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Tangled Terms

How We Talk About Transformative Agreements

Transformative agreements (TAs) are a relatively new type of journal package that typically includes both access to the publisher's paywalled content and coverage of the open access (OA) publishing fees for an institution's authors. As many libraries have entered into these agreements in recent years, analyses of their "value" are increasingly being presented at conferences and in the literature. However, these assessments often reveal inconsistencies in how TAs are defined. The term "transformative agreement" is broad, encompassing considerable complexity and diversity in terms and requirements. It is important that we have a clear understanding of what is being assessed. Additionally, we must critically engage with the language that publishers use surrounding TAs, not simply adopt or amplify their terms by framing results of these agreements as "cost savings."

We suggest exercising caution when using language that assesses the value of TAs and recommend considering several key questions to guide this reflection: How are terms such as "value," "savings," and "cost avoidance" defined? What indicators are used to assess success? Do these indicators account for administrative costs—such as launching new platforms, developing new processes, or the human labor required to administer these agreements—which are often rendered invisible to authors who benefit directly from not paying an article processing charge (APC)? We contend that in most cases, it is more accurate to describe "value" or "cost savings" as a shift or redistribution of funds. It is also important to recognize that the "value" of TAs can be perceived in other ways, such as eliminating barriers to authors and facilitating more OA content. Here we aim to initiate a conversation among collections librarians and scholarly communications librarians about these issues, with the goal of developing a shared understanding and consistent language for discussing and assessing TAs.

Defining "Transformative" Agreements

It has been argued that, globally, the funds libraries spend on subscriptions are sufficient to fully "transform" the publishing system to support OA services—eliminating the need for authors to pay APCs out of pocket.¹ This idea gave rise to the term "transformative agreement." A TA is generally defined as an agreement "in which former subscription expenditures are repurposed to support OA publishing of the negotiating institutions' authors."² Unlike conventional agreements that might include contract elements such as an APC

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discount, an embargo period, or deposit into an institutional repository, TAs aim to convert prior subscription payments into immediate OA publishing. Over time, TA has become an umbrella term that encompasses agreements with a variety of different terms and conditions.³ Other labels such as “Read and Publish” and “Publish and Read” are also used—sometimes with distinct meanings and other times used interchangeably with the term TA. Choosing not to use the term “transformative” is itself a deviation from Schimmer et al.’s⁴ original vision for these agreements.⁵

Regardless of the specific terminology or definitions, the details of these agreements vary widely. For example, some agreements include caps on the number of eligible papers, while others allow unlimited publishing (e.g., TAs negotiated via Canada’s consortia, the Canadian Research Knowledge Network [CRKN]).⁶ Whether or not gold journals are covered in the agreement can also vary, as do the types of works (research articles, review articles, case studies, letters to the editor, commentaries). How the terms and total cost of each negotiated contract are determined and whether previous APC spend is factored in vary widely and is not standardized.

This diversity of TA models matters when it comes to any assessment, evaluation, or discussion of TAs. For instance, whether gold journals are included becomes significant when discussing the financial impacts of a particular agreement because many commercial publishers provide a lower APC discount for gold journals (e.g., 10–20 percent) than hybrid journals (e.g., 100 percent; see CRKN’s Read and Publish agreements).⁷ Given these variations, broad generalizations about the benefits and drawbacks of TAs should be made with caution. Aggregating and analyzing data from agreements with different terms and conditions is unlikely to yield meaningful conclusions regarding their impact. Still, the complexity should not deter analysis or discussion. It simply underscores the need to clearly articulate these differences and account for them in the framework for evaluation.

Defining “Savings,” “Value,” and “Cost”

Just as there is no single definition of a TA, there is no consensus methodology for measuring the “savings” achieved or the publication “costs” involved in TAs. Traditional subscription models have clear metrics, such as comparing a package price to individual list prices or calculating cost per use (the price divided by the number of uses).⁸ However, these metrics cannot be applied with hybrid journals that combine both closed and OA articles or with TAs. Ironically, institutional usage of articles under a TA can now only be accurately measured for paywalled content. As a result, libraries and consortia are grappling with how to assess and analyze their value, requiring reevaluation of assessment models and practices.

In the context of collection assessment, “savings” typically means actual dollar amounts, thereby defining value in financial terms. Although TAs clearly reduce or eliminate APCs for authors, the reductive nature of defining savings and value in this way both simplifies the complexity of OA benefits and impacts and obscures the costs. The idea that TAs produce savings due to the elimination of APCs assumes authors would pay APCs in full if such an agreement did not exist. However, the cost reduction associated with TAs may incentivize publication in hybrid journals at the expense of other models such as diamond, which charge no APCs, or fully gold journals, which frequently charge a lower APC than hybrid journals.⁹ The impact of the TA on author publication behavior is still not well understood, although studies are beginning to illuminate some findings.¹⁰ Are authors intentionally seeking out

journals covered by TAs? What role does an APC waiver play in determining where to publish? And how does the choice of corresponding author, generally used to determine TA eligibility, factor in? More work needs to be done on the relationship between TAs, APCs, and author behavior to better understand how APC waivers might actually translate into savings.

