

The International Journal of Wellbeing: An Open Access Success Story

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DW: There are not enough journals that publish interdisciplinary wellbeing research.

AJ: You're right. The few that do are choked up with submissions.

DW: We could create one, you know. There is free software for it.

AJ: That's a great idea. What would we call it?

DW: What about the *Australasian Journal of Wellbeing*?

AJ: Why not the *International Journal of Wellbeing*?

DW: But, could we really make it thoroughly international?

AJ: Sure, and it would be more fun. We should ask all of the people we really admire to be involved – and they're everywhere.

DW: But, why would they get on board with this?

AJ: I can see a lot of benefits, and I think they will too.

DW: Let's grab a coffee and nut this out...

International Journal of Wellbeing: A caffeinated conception

In 2010, over coffee, this is roughly how Aaron Jarden and Dan Weijers began exploring the idea of creating the *International Journal of Wellbeing* (IJW: <http://www.internationaljournalofwellbeing.org/>) – an online only, interdisciplinary journal. At the time, Aaron held a junior faculty position at the Open Polytechnic of New Zealand, and Dan was a PhD student at Victoria University of Wellington. Less than a year later, on January 31st, 2011, the IJW launched its first issue. So, how did two young academics from the far corner of the academic world create an online only journal that, five years after launch and 15 issues later, is one of the most read and respected journals in the field, approaching 500,000 full text article views? Although hard work, quality relationships, and luck undoubtedly had roles to play, the key to the IJW's success was, and still is, its open access publishing model.

Early in the piece we conducted research into the various business models for journals. It did not take long to discover that the costs for publishing an online only journal were tiny. Overheads are about US\$1,000 per year, and per article costs are about US\$200, which includes professional copyediting,

layout, and proofreading. We were astonished to discover this, and quite appalled at the current cost of journal subscriptions, article download fees, and one-off author fees for making individual articles open access in otherwise pay-for-access journals. The truth behind journal business models is that thousands of hardworking academics find time to write, review, and edit for journals. Without those academics, the journals would fail, and with them, very little else is required for success. Of course, the Internet has played a huge part in all this, making the dissemination of research orders of magnitude cheaper and more efficient than it was just 25 years ago – times have changed.

One of the most important changes is the commitment of countless skilled people around the world who create software and make it freely available for fun, and for the greater good. Governments and other organizations also play an important part when they fund open access and open source software. Most importantly for us, very high quality open source journal software is available for do-it-yourself journal publishers. We cannot thank enough the brilliant human beings at the Public Knowledge Project (PKP) and Open Journal Systems, as well as the US federal government for funding the opening up of academic research through the PKP. The software from Open Journal Systems allows even relatively techno-averse academics to manage and publish all relevant academic journal activities in a professional way.

The case for open access

With the knowledge that we only needed about US\$5,000 per year to setup and run a successful online only journal, we realized that we did not have to approach journal publishers; we could publish the journal ourselves. The idea of open access publishing was appealing to us because it seemed fairer and more in line with the point of academia – the production of useful information for all. It just did not seem fair to require authors to pay large amounts for the privilege of publishing in a journal, especially since they do most of the work in the research publishing process – writing research-based articles that extend the global body of useful information. Some journal managers might argue that the authors never have to pay out of pocket because their institutions pay. But this reasoning is of little solace to unaffiliated scholars, academics at underfunded institutions, and academics outside of the sciences (where author fees are not the norm). Furthermore, passing the author fee on to the academic institution is not fair to the institution, since it is the academic institutions that pay the academics, enabling the writing of the article in the first place. To make matters worse, some journals, after taking the author fee from the academic institution, then sell full access to the journals to academic libraries, whose checks are written by those very same academic institutions!

But, perhaps even more importantly, fully open access journals can be read by anyone with an internet connection and a computer. We believed that it was important that useful research publications can be accessed by as many people as possible. There exist many inequalities in the world, and unequal access to the most recent academic research, especially on wellbeing, is a particularly pernicious kind of inequality because it could exacerbate other forms of inequality. For this reason, we are proud that the research in the IJW has reached people in 185 nations around the world.

As we're sure readers are now well aware, not all open access is created equal. As academics as well as potential publishers, we realized that most academics are concerned to protect their intellectual property. For this reason, we wanted to make it clear that authors own the copyright to work published

in the IJW, and we chose the Creative Commons license that gives authors the most protection, in line with academic fair use standards. We use the Attribution-Non Commercial-No Derivatives (CC BY-NC-ND) license, which only allows others to share the work as long as they do not alter it and they credit it to the author. The work also cannot be used for commercial purposes. Of course, academics can still use the research in all of the normal ways, and anyone wanting to commercialize the research can do so, just as long as they get the agreement of the authors.

Open access: The key to our success

So, we knew that we wanted to create an interdisciplinary online only and fully open access journal on wellbeing, broadly construed and tapping into various disciplines such as philosophy, psychology, economics, and sociology. But we also very much desired for the journal to be an exceptional one; a high quality well-respected journal that leading academics would be proud to publish their work in. As junior academics, we were confronted with a huge prestige problem; why would the best scholars in the field want to join our editorial team or submit their research to us? Both being educated and working in New Zealand, we did not have institutional prestige to leverage. Aaron had a few contacts with excellent psychologists working on wellbeing, but other than that, there was no reason to think we had the resources to resolve our prestige problem. If we were flexible on our open access status, then we might have been adopted by an established journal publisher. Being associated with Springer or Taylor and Francis might have allayed fears that the IJW would only be read by people who accidentally found the page via a procession of typos. But, we did not want to give up on open access. So, armed with just a few contacts, and an overabundance of naïve optimism and caffeine, we pushed ahead with our idea.

