Chapter 7

Dealing with OA Journals

My best guess is that there are more than 5,000 good-quality OA journals accessible to English-language readers (and probably another thousand or more that aren't). I doubt that there's a significant field that doesn't have several good OA journals.

But there *are* questionable journals—certainly among subscription publishers, but also among OA journals, doubtless including some within *DOAJ*. There are undoubtedly also quality OA journals that are *not* in *DOAJ*, and there may be more in the future, given tightened *DOAJ* criteria.

You want to know which journals are questionable and which are good. That's important if you're planning to submit an article, if you're working with scholars who are writing articles, if you're looking to make OA resources more visible in your library—and, of course, if you're being asked to join an editorial board.

Starting Points

I believe there are two paths to be considered:

- If a journal is in the *Directory of Open Access Journals*, are there reasons to avoid it?
- If a journal is *not* in *DOAJ*, are there reasons to consider it?

Before considering those two paths, it's worth noting two key exceptions to the general assumption that good OA journals will be in *DOAJ:*

- **Sparse journals:** The new *DOAJ* criteria preclude journals that don't publish at least five articles per year. That's sensible in most fields, but there are some cases (e.g., journals concerned with a single scholar) where such journals might be worthwhile.
- **New journals:** A brand-new OA journal may not meet all *DOAJ* criteria for a while.

We'll look at those as a third stream.

Spotting Questionable *DOAJ* Journals

You're interested in a particular journal, which seems to have a plausible title, and you find a record for it on *DOAJ*. That record will link to the journal. You should go to the journal's site for the steps here (adapted from the July 2014 *Cites & Insights*).

1. Is there a clear statement as to article processing charges (APC) or other fees? This should ideally appear as a tab on one of the main menus; otherwise, look at Author's Guidelines or About the Journal. If you can't find a statement (and the journal isn't published by a society, governmental agency, academic institution, library, or self-identified volunteer group) or, even worse, if there *is* an APC but the site doesn't say what it is: **STOP.** Go elsewhere.

It would be good if journals published by volunteer groups and by universities, libraries, and societies explicitly said they do *not* have APCs—but, especially for older and smaller journals in Humanities and Social Sciences, the question may never have arisen. For any commercial or quasi-commercial publisher,

step 1 is absolute. If they don't explicitly state whether or not there is a fee and, if so, what the fee is, you should avoid them.

2. Have you or your colleagues been getting repeated e-mail from the journal asking for articles—especially if such e-mail has multicolored text? **STOP.** Go elsewhere.
3. Does the journal or publisher's site make implausible promises (e.g., very short peer-review turnaround) or unlikely statements (e.g., a one-year-old journal claiming to be tops in the field—or any journal charging more than $100 claiming it has the lowest APCs)? **STOP.** Go elsewhere.
4. If there is an APC, is it one you consider reasonable (and are there clear waiver methods)? If not, **STOP**. There are other places to publish. (But see also step 14.)
5. Do article titles over the past few issues make sense within the journal's scope—or at all? If not, **STOP.** You're better off elsewhere.
6. Download and read at least one article in full text (which almost always means PDF), preferably one you think you can understand. If the download process doesn't work, requires registration, or yields a defective PDF, **STOP.** Go elsewhere.
7. Does the article look good enough for your tastes (that is, are the layout and typography acceptable)? Does it seem to be at least coherent enough to be in a journal you'd want to be associated with? If the answer is No to either question, **STOP.** Go elsewhere.
8. During the process of navigating the journal site, looking at archives, and downloading a paper or two, have you been assaulted by ads (where you have to decide what constitutes "assaulted")? Is navigation difficult or taking too long? Is the download taking forever? If the answer to any of these is Yes, then you should probably **STOP.** Go elsewhere.
9. Is the journal a going concern—is it publishing a reasonable stream of articles (where only you can determine what's reasonable)? If not, pause. You're probably better off with another journal.
10. Do the quality of English and the general appearance of the journal's site give you confidence in its quality? If not, pause. You're probably better off with another journal.
11. Does one author show up over and over again within the past few issues? If so, pause. At best, the journal has problems. You're probably better off elsewhere.

These eleven steps may seem like a lot—but it shouldn't take more than five minutes or so to do all of this. If it does, see step 9. If you go through the set and still aren't sure, that alone is reason to consider going elsewhere—but there are two more, somewhat more difficult steps you should take.

12. Check the editorial board for plausibility and to see whether these are real people.
13. Check Retraction Watch—but be aware that excellent journals have retracted papers and that most journals don't show up there.

Retraction Watch
http://retractionwatch.com

Here's a bonus step that I believe is important if the growth in OA is ever to help library budget problems, rather than just shifting costs from one line to another:

14. If there is an APC (and especially if it's a high one), is it going to a publisher you want to reward? That's particularly an issue for big subscription publishers starting bundles of OA journals: is there another equally good OA journal that either has no APC charges, has lower charges, or is part of a publishing operation you'd rather support?

Still not sure? Go elsewhere—or read the Library Loon's article (see "Another Resource" below).

