# Alternative Publishing Platforms

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**Published on:** Apr 21, 2022

**DOI:** 10.21428/996e2e37.3ebdc864

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## Introduction

Research findings have traditionally been published as peer-reviewed academic articles, monographs and edited collection, proceedings, or theses, with academic publishing companies being the main venue for the publication of findings. In order for research organisations to make research findings available to their researchers and students, they have to subscribe to journals and monographs agreements. One of the issues with this process of publication and discoverability of academic content is that it has become increasingly costly to research organisations and has tied them to big deal agreements with a limited number of publishers[1].

More recently, changes in the scholarly communications landscape have fomented the emergence of other forms of communication and dissemination of research findings. For example: preprint repositories, data journals, scholarly blogs and websites, innovations of the peer review process, and micropublications[2]. These are innovative forms of publication that seek to remove the barriers, constraints and costs imposed by legacy academic publishing companies.

In the title of the activity and this scoping paper we use the term ‘alternative’ with which we precisely envision those publishing platforms and projects that follow different paths (e.g. in equitable publishing models, quality control, technical features, open source, iterative publishing workflows, etc.) compared to the already mentioned

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legacy publishers. Although we use the term alternative, we recognize that this can also lead to narrowing or even ambiguity. Where necessary, we try to address this in the right way or to make it explicit in our results.

Alternative forms of publication have been explored by multiple stakeholders in the last two decades, with open access publishing being the most widely known, which encompasses, for example, the publication of peer-reviewed articles in full open access (with or without article processing charges (APCs)) journals, in hybrid journals (subscription based journals which allow open access publishing upon payment of an APC), or via deposit of the research output in a repository (green route). One issue that has emerged from making research findings publicly available for free is that a large commercial sector has relied on journal publishing as a income stream with often large profit margins. These commercial players have developed considerable power over academia because academic research assessment has become intrinsically entangled with journal publications, making them almost the be-all and end-all for researchers. Hence research organisations spend large proportions of their budgets on access to journal publications, through academics themselves paying for APCs or research organisations signing up to transformative agreements[3]).

Globally, many have criticised focussing only on APC-based journals as a way to foster open access. The critique is that this merely shifts the onus of payment from those wanting to read to those wanting to publish and consequently creates new inequalities. Moreover, by linking the publisher's revenue to the number of accepted articles, the APC-system runs the risk of encouraging the lowering of scientific standards for acceptance in journals[4]. Diamond (i.e. free to read, free to publish) journal publishing models deserve attention as a way of making research articles freely available to readers whilst avoiding the potential drawbacks of APC-based publishing. Existing diamond journals are sometimes regarded as not requiring any fostering as they are already fully open access and do not charge authors. However, for these (often smaller) journals to remain a viable publishing venue, they cannot be neglected.

There are projects to set up diamond publishing options for institutions, and to support development of new and existing diamond journals in terms of infrastructure and visibility, such as through national and regional journal platforms.

Not all diamond journals can be considered as alternative publishing (platforms), but diamond journals can definitely make use of alternative publishing platforms such as infrastructure (including new, more inclusive, governance models). In addition, alternative publishing platforms can have diamond models. The connection between

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diamond journals and alternative publishing platforms is that they both can play a role in fulfilling the need that is felt for a form of open access that is characterised by lowering costs and keeping control of publishing, in terms of public and academic led governance. In addition to the problem of cost, there are several researchers' needs which aren't being met when publishing in traditional journals and why alternative platforms are seeing the light.

## Alternative publishing platforms

Over the past decade a vibrant ecosystem of so-called alternative open access publishing platforms has emerged, many of which aim to tackle some of the perceived issues with the journal publishing system other than cost. Platforms represent a move away from the traditional journal as an organising principle. These platforms might differ from traditional scholarly journals in a number of ways, including publication process, governance and underlying infrastructure.

They often apply a wider disciplinary scope, include the publication of submitted versions/preprints[5] and apply open peer review. Often the focus is on free availability of content, transparency and efficiency rather than selectivity or prestige.

Alternative publishing platforms may also focus on one or more of the following aspects:

- speed of publication (e.g. preprint servers, and F1000 prepublication);
- reforming the peer review process (e.g. Copernicus Publications; SciPost; F1000 open review; Peerpub, Peer Community In);
- reproducibility and replicability of research results (e.g. Open Science Framework; eLife's Executable Research Articles);
- publication bias; incentive structures.

