace and excluded scholars from underprivileged or underrepresented communities. Progress in no-fee OA journal publishing is also driven by the practical need to fill research gaps in many fields and disciplines, and by the desire of some professional organizations to reclaim a measure of control over their respective literatures. These factors are complemented by the expanded options and availability of online journal publishing platforms, and by the emergence of a robust community of institutions that support no-fee OA publishing by way of journal hosting services, or through the provision of staffing, services, or financial support.

Importantly, no-fee OA journals are also defined by fundamental principles of ownership and operation. As described by Science Europe, these journals are "community-driven, academic-led, and academic-owned publishing initiatives."[1] Under traditional publishing models, journal management, production, dissemination, and associated services are primarily a publisher's responsibility, paid for by subscription and/or publishing fees. In no-fee OA publishing, however, the responsibility for these core functions belongs with community owners, who are often individual journal editors or editorial teams comprising academic community members. It is a model heavily dependent on volunteerism. Given this circumstance, several challenges rather obviously present themselves. Reason holds that most no-fee OA journal editorial team members already hold institutional appointments as researchers, scholars, and teachers and are therefore already highly committed by way of their primary professional responsibilities. For these academics, journal development, editing, production, and management may represent significant added obligations. Furthermore, no-fee OA publishing may require new skills, person-

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nel, or even financial investment. The continued growth and health of no-fee OA journal publishing requires an understanding of these challenges, and a vision and a plan for addressing them.

In 2021, Becerril et al.[2] authored the results of a study examining no-fee OA journals on an international scale. This was the first study of its kind, and though the results identified some of the challenges associated with the no-fee OA publishing model, those were not amplified. Furthermore, the study's results spoke considerably toward the European context. This latter point is understandable, as the work was commissioned by cOAlition S, and European research in this area figures prominently in the published literature. To date, however, no such research has specifically explored no-fee OA journal publishing in the North American context, much less the inherent challenges with which those journals are confronted, or the strategies employed to meet those challenges.

With these dynamics in mind, the authors administered a survey of no-fee OA journal editors and managers. The research questions driving this investigation were as follows:

- What are the specific challenges that confront North American no-fee OA journal editors and managers?
- What are the strategies that North American no-fee OA journal editors and managers employ to address those challenges?

Given the dearth of prior research on the North American no-fee OA journal landscape, the investigators come with no prior assumptions or hypotheses. However, they do come with an abundance of practical and professional experience in this space. In addition, they approach this research with an understanding of the need to support and advance new models of scholarly publishing beyond the realm of the commercial sector and its persistent exploitations.

Literature Review

In their seminal paper, Fuchs and Sandoval proposed the diamond model (i.e., no-fee OA) of journal publishing as an "opportunity to reclaim academic commons," and "to realize the true essence of academia as a communication system that produces and communicates academic knowledge…in an open process."[3] In addition, the authors offered no-fee OA publishing as a viable alternative to "academic publishing houses' oligopoly profits…based on the exploitation of academic workers' free labor."[4] It is necessary to accentuate the "no-fee" aspect of this discussion, given the current scholarly publishing environment. The intervening years since the publication of Fuchs and Sandoval's paper have seen a significant shift in the commercial publishing sector toward paid open access by way of article processing charges (APCs). As asserted by Borchardt, Schultz, and Dawson:

> "Models based on author's fees, whether hybrid or fully OA, are also inequitable for researchers, locking out those who do not have the benefit of an institution or grant funder that can pay increasingly expensive APCs on their behalf. A transition to OA was intended to reduce barriers to readers, but APC models are now imposing barriers on authors instead."[5]

There have also been positive developments since Fuchs and Sandoval's call for a no-fee OA revolution in scholarly publishing. There is, for example, an expanding literature introducing new, community-driven, no-fee OA journals in a wide spectrum of fields and disciplines: e.g., marine sciences,[6] geomorphology,[7] sedimentology,[8] seismology,[9] volcanology,[10] etc. European academics appear to be progressing at a swifter pace than their counterparts in other regions to occupy this space. There are several studies on the no-fee OA journal landscape in countries like Croatia,[11] Germany,[12] Norway,[13] and Switzerland.[14] In terms of geographic regions, Africa[15] and Latin America[16] are also well represented in this space. To date, however, no such studies have specifically explored progress toward the no-fee OA journal publishing landscape in a North American context.

