

An update on our perspective on Open Access

Date : April 6, 2014

Haidy Geismar, UCL

In October last year (2013) I posted a draft of an editorial for the Journal of Material Culture which rehearsed some of the options we (the editorial board led by myself and Susanne Kuchler, with guidance from Danny Miller) have been working through regarding taking the journal towards Open Access. The take home message for that piece was that we felt strongly that the current recommendations for open access "compliance" in the United Kingdom were inadequate and inappropriate in terms of their effect upon ideas not just of scholarship, but on scholarly community. The prevailing models in the UK for Open Access, known as Green and Gold, both depend on individuals to decide whether or not their individual articles should be made open access. Gold Open access costs significant amounts of money but results in an article openly available through the journal's home page. Green means that any author has the right to post the accepted version of their article on their homepage or institutional repository (for some journals after a specific embargo period). This is very much a national situation for OA in the UK and it's different in the US (and indeed in many other places), but in our editorial, Susanne Kuchler and I argued against models that sidestep the journal itself as an intellectual frame for committing to OA by passing the buck to individual authors. We raised questions regarding the implication of moving to a view per article/pay per article model for the future of scholarly journals.

Some [people](#) interpreted the editorial as a statement against OA. In fact, we take the journal's responsibility for open access very seriously and have spent considerable time (after hours from our regular job and duties as editors) exploring these issues as we really want the journal to be accessible to everyone who wants to read it. We are balancing these desires with the fact that Sage owns the journal's name, the back issues and has said that they will reform the journal with a different editorial board if we leave to move to an open system (like open journal).

Our editorial launched an online questionnaire with which we hoped to gather more opinion from material world readers and Journal of Material Culture readers. This probably says more about electronic survey burnout and the limitations of our own reach, than it does about the question of open access but since December 2 we have had only 16 respondents to the survey (If you would still like to participate you can by following this [link](#).).

Whilst 16 is obviously far too few a number to make any kind of generalization, I can report that out of the 16 respondents (15 of whom work in academia), most only read the journal in digital form accessed via a university subscription. Of those 16 people, 5 would be prepared to pay a submission fee to a journal without guarantee of acceptance (and 11 would not). The following chart shows how people felt about paying for open access, upon acceptance for publication:

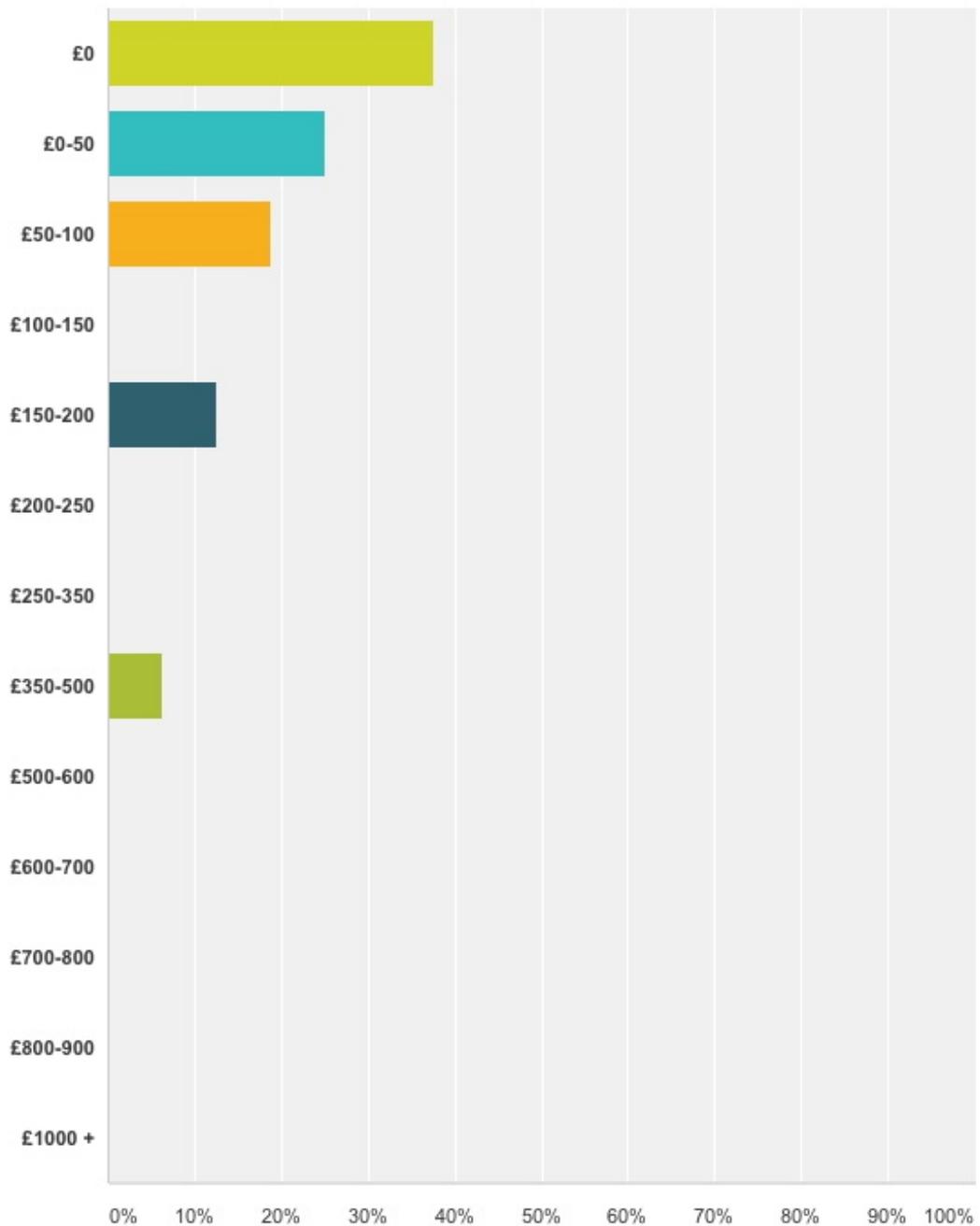
Q6

Customize

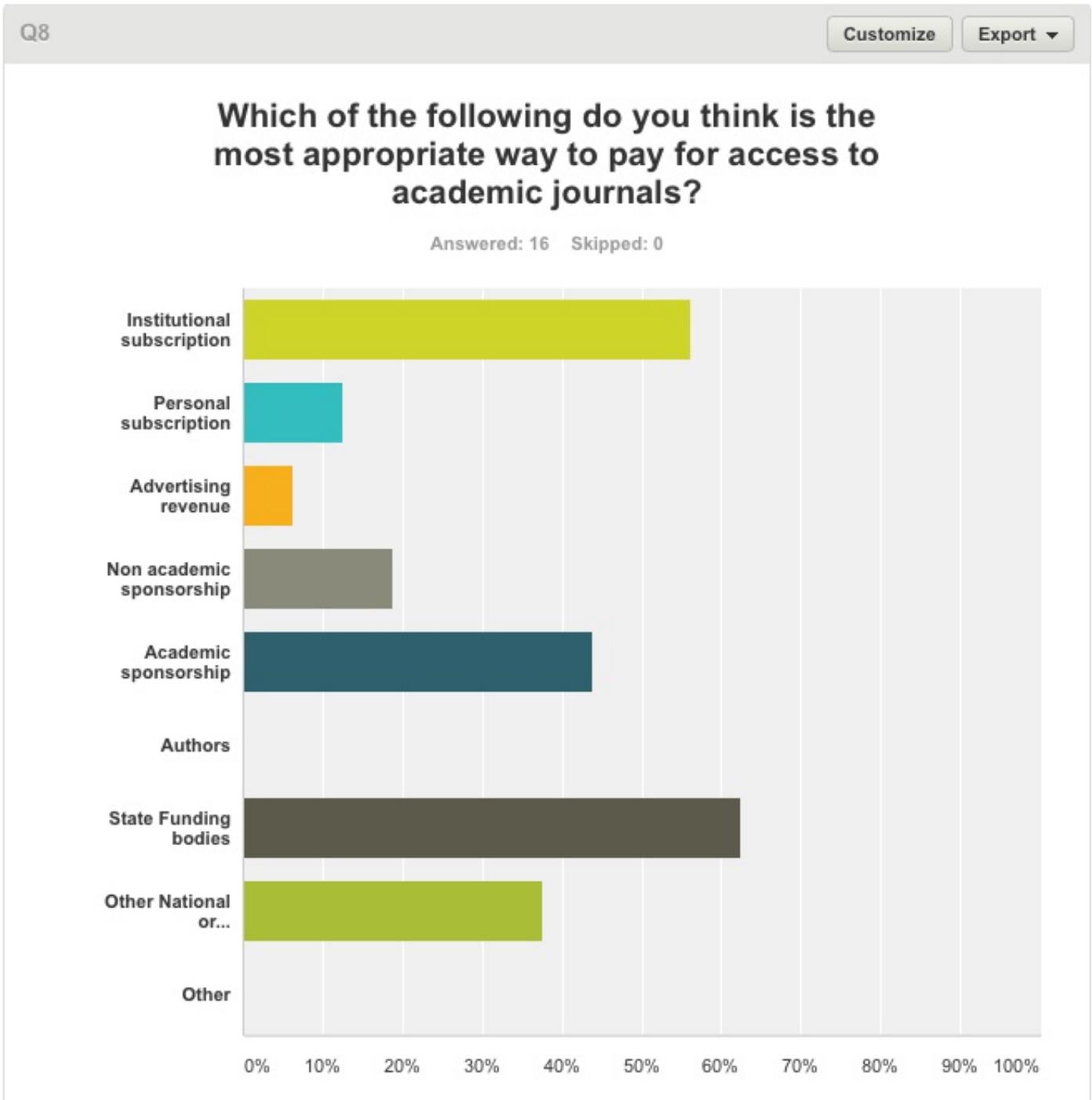
Export ▾

As an author, what is the most you would pay for Open Access once your article had been accepted?

Answered: 16 Skipped: 0



The following response was more interesting:



People had many different ideas about the most appropriate source of funding for open access, but NO ONE thought that authors were the most appropriate vessels to provide for open access.

People were also given the chance to provide substantive comments about open access and 5 people chose to share their opinions, which I cut and paste here:

Respondent 1: Publishers views should not be considered. They are not neutral stakeholders. Their goal is to maximise profits, not to further scholarship or increase accessibility, despite the lipservice they may pay.

Respondent 2. Elsevier, T&F, OUP, and many others are multinationals using slave labour of tenured individuals (not me - I'm unemployed though I have a visiting fellow position) to maintain the high standards of journals. They are taking public money and putting it into private hands, just like in war time. Some of the most interesting, innovative, and exciting journals are open access. While stodgy publishers need to make their buck somehow, knowledge and research should be shared among those to whom it is relevant. The multinationalisation (a fantastic nominalisation) of publishing is as boring as it is restrictive and elitist.

Respondent 3: The questions are confusing. The question of whether I am prepared to pay for my article depends on how and by whom the journal is edited. I refuse to pay submission fees if the journal is edited by a large publisher such as currently is the case with JMC with SAGE. As long as the journal is with sage, I don't pay any submission fee. If the journal would move to Gold open access and away from SAGE to an independent, not for profit platform, I would be prepared to pay. The question is not: to pay or not to pay, but about the relationship between publisher and author. The main point is to get away from for profit publishers.

