
Guest Post — From Parasitism to Symbiosis: Escaping Peer-Pressure and For-Profit Publishers Through Diamond Open Access

By CAMILLE THOMAS, ROMAIN VAUCHER | JUL 16, 2026

ADVOCACY | AUTHORS | BUSINESS MODELS | CONTROVERSIAL TOPICS | INFRASTRUCTURE | OPEN ACCESS
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Editors' note: Today's post is by Camille Thomas and Romain Vaucher. Camille is a biogeosciences researcher at the University of Bern. Romain is a Senior Lecturer in Sedimentology at James Cook University, Australia.

Ecosystems emerge from the interactions between groups of organisms and their environment. From our human perspective, we often describe them as either balanced or disrupted, but in reality, they are never static. They are constantly shifting, moving through states that are dynamic, sometimes fragile, across both time and space. Species come and go with new predators arriving, others migrating or disappearing. As environmental conditions change, previously constrained organisms can expand, and entirely new interactions begin to take shape. When these environmental conditions shift more dramatically, the effects ripple through the system. Existing relationships are reshaped, and new ecological connections can emerge. In this sense, change is not only a source of disruption, but also an engine for innovation.

In many ways, human industries and their associated economies function similarly to ecosystems. Terms such as disruption, evolution, and predator–prey dynamics are routinely borrowed to describe their interactions. Over the past decades, the scientific publishing industry has itself undergone major “environmental” shifts, triggering rapid and far-reaching evolutionary responses.



The rise of open access (OA) publishing, driven by growing demand and reinforced by funder mandates, rapidly reshaped the scientific publishing ecosystem. Subscription-based journals saw a key resource stream decline, as institutions and researchers were pushed to comply with new policies.

Some actors adapted by occupying new niches, launching fully Gold OA journals or developing hybrid models (i.e., journals relying on the subscription-based model while also offering a Gold OA, route). Large for-profit publishers, once seemingly at risk, proved highly resilient (Larivière, Haustein, & Mongeon, 2015 (<https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0127502>); Butler, et al., 2023 (https://doi.org/10.1162/qss_a_00272)). By introducing article processing charges (APCs) to publish via the Gold OA route, they shifted the cost of publication onto authors and their institutions, turning OA into a new, stable resource stream (Frank, Foster, & Pagliari, 2023 (<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2022.115592>)).

Major transitions often give rise to new interactions. In scientific publishing, researchers were pushed to explore new venues, sometimes less prestigious or immediately rewarding, but potentially more sustainable over time. Green OA was one of the first adaptive strategies. It required little change in publishing practices, allowing compliance with OA mandates through institutional repositories. Yet, rather than a true solution, it has largely functioned as a temporary refuge during a period of disruption.

Authors deciding to use the Green route submit their non-formatted manuscript to OA platforms (e.g., institutional repositories) after acceptance in a non-OA journal. Therefore, the authors are complying with OA mandates by funders. As a result, the article is available under two different formats on the web: i) a nicely formatted PDF beyond a paywall, and ii) a raw non-formatted version on an institutional platform, which has its access commonly delayed (as required by some journals applying embargo periods to their accepted manuscripts). The underlying resource dynamics remain largely unchanged. Institutions continue to pay subscription fees, while also covering APCs for Gold OA.

At the same time, universities invest in building and maintaining repositories. The Green OA option that initially served as a transitional niche has now become a comfortable shelter, one that delays deeper, systemic change (Vaucher & Thomas, 2026 (<https://doi.org/10.57035/journals/sdk.2026.e41.2397>)). In this evolving ecosystem, dominant actors have not disappeared; they have adapted. A few decades later, their profits have surged (Suarez and McGlynn 2017, Khoo 2019). Former apex predators now extract value through multiple pathways, increasingly resembling the parasites described by Walter & Mullins (2019) (<https://doi.org/10.1091/mbc.E19-03-0147>) within the system they continue to shape.