APC pricing lacks transparency. This is an important factor to consider when discussing APC cost savings. As Butler et al.¹¹ demonstrated, there is a large amount of variability in terms of APC list prices, even across journals for the same publisher, suggesting that prices are not cost based but driven by other factors. Although delving into the cost drivers and market conditions related to APCs is beyond the scope of this piece, it is worth noting that the savings being asserted are more akin to the traditional big deal argument made by publishers, namely, that the big deal represented massive savings compared with the aggregated list subscription prices for the included journals.¹² It is necessary to critically examine any argument of cost savings for TAs that depends on APC list prices because these prices are set by the publisher, often without any perceivable standards or transparent framework around cost breakdown (i.e., how the APC is calculated based on elements like production). Efforts have been made to promote transparency, as seen in the Open Access Toolkit's¹³ approach to categorizing the costs of running a journal or early initiatives like the Fair Open Access Alliance,¹⁴ which provided a framework through a breakdown of publishing services and fees. More often, however, publishers do not follow any standardized approach; instead, APCs are tied to metrics such as journal prestige.¹⁵ The lack of transparency around these costs preserves publishers' pricing strategies and becomes even more obscured when APCs are rendered invisible to authors via TAs, where the expense is transferred to libraries. This begs the questions: how is "cost savings" defined and what is being "saved"?

As academic libraries grapple to frame the value of TAs as cost savings, the term "cost avoidance" has emerged in the literature.¹⁶ While the term "avoidance" reframes the discussion to emphasize preventing spending rather than reducing existing costs, it is still predicated on the financial value of "avoiding" an APC. Even if cost avoidance is accepted in theory, the question remains: a cost to whom? Libraries—and by extension institutions—frequently bear the costs of TAs, though APC funding can also come from a variety of sources including institutional or individual grant funding.¹⁷ Although researchers manage their own grants, institutional programs are administered by staff, generating hidden labor or technical costs, a burden TAs similarly carry. Although authors may avoid directly paying the APC, TAs impose additional invisible costs on administrative units and libraries through increased staff time. TA administration, like the APCs, is not standardized, and the communication, marketing, institutional verifications (if necessary), troubleshooting the TA pipeline from institution to publisher, and assessment of the agreements are not consistent within the TA model. A 2024 Jisc report¹⁸ on TAs found that these agreements did not necessarily remove administrative burden of managing OA and that TAs remain resource heavy.¹⁹ Libraries more often witness this burden as we support authors who often rely on libraries for guidance in navigating complicated and potentially confusing publisher workflows (e.g., understanding author agreements, choosing open copyright licenses, interpreting jargon). Libraries, then, are inheriting additional administrative activities with these agreements, and we argue that these administrative costs must be considered when assessing a TAs value.

Cost savings or cost avoidance arguments often overlook the growing numbers of third-party technologies (e.g., OA Switchboard,²⁰ SciFree's Journal Search Tool²¹) and services

to administer and better manage TAs. As OA models evolve and the number of TAs increases, so does the development of vendor technologies to integrate, evaluate, and assess. Some of these tools operate using open infrastructure (e.g., Research Organization Registry),²² but most require financial support for access and maintenance (e.g., SciFree, OA Switchboard, Journal Checker Tool²³). Although initial expenses may be covered by grants or sponsorships, sustaining these tools once funding ends will likely fall to library collection budgets—as is indeed the case now with OA Switchboard.

While TAs are often framed in terms of financial savings, their evaluation must also consider the value of the increased number of articles made openly accessible to the world. TAs clearly advance OA objectives, but value assessment should move beyond calculations of savings based on the number of papers and APC list prices or discounts to reflect the full spectrum of OA publishing practices. When value is reduced to financial savings, OA becomes further equated with TAs and APC discounts, reinforcing many publisher narratives about library savings,²⁴ overlooking other costs, and positioning TAs as the default path to meeting OA mandates and policies at the expense of more equitable models such as repository-based green OA and no-fee diamond OA journals.

Conclusion

This article is not meant to suggest that understanding the costs associated with TAs lacks value or that reduction in publication costs for the institution or researcher is not occurring. Rather, we argue that when assessing and reporting on these issues, we must carefully examine the assumptions embedded in terms like “savings,” “cost avoidance,” and “value.” Such terminology often reinforces the revenue-driven business models of commercial publishers, rather than reflecting institutional and library OA priorities and the principles of open scholarship.

Framing outcomes as “savings” or “cost avoidance” may obscure the fact that these agreements often redirect funds rather than reduce overall expenditure. This framing also hides the labor behind TAs, the complexities of the systems, and the lack of transparency in the publishing costs. In this context, defining savings, value, and costs must go beyond financial metrics to include equity, sustainability, transparency, and alignment with institutional and scholarly values. Only then can we meaningfully assess whether TAs are truly “transformative”—or simply transactional.

Developing such an evaluative approach that moves beyond traditional subscription methods of assessment will require time to and collaboration across sectors, including infrastructure providers, publishers, consortia, institutions, and authors. However, this work is essential to reclaim the discourse around OA for those most invested in its successful future. *z*

Notes

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