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Open or Openwashing? Preliminary Findings from a Content Analysis of Publisher Websites

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Open or Openwashing? Preliminary Findings from a Content Analysis of Publisher Websites



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openwashing

VERB. to spin a product or company as open, although it is not

Background

Our survey of the literature concluded that definitions of openwashing coalesce around two major themes: marketing and transparency. Openness as a virtue has become a marketing strategy used by businesses to their commercial advantage (Weller 2013). "The power, ethics, and brand" of Open resonate widely with the public, so companies want to associate themselves with it (Wiley, 2016). Various and conflicting definitions of Open also make it easy for diverse groups to co-opt the language of Open. Concern about openwashing is well documented in some corners of the Open community (i.e., among open education practitioners), but is less explicitly discussed in LIS literature. Our study addresses this gap by identifying common themes and tactics used by academic publishers to market Open, which we deem to be characteristics of openwashing.

Methodology

A content analysis of 161 webpages about Open access was conducted, taken from 22 medium-to-large academic publishers. Publishers were identified and randomly sampled from a list created by Nishikawa-Pacher (2022). Our sample includes Elsevier, Springer, MDPI and others that publish at least 125 journals. We each independently coded webpages with NVivo, using the "7 Sins of Greenwashing" as our initial coding framework (Terrachoice, 2007). We incorporated new themes as they emerged, grouping "like" codes together before finalizing the key themes that comprise our preliminary Openwashing framework.

Openwashing Framework

	Hidden Trade-Off	A claim suggesting that a paper (or the publisher itself) is Open based on a narrow set of attributes without attention to other important publishing issues.
	Inconsistent	Presenting information in two or more different places, which is inconsistent and does not match.
	Lesser of Two Evils	A claim that may be true but that risks distracting from the greater impacts to publishing as a whole.
	Vague	A claim so poorly defined or broad that its real meaning is likely to be misunderstood by the consumer.
	No Proof	A claim not substantiated by easily accessible supporting information or by a reliable third-party certification.
	Client as Partner	Claiming client contributions to or impact on publisher open access models.

Hidden Tradeoff

"Springer Nature supports immediate Gold OA as the most open, least restrictive form of OA." - Springer

"Open access publishing is an author pays model, in which the published research is freely accessible to all. The cost to publish varies per journal and you can learn more about the Article Processing Charge (APC) for each journal in their submission guidelines." - Sage

OA is narrowly defined and branded in terms of publishing fees.

> False choice

Implying that one has to choose between a narrow set of options in order to make their work Open, when in fact, other options exist.

"Open Choice: Your research. Your choice. Choose optional open access in a Springer hybrid journal with Open Choice. Make your research more visible and accessible, immediately on publication. More than 1,900 Springer journals offer optional open access..." - Springer

Author is being presented the choice to make work Open in a journal (for a fee) or publish behind a paywall. The option that's left out is depositing a copy of their work (for free!) in a repository.

Lesser of Two Evils

"Our current path to a sustainable, open access future is primarily through transformative agreements, consistent with the Transformative Arrangements route of Plan S." - Cambridge University Press

> Good Quality

Claims about the value and prestige of works that they publish, owing to publisher processes.

"Rigorous standards and quality journals across the board.

- Rigorous peer review
- Helping authors excel
- Quality journals
- Commitment to quality

You want quality? We've got it." - Elsevier

"All journals uphold a peer-reviewed, rapid, and rigorous manuscript handling and editorial process." - MDPI

Transformative agreements make work Open but not in an equitable way. Only authors at institutions with these agreements get benefit of no APC.

Note words like "rigour," "quality," "standard," and the continued emphasis on peer review.

Details about quality aren't bad on their own, but equating their specific brand of Open with quality can be a tactic to justify the price to publish.

No Proof

"While offering competitive article publishing charges (APCs), our expert editors and reviewers ensure that all our open access publications maintain the highest standards of quality..." - Elsevier

> Presumed leadership
Broad claims about their leadership in the open movement, while neglecting others that have had a key influence.

"We're the pioneers of open access publishing." - BMC

"As a pioneer open access publisher, our mission is to make new research findings accessible to everyone." - MDPI

"Pioneering new publishing models and policies." - Cambridge University Press

There are publishers with lower fees, so what makes these competitive? What data supports this claim?

Wait, so you're all pioneers?

So What?

Some academic publishers are co-opting the language of Open to brand services that do not reflect Open values, and in doing so are redefining the meaning of Open. When librarians are able to identify and name openwashing practices in scholarly publishing, they are better positioned to:

- advise researchers on open publishing options
- critically evaluate and assess OA membership offers
- advocate to uphold the principles of Open as a core value of librarianship

Next Steps

- Apply inter-coder reliability
- Do quantitative data analysis to determine patterns or differences across publishers
- Refine framework

BEWARE!
OPENWASHING PRACTICES CAN LOOK LIKE BUSINESS AS USUAL.

Scan the QR code for slides from a previous presentation, where we provided an overview of the literature on openwashing.