You may have noticed one criterion that's *not* listed here: presence of an ISSN. There are good reasons for that omission:

- At least in the United States, e-journals that do not have explicit issues are not eligible for ISSNs. While most e-journals do and should have year separations, there's no particularly good reason for a purely digital journal to specify issues within a year.
- At least for the international ISSN agency, ISSNs aren't available for journals that have not published at least five articles in an issue. Some sparse e-journals never achieve that level.
- An ISSN says *nothing* about the quality of a journal: it's just an identifier.

Good Non-*DOAJ* Journals

You're interested in writing for, reading, joining the editorial board of, or otherwise being involved with an OA journal that is *not* in *DOAJ*. If it's a "hybrid" journal, you should investigate *closely* whether it is in any real sense meeting the goals of open access; I believe my own skepticism and that of others (including *DOAJ*) is justified. For that matter, does the journal title make any sense to you? (Would *you* publish in

the *Journal of Library*, to offer one mythical example that isn't that different from some "real" ones?)

Otherwise, and if it's not a new or sparse journal, you need to ask yourself *why* the journal is *not* in *DOAJ*—or, if feasible, ask that question of the editor and publisher. I would poke at their answers and probably use a tougher version of the fourteen-step process just discussed. I would definitely read the Library Loon's article (see "Another Resource" below) and apply those tests as well.

Unless you personally know the editor or people on the editorial board and they're willing to vouch for the journal's quality, I'd probably stay away. There may be exceptions for "national" journals (those intended to serve only one nation or region), but even there most of the same questions arise.

Obvious reasons *to* consider a non-*DOAJ* journal are that it fills a gap in OA publishing that no other journal fills, that you have colleagues who swear by it (and none that swear at it), or that you desperately need a publishing credit and don't care where it comes from. There may be others—but not many of them (again, apart from new and sparse journals).

New and Sparse Journals

There are two special cases: journals that haven't been around long enough to be in *DOAJ* and journals that publish fewer than five articles in some years.

I believe the fourteen steps already offered make sense for these special cases as well. Beyond that, you need to have satisfactory answers for one of two questions:

- **New journals:** Is this journal a useful addition to the field?
- **Sparse journals:** Is it reasonable for this particular journal to have so few articles?

New Journals

With more than 28,000 journals, including more than 5,000 OA journals that are reasonably well established and appear to be of good quality, peer-reviewed publishing doesn't suffer from a shortage of journals.

Additionally, the creation of more and more journals may lead to more salami slicing, where scholars split the results of research into more and more, narrower and narrower articles. This wastes everybody's time.

On the other hand, there are probably *many* subject areas where there are not enough OA journals or not enough no-fee OA journals, and certainly many niche fields that would be well served by focused OA journals.

Developing nations and regions may not be well served by the existing journal universe in some fields, arguing for more OA journals to serve scholars and readers in those nations and regions.

If you're considering being part of an actual OA journal startup—being on the founding editorial board or being the founding editor—you and your group have presumably thought about these issues and concluded that there is a need or at least a desirable addition to the field.

In other cases, in addition to the fourteen steps, I'd look carefully at the journal's mission and scope and at the publisher's mission statement. If you see grandiose and unlikely statements in either case, I'd stay away. If you see a clear case for the new journal, it's worth considering.

One clear case for new OA journals is where an editorial board for a subscription journal has become disillusioned with the pricing or other policies of that journal. OA journals *should* attract authors away from subscription journals, especially the most expensive subscription journals. Startups that involve an existing editorial board trying to do a better job through OA deserve support.

What's *not* a good reason for new journals: a "publisher" who wants to establish a big stable of journals (probably with moderate APCs) to make a splash and to make big bucks. The latter is unlikely; the former simply has nothing to do with advancing scholarship or open access.

Sparse Journals

What about barely-there journals? If a journal doesn't publish at least five articles a year, it's not eligible for *DOAJ* (under current criteria)—and if it doesn't publish at least five articles in an issue, it's not eligible for an ISSN (at least from the international agency).

Five articles a year—not five articles an issue—is *very* sparse. For most subjects, it's a sign that the journal's not making it: authors don't consider it to be a good place to publish.

The key question, in addition to the questions you'd ask of a *DOAJ* journal or a new journal, is whether sparseness is reasonable for this particular journal. If it's called an international journal in any but the narrowest field, the answer is almost certainly No—the journal is almost certainly sparse because it's superfluous or questionable. (Really? An international journal on agriculture can't attract five good articles a year?)

But I wouldn't be surprised if the mythical *Journal of Walt Kelly Studies*, devoted to scholarship regarding the creator of Pogo, had only two or three articles per year. The same might be true for any number of author-specific or scholar-specific journals, and for others with clear but narrow niches.

In those cases, the answer's likely to be fairly obvious (and the OA journal should certainly be free to publish and operate with minimal overhead): there's a felt need, but it's just not one that draws many authors.

Another Resource

This chapter borrows heavily from my previous writing on this topic—but also from the Library Loon, probably the wisest pseudonymous writer in the library field. I thank the Loon for inspiration and highly recommend "Assessing the Scamminess of a Purported Open-Access Publisher," posted April 11, 2012, by the Library Loon at the blog *Gavia Libraria*, which goes into more issues than I do (and is decidedly more stringent than I am).

Assessing the Scamminess of a Purported Open-Access Publisher
http://gavialib.com/2012/04/assessing-the-scamminess-of-a-purported-open-access-publisher