



Imagining Truly Open Access Bioethics: From Dreams to Reality

Bryn Williams-Jones, Vincent Couture, Renaud Boulanger & Charles Dupras

To cite this article: Bryn Williams-Jones, Vincent Couture, Renaud Boulanger & Charles Dupras (2017) Imagining Truly Open Access Bioethics: From Dreams to Reality, *The American Journal of Bioethics*, 17:10, 19-20, DOI: [10.1080/15265161.2017.1365193](https://doi.org/10.1080/15265161.2017.1365193)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15265161.2017.1365193>



Published online: 11 Oct 2017.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Imagining Truly Open Access Bioethics: From Dreams to Reality

Bryn Williams-Jones, Université de Montréal
Vincent Couture, Université de Sherbrooke
Renaud Boulanger, McGill University Health Centre
Charles Dupras, McGill University

Imagine that you are part of the editorial board of a young bioethics journal committed to publishing open access (OA) and to ensuring accessibility to high quality and innovative scholarship. To support junior and international scholars who might not otherwise find places for their work in the leading Western bioethics journals, you do not charge author fees. Imagine also that you have no financial resources to pay for a professional website, automated submissions manager, or even a part-time coordinator: Your government has cut all grants for journals, you cannot go to industry for private funding because of the evident risk of apparent conflicts of interest, and your strapped-for-cash institution cannot afford to offer you any support. If one of the major publishers were to approach you to sign a deal, the temptation would be strong to accept. However, this would likely mean putting aside your ideals: It would be impossible to stay a “Green OA” publication (i.e., free of author publication charges) or supportive of junior and international scholars (because of pressures to “increase credibility” through artificially high rejection rates, for example).

Chattopadhyay and colleagues (2017) rightly point to the twin burdens of lack of access and opportunity to publish in health and bioethics journals faced by scholars and professionals working in low- and middle-income countries (LMIC). They ask us to “Imagine a world where all publicly funded research is freely available—irrespective of ability to pay or geographic location.” But this world is already being built in bioethics, if relatively slowly. At the forefront of the movement are professional associations (harkening back to the early days of scholarly publishing) and committed scholars who, like Chattopadhyay and colleagues, are disenchanted with the current models of expensive journal fees upstream (pay-to-publish) or downstream (access licenses) that limit dialogue across borders. Addressing these challenges requires breaking with the traditional models of publishing and taking advantage of the opportunities offered by low-cost Internet solutions. There are a growing number of credible journals that publish without any charges and that endorse self-archiving in

public repositories. Thus, we disagree with Chattopadhyay and colleagues’ generalization that the “business model of OA journals requires authors to bear the cost of publication.” Clearly, some “Gold OA” author-pay journals place a high burden on contributors: “Do I pay out of pocket to be published, or do I use these funds to help support a student?” But there are other models, including those journals that are volunteer driven and free of any charges. Recognizing this, Chattopadhyay and colleagues reference in passing journals such as the *AMA Journal of Ethics*, the *South African Journal of Bioethics and Law*, and the *Indian Journal of Medical Ethics*.

Our experience as executive editors publishing one such Canadian Green OA journal—*BioéthiqueOnline*—over the past 5 years has shown us that it is possible to imagine solutions to improve accessibility that are fully inclusive from the start, regardless of the reasons behind an individual’s lack of access to opportunities to engage with and contribute to the field of bioethics. In our high-income setting, these reasons include financial barriers experienced by bioethicists whose institutions no longer subscribe to the major publishers or by activists, patients, and professionals who do not have university affiliations. Working with a team of highly dedicated volunteers has given us the liberty to innovate (e.g., engaging artists in bioethics dialogues) in a timely manner, without having to worry that the manuscripts respond to one particular bioethics worldview.

But the sustainability of this model is at risk, as it relies on unpaid work, and growth opportunities are limited. Growth is limited by the lack of revenue streams, but also and, maybe more importantly, by the lack of support from the academic community. That lack of support is understandable, considering the large number of fraudulent OA journals (Beall 2017). However, individuals in the bioethics community must come to accept their responsibility (Parker 2013) and learn to differentiate poor-quality OA publications from those that are legitimate and credible sources for the dissemination of bioethics research.

That responsibility, however, is only the first step. If we are to shift the balance of power and realize Chattopadhyay

Address correspondence to Bryn Williams-Jones, Bioethics Program, Department of Social and Preventive Medicine, School of Public Health, Université de Montréal, CP 6128, succursale Centre-ville, Montreal, Quebec, H3 C 3J7 Canada. E-mail: bryn.williams-jones@umontreal.ca

and colleagues' vision of making quality bioethics research freely available to all, then bioethicists (from both high-income countries [HIC] and LMIC alike) must proactively take ownership of the OA revolution. Specifically, we call on our colleagues in the global bioethics community to:

1. Participate in OA journal editorial boards: Volunteering one's time and experience can go a long way to providing the guidance and credibility necessary for an OA journal to succeed.
2. Preferentially submit research to OA journals: A commitment by established bioethics scholars to publish in OA, where possible, will ensure that smaller journals can maintain a throughput of quality manuscripts and so be considered credible.
3. Accept requests to do peer reviews for OA journals: Peer review remains the gold standard in academia, and OA journals also require this support from the scholarly community.
4. Get involved in lobbying research institutions and governments to invest in OA: If the current funding model is to change and the stranglehold by a few mega-publishers is to be broken, then research institutions and governments around the world need to invest in supporting credible OA journals (e.g., through internal, national or international grants).

In making this plea to our colleagues worldwide, we understand that volunteering for the OA movement may often be easier for HIC scholars and practitioners than for their counterparts in LMICs. We are also conscious that the infrastructure (including high-speed Internet and reliable power sources) needed to contribute to OA journals may be lacking in many areas of the world. If OA is really

to be open to everyone, then these issues need to be discussed collectively so that we can find ways to alleviate any limitations for LMIC scholars.

Chattopadhyay and colleagues challenge Western bioethicists for being complicit in what they call "moral imperialism" by (1) not working to make research freely available to LMIC researchers and (2) focusing bioethics on the issues of HIC. While it is important to critique the financial model of publishers and elite journals, it is also worth highlighting the big strides being made by both LMIC and HIC scholars in developing fully OA publishing, including in the field of bioethics. The model of publishing freely is no longer a dream; the reality of OA is being built by groups in numerous fields, including in bioethics. But for this dream to fully succeed, and for knowledge to become freely available globally regardless of ability to pay, it needs the support of us all. Only then can we aspire to having a more inclusive bioethics, that is, one that is more pertinent to the diverse sociocultural and political realities being faced outside North America and Europe, not only in the ivory towers of academic bioethicists but also on the ground by practitioners, patients, and research participants alike. ■

REFERENCES

- Beall, J. 2017. What I learned from predatory publishers. *Biochimica Medica* 27 (2):273–79. <https://doi.org/10.11613/BM.2017.029>
- Chattopadhyay, S., C. Myser, T. Moxam, and R. De Vries. 2017. A question of social justice: How policies of profit negate engagement of developing world bioethicists and undermine global bioethics. *American Journal of Bioethics* 17 (10):3–14.
- Parker, M. 2013. The ethics of open access publishing. *BMC Medical Ethics* 14:16. <https://doi.org/10.1186/1472-6939-14-16>