During the OA transition, new “species” emerged, challenging the dominance of established for-profit publishers with models that leaned heavily toward parasitism, drawing on public funds through high APCs while offering limited added value (minimal editorial oversight, weak curation, and insufficient safeguards against unethical practices). Actors such as Hindawi, MDPI, and Frontiers rapidly occupied this niche (Enserink, 2015 (<https://www.science.org/content/article/open-access-publisher-sacks-31-editors-amid-fierce-row-over-independence>); Oviedo-García, 2021 (<https://doi.org/10.1093/reseval/rvab020>); Nicholas, et al., 2023 (<https://doi.org/10.3145/epi.2023.sep.09>)). Their model proved difficult to compete with: efficient, scalable, and perfectly aligned with the pressures faced by researchers operating under a “publish or perish” regime (Hanson et al. 2024 (<https://direct.mit.edu/qss/article/5/4/823/124269/The-strain-on-scientific-publishing>)).

Faster publication, predictable acceptance pathways, and relatively standardized fees created a powerful pull (Horbach, Ochsner, and Kaltenbrunner 2022 (<https://www.leidenmadtrics.nl/articles/reflections-on-guest-editing-a-frontiers-journal>)). It did not take long for established publishers to adopt similar strategies. Rather than resisting, they integrated these trophic dynamics into their own models, leveraging their prestige to justify even higher APCs (Butler, et al., 2023 (https://doi.org/10.1162/qss_a_00272)). New outlets emerged, capitalizing on brand recognition to market visibility as a premium product, like *Nature* and its ever-expanding list of topic-specific journals, with fees reaching unprecedented levels (“*Nature Neuroscience* offers OA publishing (<https://www.nature.com/articles/s41593-019-0095-2>)”).

In this system, researchers find themselves caught in accelerating feedback loops, where survival depends on continued participation. Yet, as in ecological systems, an overabundance of extractive strategies can destabilize the whole, and when resource extraction outpaces regeneration, ecosystems weaken. Scholarly publishing is in such a phase where long-term sustainability gives way to short-term gain. But it is far from balanced. On one hand, parasitic dynamics remain difficult to escape, as they are embedded in the global mechanics of research evaluation. On the other hand, new “species” are emerging and co-evolving within distinct niches.

For instance, parts of the Chinese research ecosystem operate under different constraints and incentives (presumably induced by the current lack of Transformative Agreements and strong influence of national preference regarding economic choices), showing limited and even decreasing alignment with Gold OA models (<https://newsletter.journalology.com/p/the-rise-of-china-and-the-fall-of->). As their influence on global science continues to grow, their presence will inevitably reshape interactions across the system. How other ecosystems will adapt to this shifting balance remains an open question.

At the same time, national and international funding bodies are actively cultivating alternative niches. These rely on scholar-led, publicly funded, community-driven models: most notably the Diamond OA (free to publish, free to read, preserving author ownership, and the right to freely share their work). In Europe, initiatives such as DIAMAS and the European Diamond Capacity Hub are laying the groundwork for this transition, in parallel with broader efforts to reform research assessment (e.g., San Francisco and Stockholm declarations) ([Sabel & Larhammar, 2025 \(https://doi.org/10.1098/rsos.251805\)\)](https://doi.org/10.1098/rsos.251805)).

These developments have the potential to redefine the environmental parameters of scholarly publishing. Diamond OA offers a pathway out of extractive dynamics. While it has long remained confined to relatively artisanal, community-driven efforts, this may be changing. The current modes of publishing (PDF/HTML) are not technically complex in themselves and, although publishing involves editorial and infrastructural costs, these formats are not inherently expensive. With increasing public investment in shared infrastructures, the conditions are now in place for a broader shift. The next evolutionary step may not depend on technology or funding but on whether researchers themselves choose to occupy this emerging niche. As incentives and initiatives multiply, one might expect the most sustainable models to prevail. Yet, anthropogenic ecosystems rarely evolve according to rational or sustainability-driven principles alone. Other selective pressures like prestige, inertia, short-term gain continue to shape their trajectories.

For now, only a handful of disciplines rely on these alternative mechanisms, while others are slowly beginning to transition. Yet the most well-funded areas of research remain locked in dynamics they inadvertently created not so long ago, ones that resemble classic predator-prey interactions but that are increasingly drifting toward parasitism from an external ecological perspective. The last major transition was not driven by principle alone, but by incentives: mandates and funding requirements pushed the system away from subscription-based models toward open access.

Today, a similar shift is taking shape. With infrastructures now emerging in university libraries and coordinated efforts to build a viable framework, the conditions for change are once again being assembled. So the next phase may hinge less on structural constraints than on collective choice. Researchers can continue to tolerate these extractives, almost vampiristic interactions, or shift toward more symbiotic models such as those offered by Diamond OA, where value is ethically shared rather than siphoned. Ecosystems do not change by intention alone, but by selection.

