

MYSTERY OF MIRROR JOURNALS



OFFICE OF SCHOLARLY COMMUNICATION

What are mirror journals?



Mirror journals are new journals which mirror existing subscription model publications. They are legitimate titles which are produced by the same publisher, have the same editorial board and selection criteria and operate under the same standards as the original publication. They are differentiated by their separate ISSN and the X at the end of their name e.g. Journal of Water Research X.

These journals have been set up to be completely Open Access publications alongside their paywalled counterparts. Researchers will submit their work to one central editorial board and it will be sent to the usual peer reviewers. Once a decision to publish has been reached the researcher has the chance to decide which title to publish in – the original subscription title or the new open title. Their choice is likely to be influenced by whether they are subject to funder mandates about Open Access.

Many publishers of these journals have stated that the aim of mirror journals is to achieve full Open Access. They claim that if, over time, the proportion of open content outweighs the paywalled then the two journals may merge back into one Open Access title.

Why are they needed?

Mirror journals have been set up in response to criticisms from the academic community about hybrid Open Access publications. These are subscription journals which charge researchers a fee to make their work openly available at the time of publication (known as gold Open Access). The hybrid model was intended to be a temporary measure on the path to full and open access to knowledge but has since become an established publication model costing institutions a great deal of money every year. Publishers hope that these mirror journals will allow them to operate a sustainable business model whilst still offering choices to researchers which allow them to meet their mandates.



POTENTIAL ADVANTAGES

Mirror journals claim to address some of the most common problems with the current publication system:



HYBRID

Mirror journals aim to avoid the problems caused by hybrid models of publication. This is where most of the content of a publication is kept behind a paywall but selected articles are made available via gold Open Access for a fee, leading institutions to complain that they are effectively paying twice for the same content (known as double-dipping). The mirror model means that there are two different journals with two charging models – allegedly making the process more straightforward for researchers, institutions and funders.



PRESTIGE

A great deal of the reward system in academia is tied to the perceived prestige of the journal title that work is published in. New Open Access journals take time to build up a reputation and this can be unappealing to some researchers who are looking to make an impression. Being attached to recognised publications with an established reputation means that researchers publishing in mirror journals still have the prestige of the publication and can continue to publish in titles recognised in their academic communities but can make their work openly available.



COSTS

Setting up a mirror journal is relatively low cost for a publisher as the same editorial board and systems are used rather than having to create new ones. In theory this means that there are few extra costs to pass on to the researcher. Mirror journals also help to save academic institutions money as they are eligible for read and publish deals where a one-off payment is made to cover both Open Access fees and subscription costs. They also arguably avoid the problem of double-dipping by operating on a separate business model to the subscription journal.

POTENTIAL PROBLEMS

However, both researchers and their institutions have raised concerns about this new form of journal:



COMPLIANCE

Even though they were in part created as a solution, mirror journals are not currently compliant with Plan S. The organisation behind the Plan has specifically said that it considers mirror journals to be hybrid publications which will not be compliant with their mandate. Although the guidance for Plan S is currently under review and it is not expected to be implemented until 2021 this is still a major concern for researchers looking to publish their work.



METRICS

There is currently some confusion around whether mirror journals will absorb the metrics of their sister titles or whether they will have their own. These measures of influence and impact take time to build for new titles which may not initially reflect well on researchers for whom this is a key concern. Some publishers have said that each title will have its own metrics but these may be combined if the two journals merge in the future.



VOLUME

There are already a vast range of journal titles available and mirror journals will create more choice for already overwhelmed researchers. Not only does this have implications for those looking to publish but it is possible that they could become the target of so-called predatory publishers looking to take advantage of any confusion. A tactic employed by problem publishers in the past has been to clone the titles of established publications to encourage contributions. Researchers will now be understandably confused by the new presence of journals which appear cloned but are actually legitimate.