



# The largest obstacles to open access are unfamiliarity and misunderstanding of open access itself

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## The largest obstacles to open access are unfamiliarity and misunderstanding of open access itself: **Peter Suber**

**Peter Suber** is an internationally acclaimed expert on open access to knowledge. He is specialised in the history of western philosophy and the philosophy of law and also a non-practicing lawyer. He works for the growth of open access to research, within [Harvard University](#) and beyond, using a combination of consultation, collaboration, research, tool-building and direct assistance.



He is the Director of the [Harvard Office for Scholarly Communication](#) in the [Harvard University Library](#), Director of the [Harvard Open Access Project](#) in the [Berkman Klein Center for Internet and Society](#), and a Senior Researcher at Berkman Klein. His ideas, books, articles and speeches on open access have immensely influenced the open access movement worldwide.

**Open Interview** features Peter Suber to understand the current trends, issues and challenges of open access with special focus on Plan S, Plan U, article processing charges (APC), access issues and predatory publishing practices. In an interview with [Santosh C. Hulagabali](#), Suber candidly shares his inspiring story of his transition from philosophy to open access movement. Plus, he also talks about his ongoing assignments at Harvard University and beyond.

● **You are a professor of philosophy and a law professional. You are known as a leading expert on the open access movement. Many of our readers would be curious to know the story of this transition?**

I started my career as a publishing scholar in the early 1980s. That was after ARPANET and before the internet and web. When the Mosaic browser came out in 1993, I began putting my publications into HTML and posting them online. I admit that I did this at first as an excuse to play with HTML and the early web. I was pleased and surprised to find that the free online versions of my writings stimulated more serious correspondence with people in my fields – philosophy and law – than the priced print editions ever had. That’s when I started thinking of the emerging global digital network as a medium for serious scholarship. Because I didn’t see many other scholars talking or writing about that, I began doing it myself. Eventually, that led me to launch

my newsletter in 2001, and two years later, to step down from my tenured professorship to work full-time on open access (OA).

You can find a slightly longer version of this history in the Preface to my book, [Knowledge Unbound](#) (MIT Press, 2016).

• **You are associated with Harvard University as Director of the Office of Scholarly Communication as well as Director of the Harvard Open Access Project. Could you please tell us briefly about the functioning of these units and the initiatives you have taken up at Harvard University?**

The [Office for Scholarly Communication](#) (OSC) is located in [Harvard Library](#), and implements the [Harvard OA policies](#). Harvard has nine school-level OA policies, five center-level policies, and a voluntary [Individual Open-Access License](#) for affiliates not covered by any of the other policies. The OSC implements them all, and maintains our OA repository, [DASH](#) (Digital Access to Scholarship at Harvard). We manage Harvard's [fund](#) to pay article processing charges for authors who choose to publish in fee-based OA journals. We run the [copyright advising program](#), which advises OSC itself, the larger Harvard Library, and individual scholars across the university. We play a role in the Harvard-wide [program](#) to provide OA to electronic theses and dissertations. We help willing Harvard-based journals convert to OA, and Harvard libraries and museums adopt OA policies for their digitization projects. Finally, we work with other institutions to help them understand, adopt, or implement rights-retention or “Harvard-style” OA policies.

The [Harvard Open Access Project](#) (HOAP) is located in the [Berkman Klein Center for Internet & Society](#), and takes on a range of initiatives to foster OA within Harvard and beyond. Chief among them are managing the [Open Access Tracking Project](#) (OATP), developing the open-source tagging platform, [TagTeam](#), maintaining the guide to [good practices for university OA policies](#). HOAP is also a major contributor to the [Societies and Open Access Research](#) (SOAR) project and the [Open Access Directory](#) (OAD). I do *pro bono* consulting for OA in both my roles, for OSC and HOAP. While HOAP had two periods of grant funding, it's currently a live but unfunded project operating on volunteer contributions. I'm exploring the possibility of new funding.

