[Headline] Is open access tarnished?

[Standfirst] As open access terms have split into colour-coded brands, not all allow totally unrestricted access and reuse. Among these, “bronze OA” stands out as a potentially damaging misnomer, writes Steven Vidovic

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Open Access (OA) is a global movement to unlock research outputs, allowing unrestricted access without barriers except for the need of an internet connection. Different characteristics of OA have become branded with colours (such as Green OA), precious metals (e.g. Gold OA) and gems (e.g. Diamond OA) that are intended to describe the nature of how open outputs are and how that is achieved. However, it is crucial to recognise that some OA brands fall short of true Open Access. Among these, the term 'Bronze OA' stands out to me as a potentially damaging misnomer.

‘Bronze OA’ refers to content, which is freely accessible to users at the point of use, but it is not always clear what license is applied or what the users’ (or indeed the authors’) rights are. Open Access, however, was defined by the 2003 [Berlin Declaration](https://openaccess.mpg.de/67605/berlin_declaration_engl.pdf) as the worldwide and irrevocable right to freely “access”, “copy, use, distribute, transmit and display the work publicly and to make and distribute derivative works”, “subject to proper attribution of authorship”. These principles are vital in safeguarding authors’ intellectual property, while enabling others to build upon and benefit from the work; maximising the publication’s impact. In response to early advocacy for OA, mechanisms and publishing business models were developed to address these needs. Not all those mechanisms address every definitive point of OA. However, I argue that Bronze OA meets none of these requirements perpetually and unambiguously.

Despite its inadequacies, ‘Bronze OA’ is being used widely by OA advocacy not-for-profit organisations (such as [Unpaywall supplied by Our Research](https://peerj.com/articles/4375/)), publishers and bibliographic indexing services (for example, Dimensions.ai, Web of Science and Scopus). This wastebasket term captures a mix of content, but often the publisher makes the content accessible as part of promotional activities, such as time-limited access supporting a press release or due to a rolling paywall. In such cases, the right to share, build upon or reuse the publication becomes subject to third-party licensing, introducing barriers that hinder public benefit from these publications.

What’s worse, the continued use of the term 'Bronze OA instead of descriptors such as “free to view” or “gratis access” may mislead well-intentioned authors into believing their outputs possess the defining and crucial characteristics of Open Access. While I am personally unaware of instances where individuals have been burdened with copyright clearance charges for reproducing or reusing content that they believed to be OA, I have encountered situations, in various job roles, where authors firmly believed that their free-to-view articles would be or were made OA despite the Publishing Agreement indicating otherwise.

This issue was brought sharply into focus on 31 January 2020, when the [Wellcome Trust issued a press release](https://wellcome.org/press-release/sharing-research-data-and-findings-relevant-novel-coronavirus-ncov-outbreak) announcing that the novel coronavirus represented a major threat to global health and asked researchers, journals and funders to share research findings and data related to the pandemic “rapidly and openly” – or at the very least make them “freely available” throughout the outbreak. [By March 2020](https://wellcome.org/press-release/publishers-make-coronavirus-covid-19-content-freely-available-and-reusable) national leaders on science policy across the globe had joined the call to action, and many international publishers of scholarly communications aligned themselves with the movement.

However, many publishers did not provide authors with an open license, but instead committed to meeting the minimum requirement. Therefore, where the author did not request an open license (such as [CC BY](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/)), the outputs in subscription journals would have been subject to a copyright transfer agreement and are made [freely available at the publisher’s discretion](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/leap.1358) or, in other words, they were made ‘Bronze OA’.

Indeed, searching ‘virology’ or ‘respiratory disease’ in abstracting indexing services will demonstrate a spike in publications in 2020 and 2021 and a noticeable (for now) difference in the percentage available via ‘Bronze OA’ in the same period. There is a risk that the content made available during this global emergency may be locked away in the future, with publishers introducing barriers to help monetise content reuse. Thankfully, the pandemic coincided with consortia establishing many no-additional-cost Open Access publishing agreements, which removed barriers to ‘Gold OA’ (that is, an open license is applied to the published version of record) and, in all likelihood, limited the effect of what is described above.

Those problems described can be tackled in large part by libraries and publishers working to create an environment in which it is straight-forward, cost effective (seemingly free to the author), and ultimately the default to make research findings and data OA. However, practical steps we can take to make true OA normative include creating communities of practice, educating ourselves and supporting others navigating new Open Research practices. Additionally, Institutions, funders and journals should incentivise Open Research best practices so that it pays for researchers to engage with it. More practically, if in doubt about OA, have a backstop! [Rights retention](https://www.coalition-s.org/rights-retention-strategy/) is a great backstop. It’s a way an author, as the rights holder, can assert their right to assign a license to other versions of their work and share that openly regardless of how it will be published once accepted by the publisher. Case in point, I have applied a CC BY license to the submitted version of this article.

As someone dedicated to understanding and managing the distinctions among publishing models, I recognise that researchers should not be burdened with excessive considerations in this regard. Instead, I advocate for fostering a stronger sense of community through enhanced collaboration and communication between research-enabling and research-performing members of organisations. This approach will empower each individual to become an expert in their respective areas and focus on unlocking the full potential of their research outputs. To help achieve this goal, we must discard unhelpful jargon and OA brands and move towards a more constructive and unified approach.

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Sources added as hyperlinks in text

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