June 2012 marked the launch of a new open-access (OA) publisher of scholarly content: PeerJ (https://peerj.com), which I co-founded with Jason Hoyt, the former Chief Scientist and Vice President for R&D at Mendeley. The intent of PeerJ is to provide a professional, high-quality, innovative scholarly publication venue for the 21st century, and the launch was greeted with considerable interest.1 But does the world really need another OA publisher?

At PeerJ, we firmly believe that OA publication (in which academic articles are made freely available under a distribution license that allows full reuse) is a net benefit to the world and that the sooner all articles are published as OA, the better.

There are approximately 2,000 journal publishing companies in the world, publishing some 25,000 academic journals with an output of approximately 1.5 million articles per year.2 But even though there have been some great examples of successful and rapidly growing OA programs,3 the academic publishing industry remains dominated by closed-access, subscription journals, with just 14 percent of the literature (in 2009) being published under an OA license.4 Despite this apparently small market share, we could actually be as few as five years away from a rapid transition of this industry. Specifically, it has been estimated that as much as 50 percent of all content could be published in an OA venue by 2017, with the market share accelerating rapidly thereafter.5

Therefore, the OA movement (a child of the Internet era) appears poised to become the journal distribution model of the future. With this “dramatic growth,” one might be forgiven for thinking that there is little need to push the envelope any further. But to not push would be to ignore the positive change that yet more innovation can bring to this space. My co-founder and I feel, therefore, that there is a considerable need to continue to experiment in order to help improve and accelerate the movement toward universal OA for all content.

Perhaps the most visible thing that we have done at PeerJ is to innovate around the dominant business model in use in the OA world. OA is a distribution model, not a business model (a fact that is often overlooked in the OA debate). With this in mind, although there are several ways to finance a “gold” OA publication,7 the business model that has seen the widest, most successful adoption is the one in which authors pay an Article Processing Charge (APC) per article published, with fees ranging from $1,000 to $5,000. It seemed to us that even at this early stage of OA development, there was very little in the way of viable experimentation with new or innovative business models—hence our development of a “membership model.”

Unlike the “traditional” APC business model, PeerJ provides authors with a lifetime membership that gives them the right to publish future articles without further charge. The basic membership fee is $99, which allows someone to publish one article a year; and $299 buys the rights to publish unlimited articles. The only “catch” is that all co-authors on a paper must be paying members in good standing. This model will provide a new and interesting alternative to the APC model, and if we can lead by example, then perhaps various other OA business models could be developed in this space.

Several other innovative aspects of PeerJ are based around the “delivery modes” (i.e., the products) that are being offered. For example, like PLoS ONE (http://www.plosone.org), we will not be judging submissions on perceived impact but only on their technical and scientific soundness; in addition, we will be encouraging open peer review (specifically, we will encourage reviewers to sign their reviews, and we will give authors the ability to post their reviews alongside their published paper); and we are also launching a “preprint server” (PeerJ PrePrints), which we expect to closely integrate with the PeerJ journal and therefore gain more adoption for a preprint venue than has so far been the case in the biosciences. Since announcing the launch in June, we have recruited a prestigious Editorial Board of Academic Editors consisting of almost 700 world-class academics (https://peerj.com/academic-boards/editors/), including several Nobel Laureates, and we will open for submissions before the end of 2012.

How do we feel that these innovations will affect the way we will do business? In an era in which much of the industry is still coming to terms with the transition from “librarian as customer” to “author as customer,” our focus on authors as “members” will further extend this thinking. When an article is published using an APC model, it is very much transactional in nature: a group of authors come to a publisher, expecting good service, and one of them is charged an APC fee for that spe-
specific service (the publication of their article). However, when all authors are members (and their membership fee does not guarantee them a publication), we have to think about them differently: we have to provide reasons for them to become members; we want them to recommend PeerJ membership to their colleagues; and we want them to receive membership benefits that they genuinely value. In addition, this new way of thinking forces us to regard each member (and hence, each author on a paper) as a unique individual, with contributions that may range from being an author to being a referee or a reader or a commenter. Because we know (and care) who our members are, we can collate and present all of their interactions with us, and we can build site navigation based around individuals (instead of the more traditional navigation based around subject area). We do not yet know how this new way of thinking will play out, but we are pretty sure that it will represent a significant evolution in how to think about the scholarly publication process.

Finally, we believe that there is significant room to improve on the technical functionality that surrounds all phases of the manuscript life-cycle in a scholarly journal. From the basic addition of a pre-print server through a focus on individuals to the ultimate presentation of the published article, there are many ways in which the process can be improved. We will be taking the best aspects of the scholarly publication process that has been developed over several centuries and combining them with the best aspects of modern database and web design standards.

So, yes there is a need for more OA publications. And yes, there is a need to push the transition to OA as hard as possible. Just as science is an experimental discipline that aims to improve the base of knowledge, PeerJ is an exciting experiment that will move the field forward and hopefully expand and accelerate the transition toward a more efficient and effective method of scholarly publishing.

Notes

Peter Binfield (PeterBinfield@PeerJ.com) is Co-founder and Publisher of PeerJ. He has held positions at the Institute of Physics, Kluwer Academic Publishers, Springer, SAGE, and the Public Library of Science (PLOS).

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