• **Have we set the scope of open access (movement) predominantly to the scholarly communication or research content although we have other serious access issues when it comes to non-scholarly literature (like Carl Malamud fighting for making information open to the public)?**

To me, open access is a kind of access, not a kind of content. It can apply to any kind of content, not just scholarship. There are many dedicated people and organisations working for open access to categories beyond scholarship, such as public laws, government records, journalism, art, music, video, and of course software. Carl Malamud is a perfect example and I admire what he's doing.

One of the newest categories of OA content is the digital scan of a 3D object like a sculpture or dinosaur bone. The objects themselves can't be OA, because they're made of atoms, not bits. But the digital scans can be OA, and we can share them with people who could never visit the physical originals. Beyond sharing, they also support 3D printing, and forms of visualization, like rotating, zooming, and panning, that can be more useful than visiting the physical originals.

Still, OA is associated with scholarship for good reason. The term was coined – in the Budapest Open Access Initiative – to cover scholarship. The progress, debates, and controversies around OA for scholarship have grabbed attention for more than two decades. Most importantly, journal articles are a special case of low-hanging fruit for OA, because scholars write journal articles for impact, not money. They lose no income by making their work OA, and gain audience and impact. Of course there are obstacles to OA even for journal articles but many other categories, such as music, movies, novels, and journalism, face the additional obstacle that the creators expect and depend on royalties.

• **There are revived discussions and deliberations on open access with Plan S and Plan U. How will open access accelerate with such plans or models? How far will these impact the entire scholarly communication system?**

I like Plan U, and I'm glad to see the discussion continue. I agree with the framers that it could be implemented alongside Plan S, and there's no need to choose between them. So let Plan S move ahead at its own pace. That's not a reason to deny or overlook the merits of Plan U, or a universal funder mandate of preprints.

Plan S is moving quickly for such a bold program. The coalition released the latest version in late April, and the coalition itself has grown from 11 funders, all public and all in Europe, to 19, including the first private funders and funders from outside Europe.

The policy is admirably strong, both in eliminating embargoes and in requiring open licenses, preferably CC-BY. It's right, in the latest version, to make the green compliance option more explicit and less onerous. It's right to require rights retention. It's right to refuse to pay APCs at hybrid journals, except during a transition period. It's right to require compliant journals to be transparent about their costs and other business data. It's right to plan to reach books, but to put them aside temporarily as a harder problem.

The coalition funders are right to endorse [DORA](#) and do what they can to change the perverse incentives built into research assessment. They're right to start by following the DORA recommendations themselves in their own work.

I don't support ordinary offset or read-and-publish agreements, because they fund and perpetuate hybrid journals. In that sense, I take the Plan S opposition to hybrid journals further than Plan S itself. But the plan is right to support offset agreements for those hybrid journals willing to convert to full or non-hybrid OA on a definite timetable.

The direct impact of Plan S may start on the small side, because the coalition members fund a relatively small percentage of the world's research. But even small forward steps are forward steps, and most are far smaller than Plan S. In addition, the indirect impact could be very large. The coalition has already added members, and will continue to do so. It has already revised the plan to answer objections and facilitate implementation, and will continue to do so. This fine-tuning will improve compliance and inspire other funders either to join the coalition or to strengthen their own OA policies without joining.

A few years ago, it was radical for funder OA policies to require zero-length embargoes, require open licenses, or refuse to pay APCs at hybrid journals. Plan S isn't the first to implement these ideas, but it will help make them mainstream.

• **What are the impediments to the growth of open access movement in the present times and what collective efforts are necessary to mitigate them?**

I've long argued that the largest obstacles to OA are unfamiliarity and misunderstanding, and I still believe it. The number of misunderstandings is large, and I can't list them all here. But here are a few of the most harmful and widespread: that all or most OA is gold OA; that all or most OA journals charge APCs; that all or most APCs are paid by authors out of pocket; that all or most OA journals are low in quality, if not predatory; that green OA must be embargoed; that green OA cannot use open licenses like CC-BY; and that permission for green OA must come from publishers rather than authors and institutions under rights-retention policies.

Most authors don't understand the range of their OA options. If a well-known option, like publishing in a fee-based OA journal, won't work for them, too many conclude prematurely that they can't make their work OA at all. Similarly, most publishers don't understand the range of their OA options. If a well-known option, like flipping to fee-based OA, won't work for them, too many conclude prematurely that they can't make a successful flip to OA at all.

