

The APC question mark hovering over the OSTP announcement

*The recent announcement by the U.S. Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP) set out a requirement for all federally funded research to be made immediately publicly accessible and in so doing has significantly accelerated a transition to Open Access publication models in the U.S. In this post **Jeff Pooley** argues that the proposals may also run the risk of locking in publishing models based on Article Processing Charges (APCs) which whilst opening access to research users, raises new financial barriers to authors, especially in less well funded fields, such as the humanities and social sciences.*

From last Thursday's [blockbuster White House announcement](#) on immediate OA for federally funded research:

“Improving public access policies across the U.S. government to promote the rapid sharing of federally funded research data with appropriate protections and accountability measures will allow for greater validity of research results and more equitable access to data resources aligned with these ideals. To promote equity and advance the work of restoring the public’s trust in Government science, and to advance American scientific leadership, now is the time to amend federal policy to deliver immediate public access to federally funded research.”

The no-embargo [guidance](#), to be implemented by federal funding agencies over the next couple of years, is a huge win, full stop. [SPARC North America](#) and the [ARL](#) are right to celebrate the [news](#). It is, in effect, a single-memo Plan (U.)S.

Still: the unintended consequences. Without lots of vigilance and careful policy revision, the edict—to be implemented across many agencies—could end up enthroning the article processing charge (APC).

Here's the basic problem. As a [growing number of studies document](#), most of the world's academic authors (including most humanities and social science authors in the U.S.) can't afford the often-usurious fees. The APC model, with its tolled access to authorship, is the subscription model seen through a camera obscura: author paywalls in place of reading paywalls. Thus the prevailing APC regime fixes one barrier to access, for readers, by erecting another, for authors.

The big risk is that the [new policy](#) will inadvertently crown the author-excluding APC. Thanks to the aggressive, profit-protecting moves of the big five publishers as well as some friendly fire from the Europeans' [Plan S](#), the APC is already in the pole position. Rich North American universities and well-heeled European nations have been [signing so-called “read-and-publish” deals](#) with the publishers for years now—deals that cover APCs for their faculty alone. In the last two years the pace of deal-making has picking up, under the “transformative agreement” euphemism—starving library budgets that could otherwise fund fee-free OA publishing. And since author fees are stitched into the deals, the approach serves to ratify—and secure in place—a scholarly publishing system underwritten by the APC.

So the OA transition is *already* leaning APC. The new U.S. policy could tip the scales still further—that's the unintended consequence that needs addressing.

It's true that the [memo](#) endorses the so-called “green” route, whereby scholars self-archive their accepted, but unformatted papers in nonprofit repositories. The new policy removes publishers' ability to impose an embargo—a very happy development indeed.

Still, the White House [memo](#) is alarmingly mute on how its OA mandates will be funded, when scholars take the “gold” route: open access to the formatted version-of-record. The only reference I could find is a single line, five pages into the eight-page guidance:

“In consultation with OMB [Office of Budget and Budget], federal agencies should allow researchers to include reasonable publication costs and costs associated with submission, curation, management of data, and special handling instructions as allowable expenses in all research budget”

Elsevier and Springer Nature will tell you that \$3,000 to \$12,000 *per article* is perfectly “reasonable.” That word is an invitation for cost-concealing abuse. The rest of the language here, moreover, guides agencies to cover what are, in everything but name, APCs. Author-facing charges, in other words, seem to be baked into the [plan](#)—with no mention, as far as I can see, of just alternatives like [collective funding](#).

The problem is potentially worse, since there’s no reference to any future ban on publishing in “hybrid” journals—those titles which accept APC-funded OA articles but paywall the rest. Librarians and other funders have rightly accused publishers of double-dipping with their hybrid titles—by charging for APCs *and* subscriptions. That’s one of the reasons the European Plan S is phasing in a hybrid-journal ban—one that isn’t telegraphed anywhere in the OSTP guidance.



There is, however, some reason for optimism. The White House [memo](#) includes an additional reference to the funding question—one that calls out, in a single crucial clause, the core issue. It is, alas, buried in a long list of charges to be carried out by a designated federal committee:

“consider measures to reduce inequities in publishing of, and access to, federally funded research and data, especially among individuals from underserved backgrounds and those who are early in their careers.”

It’s this language, apparently, that led SPARC North America’s Heather Joseph to downplay the risk of author-excluding fees. She is quoted in the *Chronicle’s* [coverage](#) [paywalled]:

“Some commentators worried that publishers would raise the article-processing charges, or APCs, associated with open-access publishing in their journals. But [Heather] Joseph, of the academic-resources coalition [SPARC], said she hopes language in the guidance that encourages “measures to reduce inequities in publishing,” particularly among early-career scholars and those from underserved backgrounds, will prevent that.”

And:

“Those publishers that try to charge ridiculously high APCs will find it difficult, because ‘inequity in publishing’ means ‘I’m priced out of being able to publish. I can’t afford to contribute my research article to the scientific record,’” Joseph said. The White House’s blog post also noted that it was working to ensure “support for more vulnerable members of the research ecosystem unable to pay rising costs associated with publishing open-access articles.”

I'm far less sanguine. We certainly can't rely on blog-post prose, especially since the actual memo's reference ("... reduce inequities in publishing of...") amounts to a single, obscurely placed clause.

By contrast, Ithaka S+R's Roger Schonfeld, quoted in [Inside Higher Ed](#), cuts to the read-and-publish chase:

"Over all, this is a very important and positive development for openness, but not without second-order consequences," said Roger Schonfeld, vice president of organizational strategy at Ithaka, a nonprofit focused on improving access to knowledge and education around the world. "The policy guidance provides a route to paying for data set deposit, through researcher grants, which should further stimulate the data repository ecosystem. But it is less clear how the mandate for free publications will be paid for, which may trouble some of the scholarly publishers, particularly those without well-developed U.S. strategy for transformative agreements."

When it comes to policy, good intentions aren't nearly enough. It's easy to imagine publishers of all kinds scrambling to make read-and-publish deals to ensure that federally funded authors' fees will be covered. In that scenario, the APC model would win new, and perhaps decisive, momentum.

Indeed, that's the most likely scenario—at least without steady pressure for policy revision, to include, for example, APC caps and funding for alternative models. Those of us in the open authorship movement—fighting to keep the author-excluding APC at bay—should welcome the new mandate, but only provisionally. This could easily become a defeat snatched from the jaws of victory.

This post originally appeared on Jeff Pooley's personal blog as: [The Big APC Question Mark Hovering Over the OSTP Announcement](#).

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