In 2021, Becerril et al. authored the results of a large-scale study, which examined areas that are critical

for no-fee OA journals, from legal structures and governance to technical capabilities, editorial processes, and funding models. The authors identified numerous challenges to the no-fee model.[17] On a systemic level, the autonomy of individual no-fee OA journals and the heterogeneous quality of the no-fee publishing landscape pose difficulties for research funding initiatives that require standardization: for example, Plan S. In addition, the volunteer work often necessary for operating no-fee OA journals fails to receive adequate academic recognition, and the journals themselves "struggle to be properly integrated into the ecosystem of scholarly publication."[18] Of greater consequence to the present investigation, however, Becerril et al. reported that no-fee OA journals often require copy-editing assistance, struggle to recruit and retain peer reviewers, lack preservation strategies, and need funding to secure DOIs, anti-plagiarism tools, and indexing services. Furthermore, Becerril et al. showed that no-fee OA journal editors and managers may require additional training and technical support, and consequently, they are sometimes forced to rely on improvised editorial workflows. As noted, however, the results of this investigation were significantly situated in the European context.

The literature concerning no-fee OA journal publishing includes some systemic-level discourse: for example, the description of a targeted no-fee OA technical infrastructure,[19] the proposition for direct financial support mechanisms,[20] and an investigation of the barriers to transitioning from subscription-based or APC-based models to no-fee OA.[21] However, it is the growing body of literature on library publishing that bears greater relevance to the present investigation. The Library Publishing Coalition (LPC) defines library publishing as "the set of activities led by academic and research libraries and library consortia to support the creation, dissemination, and curation of scholarly, creative, and/or educational works."[22] This emergent publishing enterprise is the result of deeper library participation in scholarly communication processes. It characteristically involves the provision of hosting and support services for open access publishing activity. Also, as described by Inefuku, Brundy, and Lair, "library publishers have been noted for being mission- and value-driven rather than profit- or even cost recovery-driven."[23] Library publishing is therefore less constrained by market forces in scholarly publishing, and it is philosophically aligned with the no-fee OA publishing movement. Expanding on the evocative aspects of values and philosophy, Ghamandi pointedly qualified library publishing as "a social and economic justice project," and "an emancipatory project to free ourselves from the cruelty of neoliberalism."[24]

More to the point of the present investigation, library publishing has the potential to address some of the practical challenges confronting no-fee OA journal editors and managers: e.g., those identified by Becerril et al.[25] To meet increasing demand for its services, the community of library publishers is steadily growing. According to the LPC's 2023 Library Publishing Directory, the organization has 158 member institutions, 107 of which are in North America.[26] Notwithstanding that growth and potential, however, the professional discourse also includes thoughtful input from those who are concerned that library publishers may be insufficiently positioned or supported to represent a viable alternative to traditional publishing.[27] To this point, Inefuku, Brundy, and Lair reasoned, "Without expanding resources allocated to library publishing programs, they will be unable to provide a significant and impactful alternative to traditional publishers. It is unlikely, in an age of stagnant or shrinking library budgets, that additional funding will be allocated to grow library publishing programs."[28] These assertions, accompanied by the no-fee OA community's reliance on volunteerism may not bode well for the scholarly quality of its products, and as argued by Eve,[29] this may in turn adversely affect the underrepresented and underprivileged scholars for and by whom alternative publishing models were developed.

Regardless of the viewpoints on library publishing or other models of no-fee OA, the arguments in favor of this paradigm shift in scholarly publishing remain consistent: to wit, it is a societal good, it corresponds to issues of social justice and global equity, and it makes standard economic sense. The best way to know for certain the challenges confronting the North American community of no-fee OA journals or the strategies for addressing them is to solicit that information directly from editors and managers. That is the purpose of the present investigation.

Methods

The authors developed a Web-based questionnaire (see Appendix A) to solicit input from North American no-fee OA journal editors and managers regarding economic, operational, and other challenges that may characterize publishing under this model. The questionnaire was developed and administered on the Web and subscription based Qualtrics XM platform, and it was pretested to assess clarity and to establish the estimated time for completion. Instrument questions were specifically designed to collect information about previous, present, and future publishing challenges, and strategies for addressing them. Study participants were also prompted to provide contextual information concerning their journals: i.e., ownership and support structures, publishing platforms, copyright licenses, article-level identifiers, indexing services, and overall operations.