• **What are your observations on the increasing trend of predatory publishing practices and what are your suggestions to mitigate them?**

Scam OA journals and publishers do exist, and they give OA a bad name. The discussion of them is necessary and justified, but it's [out of proportion](#) to their actual numbers, which also tends to give OA a bad name. It's as if the widespread discussion of doping in sports tended to inflate most estimates of how many athletes are guilty.

I want to warn authors and readers against scam journals. For this purpose, it helps to have a good blacklist of the dishonest journals or a whitelist of the honest ones. There's some debate about which approach is best. But for present purposes, it's less important to choose between them than to make a start in helping scholars steer clear. It's also less important to have lists of any kind, which are subject to rigidity and artificial line-drawing, than criteria that researchers can apply for themselves. In this spirit, the acid test is for a would-be author to read a handful of actual articles in a particular journal.

Suppose you're considering a certain OA journal in your field. You've never heard of it and wonder about its quality. But you're an expert in the topic or field. What do you make of the articles the journal has actually published? Would you be proud or embarrassed to be associated with them? Scam journals fail this test quickly. You needn't fear that the test would waste your time. If the articles fall embarrassingly below your own standard, you'll know that right away. If they don't, you'll learn a bit more about your topic or field from your test reading.

I agree with the many who've argued that open peer review is a promising approach. The problem is not that traditional, closed peer review is weak or dishonest, and makes a journal predatory. On the contrary, it's one of the solid ways to make a journal non-predatory. The problem is that it's hard to tell from the outside whether a journal is performing closed peer review at all, or at what level of quality and rigour. Journals with open peer review don't have that problem. They show exactly how they perform peer review. They can't claim to perform peer review without actually doing it. Hence, even apart from the other reasons to consider open review, it's a good tactic for new journals that worry that they might be put under the cloud of suspicion.

Similarly, preprints are immune to this problem. They're not peer-reviewed. There's no uncertainty on that point, and no false pretense. If you circulate your new work as a preprint, you can make a final journal decision later. Meantime, you can elicit feedback to make your work stronger, and interest a cadre of colleagues who care more for the work itself than the journal in which it might appear.

Finally, no-fee OA journals are also immune to the problem. The only motive for launching a scam journal is to collect publication fees – or subscription fees in the case of scam subscription journals. Not all fee-based OA journals are predatory, and not by a long shot. Most are entirely honest. But all predatory OA journals are fee-based.

As I just mentioned, not all scam journals are OA. Some are subscription-based. We shouldn't forget [Elsevier's nine scam journals](#) funded by pharmaceutical companies to puff their products. Elsevier didn't stop or apologize until it was caught, and we can never know about examples we haven't yet detected.

• **The open access publishers are increasing 'article processing charges'. The recent example is BioMed Central. (We can recall here, in 2003, while referring to the said journal you had categorically stated that the editorial should have avoided using unfortunate and inaccurate phrase "author pays"). Any comments on it?**

First on the terminology point. Yes, I still want to avoid the term "author pays." It's still inaccurate and misleading. Fees at fee-based journals are usually paid by the author's funder (59%) or the author's employer (24%), and rarely (12%) by the author out-of-pocket. I'm using [2011 data](#) here because I can't find a newer study. But I'd [welcome newer data](#).

Journalists who use the term "author pays" as if it covered all or most OA, all or most OA journals, or even all or most fee-based OA journals, are spreading misinformation. Non-OA publishers who use the term are spreading FUD. Fee-based OA publishers who use it are shooting themselves in the foot.

Journal publishers need to recover their actual costs of production, perhaps with a bit extra to grow the enterprise. But their actual costs vary enormously. Hence, even APCs closely tied to costs can vary enormously. For that reason, it's hard to tell from the outside whether APCs are closely tied to actual costs. At the same time, it's clear that many are not. Many journals charge what they think the market will bear, and effectively say so, for example, by citing their prestige

or impact factor. Almost as bad, many fee-paying organisations are willing to pay exorbitant APCs, proving that the market will bear them.

