A hybrid open-access model to bridge the publishing divide and reach out to a broader community

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If you are reading this editorial, you are probably someone who cares as much about free dissemination of scientific information as I do. Readers want to have free access to high quality scientific articles. Authors want to have their work viewed by as many people as possible. Hence, an open-access model is a great idea. Given the costs need to be covered to allow a journal to be sustainable, a hybrid model offers this particular advantage, as well as an important additional one, related to non-discrimination for author access, that I will describe later. First, I would like to clarify what “open-access” is, since there is evidence that both authors and readers are confused. There are primarily three models for scientific journal publishing: the “reader-pays” model, utilized by traditional (ie, non-open-access) journals; the “author-pays” model, utilized in most open-access journals; and hybrid models that combine the two. A frequent misconception is to therefore equate the concepts of “open-access” and “free”: articles in open-access journals are not really “free”, but rather paid for upfront by the authors. That is, in open-access journals, the cost is picked up in large part by the authors, and not by the subscribers. The reverse is true in traditional journals (though some journals have a large volume of advertisements that can defray costs). In hybrid models, the costs are distributed to both readers and authors.

A HYBRID OPEN-ACCESS MODEL

JAMIA utilizes a hybrid, “delayed open-access” model. In this model, all articles are made freely available after one year of publication, but authors have the option to remove the one-year embargo (and thus have their articles become “open-access” immediately) by paying a fee. For JAMIA, the “author-pays” fee is optional and lower than the fee charged by many popular open-access journals. Subscriptions cover the costs for all other articles. By offering two options, JAMIA allows authors who do not have resources to pay the publishing fees to still have their work appear in the journal. I strongly subscribe to the principle of publishing articles of merit, regardless of the author’s ability to pay, and hence I view this model as the one that better suits the journal at present.

Because of the prevailing confusion about open-access, many authors have told me they prefer to submit to open-access journals, as they want their work to be highly disseminated and highly cited. However, the hybrid model also allows this to happen: see for example the high representation of open-access articles in the list of “most-viewed” articles that we display in JAMIA’s web site (http://www.jamia.org), which include many “editor’s choice” articles that are open by default. Some authors are unaware that JAMIA offers this opportunity, and I hope this editorial helps clarify this option.

Related to the issue of author access, the hybrid model prevents JAMIA from inadvertently creating a deep publishing divide that would happen if important work from authors who can’t pay were excluded. This is currently the most appropriate model for fair publication by our highly diverse informatics community: while authors in some institutions can sponsor unlock fees, authors from less advantaged settings can still publish their best work in the journal and have it publicly accessible after 1 year. I hope this clarification allays the concerns of some readers and authors, and encourages authors to consider the immediate open-access alternative for articles accepted in JAMIA.

EXPANDED SCOPE

I also take this opportunity to clarify another important point of confusion. JAMIA is changing not only in terms of layout and expediency, but also philosophy: the journal, like our professional society AMIA, is reinventing itself, placing a strong emphasis on knowledge dissemination and broadened scope, while keeping its scientific quality through a peer-reviewed system that placed it at the top of its category in terms of impact factor. We are reaching out to new scientific communities such as those represented in the Translational Bioinformatics and Clinical Research Informatics Summits (don’t miss the upcoming issues highlighting some of the best articles from the conferences), public health informatics, as well as highly technical contributions from the computer science and engineering communities. JAMIA is looking for innovative contributions that represent what informatics practitioners and academicians are doing today. These contributions are not limited to evaluation of systems or to health informatics topics, and will start to appear more frequently in every new issue. JAMIA seeks high quality submissions in all AMIA strategic areas, and considers diversity to be fundamental for it to remain at the center stage in the education and practice of current and future informatics leaders.

We have simplified our article categories to encourage submissions by those who are not accustomed to think of JAMIA as a venue for publication. To expedite the process and ensure appropriate review, it is important for authors to categorize their articles properly: mature work that often contains thorough system evaluation or a detailed description of a novel application or adaptation of existing technologies and methods should be submitted in the category “Research and Applications,” while insights gained from the design and preliminary evaluation of systems, or short and generally applicable descriptions of new methods fit in the category, “Brief Communication”. Reports of implementations that offer insights that can guide other practitioners should be categorized as “Case Reports” (note that, in contrast to other medical specialty journals, in JAMIA, the “case” may be a system, software, or method). “Reviews” can report on what is available in the literature on topics of interest or constitute tutorials that help readers understand the importance of certain areas of study. The word limitations for each category should not be used as a factor for category
selection since JAMIA allows online supplements without word limits to accompany the primary article.

The main function of a scientific journal is to keep readers informed of the best work in the field. JAMIA is proudly pursuing this goal and continually evolving to reflect the dynamic nature of our field. I welcome your feedback and express once again my true appreciation for the tireless efforts of the editorial and management teams, anonymous reviewers, authors, and critics who helped us transition to a new editorial management system. We share the goal of improving the journal through every issue, and together we will continue to evolve models that allow the best informatics articles to be published in JAMIA.

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REFERENCES

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