To solicit relevant participation, the questionnaire was posted on the following email-based discussion lists: Association of College and Research Libraries Scholarly Communication Discussion Group Community Forum, Open Café Listserv, Public Knowledge Project Community Forum, Bepress Users Forum, Ubiquity Press Users Forum, IR Managers Forum, and the Texas Digital Library (TDL) OJS User Group. In addition, the questionnaire was distributed by way of a curated spreadsheet of journal editor email addresses generated from the Directory of Open Access Journals, the Free Journal Network's list of journals, and TDL's list of hosted journals. The invitation to participate in this study was broadcast on all these channels in May 2024; it was open for four weeks and generated 224 total responses. Seventy-nine responses from editors or managers of non-North American journals were separated out, thus resulting in a study sample of 145 responses. The questionnaire and all other aspects of this study were approved by the corresponding author's Institutional Review Board. Collected data was stripped of identifiable information, and it is openly available on the Open Science Framework website.[30]

Results

The authors sought to establish a purchase from which to gain some contextual understanding of the challenges confronting North American no-fee OA journal editors. Accordingly, they asked study participants to qualify the ownership of their journals. As shown in Table 1, responses to this prompt appeared to shed some light on a highly variable landscape. Although journal ownership types were led by professional or learned societies, independent or community owned publications, and university entities (i.e., schools, departments, centers), nearly a third of the responses to this prompt defied proper categorization. As an example, one respondent summarized, "There is no ownership structure or supporting organization." The variety of responses that defied categorization and the tenor of others led the authors to believe that the term "ownership" may have been misunderstood, or that the issue of ownership (i.e., who is ultimately responsible for the journal and has the authority to publish under that name) is not a primary concern for some no-fee OA journal editors.