Even though I support no-fee journals, and want to see them spread, I don't condemn the fee-based business model as such, and certainly don't think it's going away. Given that reality, a good long-term goal is something like a market in which fee-based journals compete at the fee level. In such a market, journals charging excessive fees will lose authors. There are several ways to get there, such as incentives for authors to pay attention to the fees charged by the journals where they submit their work, and for organisations to cap the fees they're willing to pay for authors. These incentives already exist, here and there, but they're not sufficiently widespread to have the market effects I'd like to see. Hence, I'm the first to admit that this market doesn't yet exist. But all who worry that APCs are too high, or growing without restraint, should support incentives to create such a market. They should also support methods to provide financial support, not just moral support, for no-fee OA journals.

The funders behind Plan S formerly promised to cap the APCs they were willing to pay. The latest version of the plan retracts this promise, apparently in the hope that asking journals to be transparent about their costs and other business data will curb APCs. I'm not as optimistic as the coalition on that point. But at least it's holding caps in reserve in case APCs rise to an "unreasonable" level.

• **Are open access journals misusing 'article processing charges' as a sole tool to make profits? When do we witness the open access journals stop treating authors as their direct consumers and exploit their money?**

The APC-based business model is one among many viable business models for OA journals. It happens to be a minority model. Only [about 30% of peer-reviewed OA journals](#) use it today. It's not a good fit in all scholarly niches. It works best in well-funded fields and institutions, and even in those niches it works unevenly. It doesn't work at all where funds are short, which is common in poorly-funded disciplines, such as the humanities, even in wealthy nations.

I don't criticize OA journals and publishers for using a fee-based model, if it works for them and if no other model would work for them. But I do criticize those that assume without inquiry that no other model would work for them. Most have not even considered any of the [dozen plus other business models](#) for supporting peer-reviewed OA journals.

I don't want us to limit ourselves to the fee-based model. But too many universities and funders do just that. They adopt the good goal of supporting OA journals, and end up supporting just the subset of fee-based OA journals and not the no-fee OA journals. Sometimes they share the widespread misunderstanding that all or most OA journals are fee-based. But many realize that most OA journals are no-fee, and find it easier to pay APCs at APC-based journals than give financial support to no-fee OA journals. This is a problem the OA community needs to solve. If we could create a mechanism or clearinghouse making it easy to support no-fee OA journals – as easy as paying an APC – then many more institutions would give their support.

When institutions only support OA journals by paying APCs, they create perverse incentives for no-fee journals to start charging fees or else leave money on the table. For that reason, new initiatives to pay APCs could kill off no-fee OA journals, which would harm many authors, institutions, fields, countries, and whole regions of the world.

Moreover, limiting OA journal support to APCs aggravates the problem of APC inflation. An open question for our future is whether we can boost support for APCs without giving high-impact and high-prestige journals license to charge what they think the market will bear.

But returning to a point I made a minute ago, I don't criticize OA journals that use the fee-based business model, unless they have never studied no-fee models. But I do criticize journalists, commentators, publishers, and even many OA advocates who continue to spread the false assumption that all or most OA journals charge APCs. Leaving no-fee journals in the shade – not just without funding but without attention and discussion – will reduce the odds even further that they will survive the growing contemporary efforts to ramp up payment of APCs.

**• You have been strongly advocating for free access to research. In view of internet technology and the growing scholarly literature, when would we witness the universal readiness and consensus to share every research output openly?**

I make no predictions on that. I limit myself to observing that progress toward the goal is slow and steady. The curve is up even if the slope of the curve is shallow. There's a bad side to that, of course. Progress is too slow. But there's also a good side. Progress has been so steady for so long that we seem justified in considering it inexorable. It has withstood all kinds of counter-lobbying and FUD. The volume of new literature OA from birth, or OA within a year, is already large enough that all major publishers now make accommodations to OA that they were not making a few years ago, and they do this from self-interest. We may not like all the details of their OA practices. But I'm taking your question as an invitation to step back and see the larger arc. Of course publishers that adopt OA at all will adopt it on their own terms. But in most cases they previously resisted adopting it in any form. Changing circumstances forced their hand, that will continue.