Respondent 4: In principle I am fully supportive of the move towards open access. However, as an early career researcher (postdoc), I am concerned about the transition to open access on two different levels: 1) Whether my financial situation (be that personal finances or relating to grants/institutions) will limit my ability to publish my work in a timely manner; 2) How the costs of open access AND the changing nature of publications under these changes will affect my ability to be competitive on the job market. We have very little information, for example, about how hiring committees view open access/non-traditional publications vis-a-vis more established journals, or whether open access will make the road towards a monograph publication (still considered a basic requirement for permanent employment in anthropology) more difficult/costly.

Respondent 5: effectively is a 'pay to publish' system that also completely excludes early career or independent academics who have neither the money nor the backing of an institution to pay for them. This will ultimately mean that material from these types of researchers and writers will never be published, thus compromising the academic exercise and diminishing the scope of debate as some excellent work will be missed, go unheeded. A disaster for the future.

These figures show that there are many different opinions and feelings about open access even within our admittedly tiny sample.

At the same time as publishing this editorial, impatient and unsure of our options, we also decided to experiment with Green open access. We emailed all the contributors to the first issue of this year and asked them to upload their author version (which we handily appended as a cleaned up pdf) to their own home page or institutional repository, in compliance with Sage's Green archiving policy. We also asked them to send us the link and we set up a sort of mirror page of the journal, with the intention of creating a Green archive. So far, only one person has even replied to this email so the site remains [empty](#) apart from our editorial).

Now there are many reasons why people may not fill in online forms, reply to emails from me, or want to self-archive their publications, but to my mind these experiences highlight the need to make decisions about journals at the highest level, in the model of [Cultural Anthropology](#), rather than leaving it up to individual authors or readers which will naturally result in a patchy experience of open access at best, and no open access at worst.

They also indicate that there is a much more complex field of engagement with these ideas than would be seen from the presentation of very polarized debates in the [media](#). I present these partial perspectives here not as an indication of any complete picture of opinion regarding open access, more as the beginnings of an ethnography of how open access is currently being parsed by some people in the academy whose views are not often represented in literature that presents the voices of editors and publishers, but far less often authors. Indeed, in a conversation I had recently with another journal editor, they observed that many of their authors are content to have their work behind paywalls. They observed that many people working in South Asian studies are extremely fearful of cases like [Wendy Doniger's](#), namely of having their work willfully misinterpreted by others in what are highly fraught political contexts (in Doniger's case, Hindu nationalists succeeded in having her scholarly book on Hinduism pulled from the shelves in India). This is NOT my view, as I do not think we should write or publish defensively or with only a control audience in mind (and Doniger's book was published by Penguin and was hardly behind a paywall) but I cite it, and the comments above, to reflect the fact that there are large number of academics who are either disinterested, or fearful, of open access, for numerous different reasons (sometimes just because they are [plain old tired!](#)) and that we need to take stock of their opinions and situations, if we are to convince them that open access is something that they should sign up to.

This experience has also shown me how geo-located these debates are - the conversation in the US is different to the UK, which is different again to France, India, China or Australia. The Journal of Material Culture has an extremely international author pool which may (or may not) explain why many of our authors seem to be less engaged than we are in the highly specific questions that are emerging around OA in the UK.

So now - alongside the issue of how to take the Journal of Material Culture forward in terms of open access, I am also wondering why this **isn't** of concern to many people, what issues **do** drive decisions around publication and how we can participate and even intervene in those conversations, expanding the one we are already having. I see this is a nascent anthropology of open access which would locate OA as an experimental moment within a very particular institutional discursive frame that constitutes authors, intellectual property, and openness in specific ways. I've started a small dossier of these fragmented perceptions, misgivings, and complex feelings that may not only help us to see OA as some others do, but help us to unpack the assumptions about OA that we ourselves are working with. As always, comments more than welcome here or on the [survey](#).