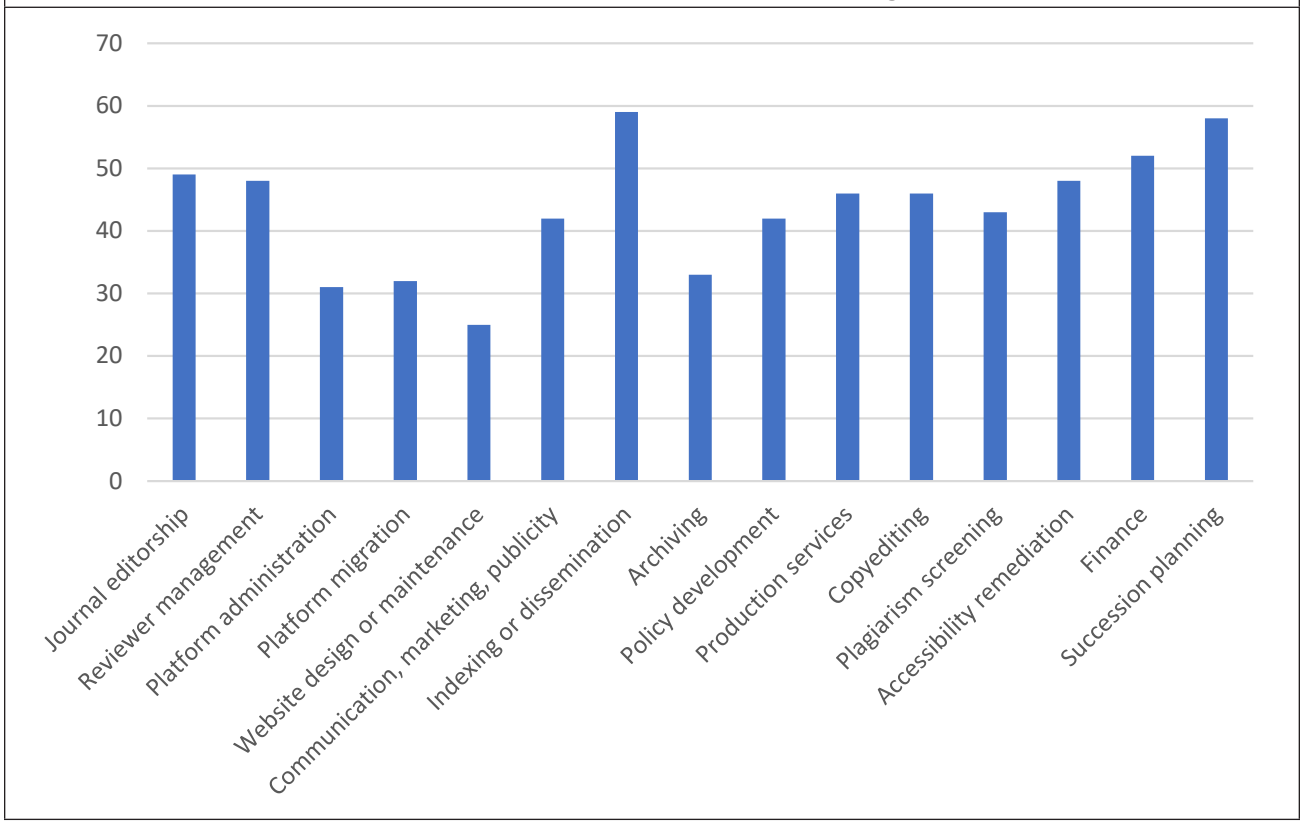
TABLE 1

No-fee OA Journal Ownership

Ownership Type	Responses
Independent / community-owned	35
Professional or learned society	38
Other not-for-profit organization	7
University press or library publishing program	2
Other university entity (department, research center, etc.)	29
Government agency	3
Unclear ownership	29

FIGURE 1

No-fee OA Journals: ***Previous*** Challenges



The authors drew from the literature to establish the following types of potential challenges confronting no-fee OA journal editors: accessibility remediation; archiving; communication, marketing, publicity; copyediting; finance; indexing or dissemination; journal editorship; plagiarism screening; platform administration; platform migration; policy development; production services; reviewer management; succession planning; and website design or maintenance. Participants were prompted to select from this list to indicate previous, current, and future challenges. The figures to follow show the percentages of study participants who identified each of the areas as either challenging or significantly challenging.

Previous challenges were defined as those encountered prior to the current publication year. As shown in Figure 1, the leading challenge in this category was indexing or dissemination (59%). That was followed by succession planning (58%), finances (52%), journal editorship (49%) and reviewer management (48%). Participants were profuse in their supporting commentary. The following are representative of their comments:

- "Our biggest issue [was] indexing…the lead time and the significant barriers for small independent publications make it nearly impossible to gain traction."
- "Getting reviewers has been a significant challenge…Review times can be lengthy as many review requests go unanswered."
- "Unpaid labor: Me! I do everything because there is no funding."

Participants were then prompted to indicate their current challenges, defined as those encountered during the present publication year. As shown in Figure 2, these were led by succession planning (57%), plagiarism screening (49%), accessibility remediation (48%), and again, indexing or dissemination (45%) and reviewer management (44%). Respondents were once again effusive with supplemental commentary, as exemplified by these representative remarks:

FIGURE 2

No-fee OA Journals: *Current* Challenges

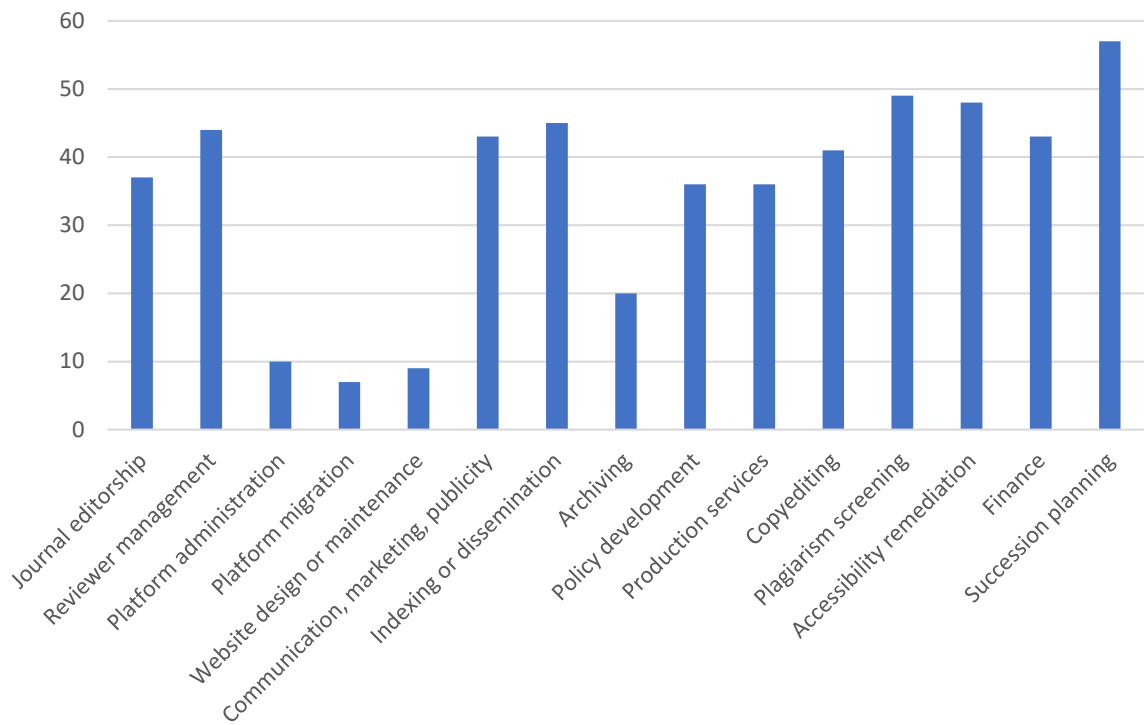
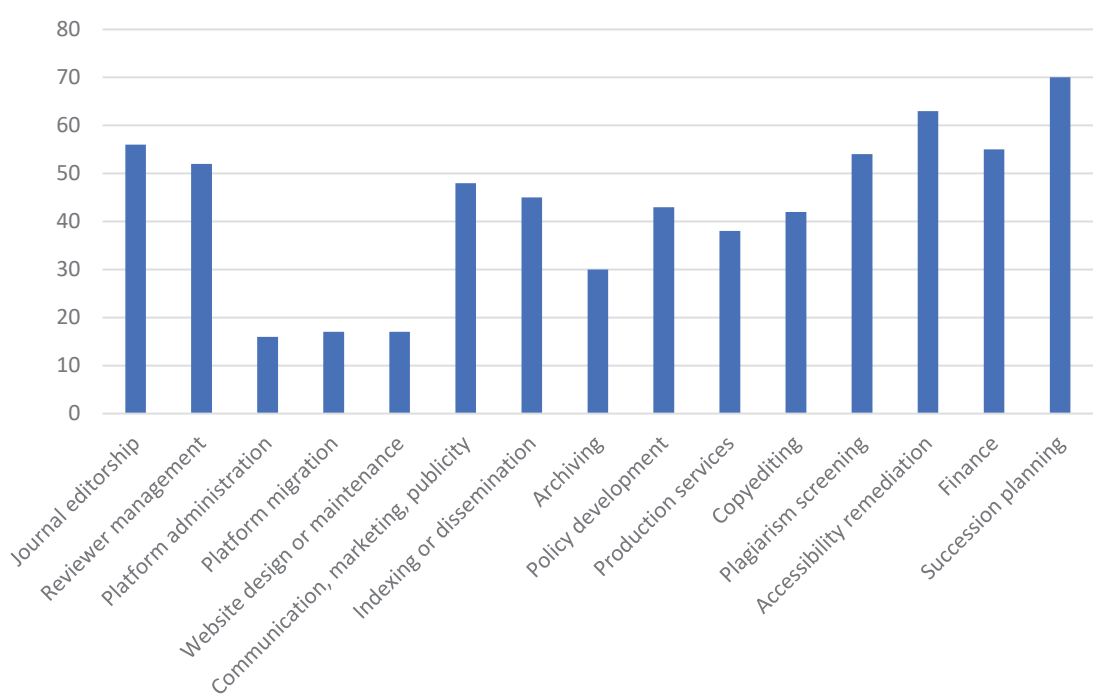


FIGURE 3

No-fee OA Journals: *Future* Challenges



- "We are facing the retirement of the 18-year co-founder and co-editor. Succession is a concern. So, too, is updating our board, and coming up with solutions for accessibility."
- "Running/editing a journal is never NOT challenging! We need to give more thought to digital preservation, digital accessibility, and plagiarism screening…and is it really sustainable to have one editor-in-chief and one managing editor doing so much work?"

Next, study participants were asked to project their future challenges, defined as those anticipated after the current publication year. Succession planning was an even greater future worry for study participants (70%). This was followed by notably elevated concerns about accessibility remediation (63%), journal editorship (56%), and plagiarism screening (54%). It should be emphasized that almost all these types of challenges are projected to be greater in the future than they are right now. Corresponding commentary included these representative remarks:

- "At some point, everything you list will become a challenge."
- "Our current publishing model is unsustainable. We're exploring moving the journal to a new platform, but we don't know what we don't know, and we don't have the staff anyway."
- "It's overwhelming to think of all that needs to be done: AI policy, indexing, archiving, accessibility. Adding more people to the team seems the best solution."