The question now is simple: which model will we choose to sustain?

*Authors' note: This piece is shamelessly inspired by the beautiful paper by [Walter and Mullins \(2019\)](#) (<https://doi.org/10.1091/mbc.E19-03-0147>), published in *Molecular Biology of the Cell*.*



Camille Thomas

Camille Thomas is a biogeosciences researcher at the University of Bern, working across microbiology, geochemistry, and sedimentology to better understand the evolution of past and present ecosystems. He co-founded the Diamond Open Access journal *Sedimentologica* and actively advocates for more equitable, community-driven publishing practices in STEM through editorial work, open science initiatives, and science communication.



Romain Vaucher

Romain Vaucher is a Senior Lecturer in Sedimentology at James Cook University, Australia, with expertise in the dynamics of sedimentary systems across modern and ancient continental to shallow-marine environments. Alongside his academic responsibilities, Romain is actively engaged in Open Science advocacy, particularly in Open Access, and is a co-founder of the Diamond Open Access journal *Sedimentologica*.

Discussion

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ON "GUEST POST — FROM PARASITISM TO SYMBIOSIS: ESCAPING PEER-PRESSURE AND FOR-
PUBLISHERS THROUGH DIAMOND OPEN ACCESS"



Very eloquent. Perhaps follow up about the finances, especially as you've got a diamond OA journal going. Just how could free for all work at scale? Usually I don't even bother to read articles about diamond OA because it just seems like blithe dreaming, but this inspired me to read a bit more. The core of the argument seems to be the basics of publishing doesn't really cost that much and there's some beneficent funders out there to make it work.

I went through DOAJ for free to publish journals in "ecology", got 220 returns, ranging from 14 published in Ukraine to 1 in the UK. Of the 5 published in the U.S., one had died at age 10. (European Journal of Ecology, by Kansas State U library), one published about 5-6 articles a year but only 1 in 2025 (Great Lakes J of Botany), and a couple published up to 40 articles a year (San Francisco estuary and watershed science by UC Davis). My take home was these existing diamond journals were flickering along in a sheltered corner, but just barely. How do advocates see this getting traction beyond passionate and eloquent essays?

By CHRIS MEBANE | JUL 16, 2026, 9:13 AM



Scale and funding are the obvious barriers to Diamond OA. Given ongoing demands for massive investment in research integrity tools, persistent identifiers, and all sorts of other new technologies, journal costs are not going down any time soon. I'm reminded of something we wrote in The Brief back in 2023:

<https://www.ce-strategy.com/the-brief/diamond/#1>

Putting that to one side, some researchers, politicians, and policymakers may not fully appreciate just how much investment would be required to make a Diamond OA network a reality. Kumsal Bayazit, the CEO of Elsevier, told investors at the end of last year that Elsevier has 9,000 staff, of which 2,500 are technologists, and that RELX spends \$1.6 billion a year on technology. European agencies would need to invest a lot more ... to create a Diamond OA utopia that provides as much value as existing scholarly publishers create each and every day.

By DAVID CROTTY | JUL 16, 2026, 9:25 AM



I've been working with academic journals (serials) for about 25 years. I've seen that scholarly journal publications do not last longer than the funding (even in scholarly society). Even if one has a reliable body of editors, authors, and reviewers (who work for free) to guarantee the quality of content or research and someone to craft the PDF or HTML (formats which must be updated continually to meet current standards), there are many other considerations regarding distribution or access including: some institution or group to pay for hosting or archiving the resource (for example, sometimes a university pays for an Institutional Repository and its maintenance), someone to monitor and provide accessibility and readability, and, quite frankly, some way to promote (where do I find this? Has it been added or crawled by Google? How does anyone know it exists?) the resource. In my opinion there must be an infrastructure for scholarly journals or articles that facilitates finding, accessing, and even promoting valid and peer reviewed scholarly research. I've never thought that academic publishing (even Open Access) was free. I believe that the Open Access movement has opened up scholarship from many non-Western countries (for example) and has exposed many of the abuses in large academic presses. However, the history of scholarly journal publishing shows that no publication lasts without funded infrastructure and support. In the end, I think there is much more to scholarly journal publishing (subscription or Open Access) and access than anyone has mentioned here.

By JUDITH NAGATA | JUL 16, 2026, 2:50 PM



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