

ONOS bitten

Bringing down cost of access to research papers is only one of many issues

While generally undesirable, centralisation promised to be a boon *vis-à-vis* public access to research through India's 'One Nation, One Subscription' (ONOS) plan. ONOS was first proposed in the country's fifth draft National Science, Technology, and Innovation Policy (2020) in response to the hefty fees research journals charged – and still do – for scholars and the people at large to access the papers they published. In this revenue model, journals accept and publish papers submitted by scholars and charge those who want to read them a fee. Research institutes also subscribe to these journals, so scholars can avail all the papers through their libraries. As these fees climbed over time, librarians banded up in consortia to increase their bargaining power at negotiations. ONOS, which the Union Cabinet approved on November 25, replaces these consortia with the national government and obliges journals to provide a single fee to access them. The upshot is expensive journals will now become available at underfunded government institutes as well.

However, ONOS will be limited to publicly funded institutes; and it allows the stranglehold of commercial publishers on scholarly publishing to continue. Many journals subsist on publicly funded research while also charging people money to access it. ONOS may reduce these sums but the government's willingness to allocate ₹6,000 crore for three calendar years for 30 major publishers must be seen against the backdrop of the gross expenditure on research and development as a fraction of the GDP having become stagnant. The government could have promoted the adoption of 'green' and/or 'diamond' open-access models that guarantee public access by default or have supported, as a matter of policy, home-grown journals sensitive to Indian scholars' circumstances while enhancing the discoverability of their research. The decision to instead channel a large sum of money to publishers abroad does not factor in India's potential to influence research access modalities in the developing world. The lack of transparency is also perturbing, including over whether the list of journals will be monitored to cull titles that have become irrelevant or predatory, or to add those that have gained currency in recent years. Most of all, at a time when many journals have switched to 'gold' open-access – where researchers pay to have a paper published that is then available for free – and preprint papers are gaining in popularity as a means of communicating research, the government's justification for adopting the ONOS strategy in its present form is weak. Add to this the absence of consultation with the institutes on their specific needs, and any celebration of ONOS will have to be deemed premature.