The value of alternative publishing platforms is not to be underestimated. They can represent not only examples of real innovative, open access scholarly communication, but also effective "threat infrastructures" to traditional journal publishers.[6] Depending on one's point of view the acquisition of F1000Research by Taylor & Francis either confirms the value of such a threat or shows its limited effect. A number of developments can be seen, which are being set up by various parties with a specific goal in mind.

Below we identify three examples in which various aspects of 'alternative' are manifested.

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### Funder platforms

Notable examples of alternative publishing platforms have been started by funders like the Wellcome Trust, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Irish Health Board and more recently the European Commission with its Open Research Europe (all using the infrastructure and publishing model provided by F1000Research).[7]

### Stakeholder governed (institutional/national/regional) platforms

In the Netherlands alternative publishing platforms is one of the five pillars of the national open access strategy of the Universities of the Netherlands (UNL) in 2018.[8] Until now these initiatives have not received the same level of attention from research institutions that has gone into negotiating transformative deals with traditional publishers. An exception is the 'University Journals'[9] initiative that was announced in 2018, but to date has remained in a conceptual phase[10]. Another example is from TU Delft that aims to set up its own open access publishing platform as part of their open science programme.[11] Examples from other Knowledge Exchange countries include, for instance, UCL Open: Environment, the first journal from UCL Press run on ScienceOpen[12], and national, community-owned journal platforms in e.g. Finland, Denmark, France and the Netherlands[13].

These examples show that these alternative platforms can offer an interesting and innovative route to open access using a different infrastructure. These platforms are also often responsible for publishing in native languages and therefore supporting multilingualism.[14] In some cases, they act as a counterbalance to the massification and uniformisation of big publishers and as such they bring bibliodiversity.[15]

### Experimental publishing platforms

Scholar-led platforms like SciPost[16], ResearchEquals[17] and, in the slipstream of the recently announced UKRI Open Access policy[18], the Octopus[19] platform, could just as well qualify as alternative publishing platforms. The underlying technical (open) infrastructure of such platforms enables communities to build and establish new publishing models, that for example disintegrate the publishing functions, or offer new open science workflows like, amongst others, open peer review, replicability, modularity, machine-readability, pre-registration of hypotheses and methods, transparency and ease of accessing methods, validation and re-usability of data and inference. These new ways of publishing research, designed as they are specifically around the needs of research and researchers rather than for readability or income-

generation, should be able to change the incentive system of publication to favour any or all aspects of good research practice.

## Sustainability of alternative publishing platforms

A big question is what kind of support alternative publishing venues need and how to organise that support. It may start with wider recognition of their role. Gaining more insight in infrastructural support and scalable mechanisms for financial support where necessary is also needed, and these may depend on collective action, as outlined in a recent Knowledge Exchange report.[20] The challenge may lie in how to apply the idea of scaling small: generating economies of scale while maintaining diversity and decentralised control.

## Towards a taxonomy of alternative publishing platforms

As illustrated above, alternative publishing platforms are considered by many as avenues to effect positive changes in the publishing [or scholarly communication] system. However, different people think of different things when they talk about ‘alternative publishing platforms’. To facilitate a productive conversation among stakeholders (including researchers, institutions, funders and (non-profit) publishers), a proposal is made to construct a taxonomy of the concept of alternative publishing platforms, teasing apart the different characteristics at play. Far from proposing one definition, such a taxonomy can help to clarify discussions around alternative publishing platforms and highlight opportunities for development and investment.

## Follow-up actions

In the first phase of the activity the Knowledge Exchange Task & Finish group will ask the following research questions: what characteristics of alternative publishing platforms can be distinguished and how do existing alternative publishing platforms fit into the proposed taxonomy? As a first outcome, the group will develop a toolkit which integrates the proposed taxonomy. Throughout the process we would welcome feedback on this scoping paper and the developed taxonomy. To collect community feedback on our work, like this scoping paper, all results will be published on the MIT PubPub platform, which allows others to contribute during the duration of the activity.

Scoping Paper_ Alternative Publishing Platforms_def.pdf 282 KB

## Footnotes

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