I've already complained about the slowness of progress. So I can't pretend to be patient. Nevertheless, we need patience to avoid mistaking slow progress for lack of progress, and I'm sorry to see some friends and allies make this mistake. We need impatience to accelerate progress, and patience to put slow progress in perspective. The rate of OA growth is fast relative to the obstacles, and slow relative to the opportunities.

**• Librarians have been the strong advocates of open access principles and they do put them into practice in one or other way every single day. What do you say about their role and contributions? Any message would you wish to give them?**

The prime beneficiaries of OA are researchers, even though OA also serves the entire public. Hence, you might expect researchers to take the lead in understanding OA and working for it. But that's not what we see. It's true that the number of researcher-activists is large and growing. But librarians are way ahead of them.

My diagnosis in a [July 2011 interview with Richard Poynder](#) hasn't changed. "Librarians lobby for OA [policies]. They write to their representatives in the legislature. They make phone calls and visit. They network and organize. They communicate with one another, with their patrons, and with the public. They launch, maintain, and fill repositories. They write up their experiences, case studies, surveys, and best practices. They pay attention. On average, they understand the issues better than any other stakeholder group, including researchers, administrators, publishers, funders, and policymakers."

• **What are your views and impressions about open access movement in India?**

I see OA-related news coming out of India every week. There's a lot happening – with OA journals, OA repositories, OA policies, and OA understanding.

I know more than a handful of Indian OA activists, and I know that's just a small fraction. I can only say India needs more because every country needs more.

I'm intrigued that major Indian research funders have expressed support for Plan S but without yet joining it. The same is happening in China. I understand some of the internal debate. Plan S looks APC-heavy, or gold-leaning, and India cannot afford APCs on a large scale. I look forward to seeing how that plays out. I hope it's clear to all constituents that the new, wider and easier green option makes it possible to publish coalition-funded research in non-compliant journals. That is, the latest version of Plan S makes it possible to comply without coming up with funds to pay APCs.

The Open Access Tracking Project (OATP), which I launched in 2009, tags India's OA-related news with "oa.india" and publishes a real-time [feed or tag library of the results](#). At the same time, it tries to recruit more volunteers to take part and make this tag library more comprehensive. I hope the OATP coverage can help show Indian activists and breadth of OA activity in India, and the gaps where more work may be needed.

I should also mention that OATP supports feeds of any boolean combination of project tags, such as [oa.india AND oa.policies](#), [oa.india AND oa.repositories](#), [oa.india AND oa.journals](#), and even more complex constructions like [\(oa.india OR oa.south\) AND oa.plan\\_s](#).

• **At present what kind of projects/assignments you are working on? What are your future plans?**

Most of my time is taken up running the Harvard Office for Scholarly Communication. But I continue my *pro bono* consulting on OA strategies and open infrastructure. I continue working with other institutions on understanding and implementing rights-retention OA policies. I continue adding updates and supplements to my [2012 book on OA](#) and the guide to [good practices for university OA policies](#) that I maintain with Stuart Shieber. I manage the Open Access Tracking Project and try to recruit volunteers in every academic and regional niche to tag news and comment we might otherwise miss. I'm active on the editorial board of the [Open Access Directory](#) and several other [advisory boards](#). I'm working on a Harvard pilot project to implement the new [Public Access Submission System \(PASS\)](#), coded at Johns Hopkins University.

I formerly spent most of my “OA time” writing and speaking, but I do much less of that today. However, I’m trying to find time to write a short piece on how the “adjunctification” of the academy harms the prospects for OA, just as it harms the academy on so many other fronts as well.

• **Before we wrap up this thought-provoking interview, I wish to know your impression about Open Interview, which is built on the OA principles to share experts' ideas openly in the form of interviews.**

It’s very useful. Interviews dive more deeply into a topic than many authors would go on their own. They reach topics that many authors would not have reached on their own. They help elicit answers to questions that readers actually have, not just questions that authors might guess that they have. Moreover, at least in my case, and for reasons that may be peculiar to me, for the past five years or so it’s been easier for me to give interviews than to find time to write articles, even on topics that matter very much to me.



**Note** • All the answers/ opinions expressed in this interview/document are of the interviewee.



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