Additional themes emerged from the data. There was, for example, some strongly worded feedback concerning current publishing practices, especially regarding article processing charges. Many participants discussed the unsustainable reliance on unpaid labor, but also their dependence on and appreciation for institutional and library support: for journal hosting, production assistance, funding, etc. There were numerous calls for institutional, organizational, and governmental investments in no-fee OA publishing, and for broader changes to our academic reward systems. Several participants used the term "labor of love" to describe their work: love for their fields, love for the cause of free access to scholarly information, and even the love for scholarly publishing. In addition, many participants reported their editorial work as being genuinely rewarding, although ultimately exhausting.

At the end of the survey, participants were asked if they wished to provide any concluding thoughts. Responses to this prompt ranged from assertive to unreserved, as exemplified by the following highly representative comments:

- "Need universities and governments to invest directly in OA journals, and to encourage the scholarly community to move away from the pay-to-publish model, and the 'prestigious' commercial journals, and focus on OA."
- "No-fee OA publishing is an absolute necessity. It's crucial to have an alternative to the current, commercially dominated, monopolistic, and systemically exploitative scholarly publishing environment. Researchers and scholars must find ways to regain control of their respective professional literatures."

Discussion and Conclusions

A comparative analysis of the results appears to indicate growing concerns about future editorial challenges in several areas. Study participants projected even greater challenges ahead with respect to accessibility remediation, finance, journal editorship, plagiarism screening, and succession planning. Examined holistically, study respondents' supplemental commentary may help to explain some of these results. For example, it is apparent that many no-fee OA journals are modest operations with minimal or no financial support or staffing, and therefore editors may lack the capacity to address persistently demanding tasks like accessibility remediation and plagiarism screening. As asserted by one study participant, fundraising is "THE major issue from which all other concerns flow." In addition, no-fee OA editors are often the originators and/or primary operators of their journals, motivated by a philosophical energy to change the nature of scholarly publishing in their fields. However, they are heavily dependent on a model

of volunteerism and therefore their journals may not be sustainably developed or sufficiently prepared for editorial succession. Bringing all these points together, one study participant offered the following: "Journal management, finance, and copyediting are actually part of the challenge of succession, since currently two people serve as stable managing editor…and copyeditor, but they will both retire in eight or nine years."

No-fee OA journal publishing is often advanced as a potential solution to economic, geographic, and sociological inequities in scholarly publishing. However, results of this investigation appear to suggest that this enterprise is confronted by its own equity challenges relative to labor and sustainability, at least in the North American context. As noted, numerous study participants qualified their editorial work as a "labor of love." To this point, Mitchell proclaimed the following:

> "We have to stop doing this. There are real costs, in terms of human labor, associated with this open access model, just as there are with other open access models. When we bury the costs of Diamond OA in volunteerism driven by a sense of mission, however noble that might feel, we give ourselves and others permission to under-resource these vital efforts, in terms of staffing, infrastructure, and sustainable funding."[31]

Under-resourcing has a direct and understandable impact on the functional areas of no-fee OA journal publishing identified as challenging in this study: accessibility remediation, copyediting, indexing, plagiarism screening. The "labor of love" notion also appears to have an understandable impact on sustainability and succession planning. Numerous study participants who expressed that particular affinity also described tenuous editorial circumstances and a heavy reliance on volunteer work, together leading to various states of exhaustion. The results of this study appear to suggest that when these editors inevitably burnout or retire, many will be unprepared with practicable succession plans.

Study Challenges and Limitations

This study's focus on the North American no-fee OA journal landscape presented some difficulties with questionnaire distribution. The email discussion lists used to solicit participation included subscribers from other global regions. The Institutional Review Board-prescribed method for separating out input from non-North American editors appeared to generate some confusion and to irritate some otherwise willing participants.

The authors were employed at United States-based academic institutions and their perspectives on scholarly publishing were naturally shaped by that experience. Their understanding of no-fee OA publishing landscapes in Canada and Mexico was less nuanced, affecting some aspects of the survey design. In addition, there were differing participant interpretations of some survey questions, resulting in difficult-to-analyze data. For example, questions of journal "ownership" were not well-understood by some respondents. In retrospect, a clearer operational definition should have been included in the survey instrument.

Data collected for this study extends well beyond the scope of this presentation and its associated manuscript. Additional data is freely available on the study's Open Science Framework site, providing contextual information about represented academic fields, funding sources and other forms of support, staffing, publication platforms, copyright licensing, indexing, and more. The authors plan to use this data to inform a subsequent paper about the strategies deployed by no-fee OA journal editors to address the challenges discussed here.

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