Before too long, we were joined by our third co-editor, rising star Nattavudh Powdthavee. We then created a 70-page business plan that stressed the low cost of online publishing (even of the highest quality), and the IJW's main point of difference – being fully open access. Then began the nerve-wracking process of contacting our academic idols, explaining the rationale and the mandate of the IJW, and inviting them to join our editorial team. To our surprise, nearly all of the academics we contacted enthusiastically agreed to put their names and their efforts to the IJW. In a matter of weeks, our editorial and advisory boards were brimming with many of the best established and up-and-coming researchers in the field. All of a sudden, we found ourselves with the support of people who could resolve our prestige problem, and provide us with invaluable advice on editing and publishing.

But why were they all so eager to get on board with us, two neophyte academics from New Zealand? For the vast majority of our now colleagues, and especially the more established ones, the main attraction was our fully open access publishing model. Many of them shared our disgruntlement at some of the academic publishers' prices and other practices. They saw supporting the IJW as something they could actually do to help turn the tide back toward the ideal of making useful information available to everyone, and not double or triple-charging the academic institutions aiming to achieve this goal. World renowned wellbeing expert and *IJW* advisory board member John Helliwell, for example, made it very clear to us that his tremendous efforts to help establish and promote the IJW were motivated by our commitment to open access publishing.

With the support of John Helliwell, and other leaders in the field of wellbeing research, we were able to attract enough funding to cover the *IJW*'s start up and operating costs for at least eight years. Initially,

technical and webhosting support was provided by the Open Polytechnic of New Zealand, and funding for professional copyediting, layout editing and proofreading was generously provided by the Vic Davis Memorial Trust (a mainly community-based mental health funding organization in New Zealand). After two years of invaluable service, Nattavudh relinquished his co-editorial role, and was replaced by Stephen Wu from Hamilton College in New York. The operations of the *IJW* are now generously funded by Hamilton College, who showed interest in the journal because of its topic, early success, and open access status. Shortly after, Lindsay Oades, psychologist from the University of Wollongong Australia, also joined our co-editorial team and brought with him much policy and process experience. After we attracted so many leading wellbeing scholars to help run the journal, it was clear that the prestige problem had been overcome, and perhaps even turned right around. In fact, reflecting back to the very first issue of the *IJW*, we attracted such esteemed scholars as Martin Seligman, Fred Bryant, John Helliwell, Erik Angner, and featured an interview with Nobel laureate Daniel Kahneman. As such, institutions have become enthusiastic about funding the *IJW*, especially considering it is so cheap to do so. And, as a result, we have published some 113 articles and reviews over the last five years.

While many things go into creating a successful journal, the moral of this story is that a commitment to fully open access publishing is what made the difference between us creating a one-issue-wonder, versus the globally influential *IJW*.

Success: Opening up wellbeing studies

Although some measures of the *IJW*'s success have already been mentioned, we'd like to emphasize the many ways in which the *IJW* has helped to open up wellbeing studies. In the publish-or-perish world that emerging academics struggle to survive in, losing an affiliation with an academic institution is often the death knell for an academic career. Unaffiliated scholars are less likely to be invited to conferences, have their manuscripts accepted for peer review, and be invited to interview for academic positions. But, to make matters worse, they also have their access to the latest research nearly completely cut off. They will unlikely be able to afford to read many articles, especially at approximately US\$40 an article. Sure, the unfortunate unaffiliated academics could approach authors directly, and ask for pre-prints, but if they are conducting serious research then they would be sending such requests almost daily. It might be argued that this inconvenience only affects a small number of people, since the half-life of unaffiliated scholars is relatively short. However, many affiliated scholars find themselves in a similar situation. Academics affiliated to institutions outside of the West, and even the less established ones in the West, will rely on libraries that are struggling to keep up with the rising cost of bundles of journals. Furthermore, a very similar story can be told about unaffiliated and less-fortunately-affiliated scholars and author fees.

Of course, the beauty of fully open access publishing is that these problems disappear. As long as the article is of sufficient academic merit, it can be published in the *IJW* (18% of submitted articles were accepted in 2015), and then disseminated around the world for all. For example, emerging academic Rachel Dodge, and her co-authors, submitted an article to us from a partially affiliated position. Since we did not evaluate the submission on its authors' affiliations, and since there was no submission or author costs, Dodge encountered no barriers on her end. After review and subsequent revisions, the paper was published in 2012. As a junior academic, Dodge did not expect that her research would make much of an impact in her own country, let alone the world. But, in a little over three years, her article "The

Challenge of Defining Wellbeing” has been viewed over 50,000 times in at least 96 countries, including multiple views in places such as Iran, Rwanda, and Peru. The combination of online and free access truly makes academic research available around the world. But, given academics propensity to do their research online using search engines like Google Scholar, open access research is also readily accessible to established academics at privileged researched institutions. The truth of this is perhaps best evidenced by the fact that (according to Google Scholar) “The Challenge of Defining Wellbeing” has been cited 135 times in just over three years.

To further take advantage of the IJW’s broad accessibility, our second issue was aimed at scholars from all disciplines and educated non-academics. “Felicitators”, as it was called, was designed to act as an entry point to academic research on wellbeing for academics and laypeople alike. The issue included articles from a diverse range of authors, including an artist, a philosopher, a monk, a historian, and of course social scientists. The issue also covered an eclectic range of topics, including Montessori education, Dr Seuss’s The Lorax, a Singaporean prison, a music teacher’s inclusive approach, Bruder Klaus on peace and war, and an investigation of whether Moses was happy. We were very pleased to enable the publication of academic work that we could whole-heartedly direct our non-academic friends and family towards, in full knowledge that the articles would be accessible to them (in both senses of the word).

Open access: Into the future

The IJW now has a cracking team of enthusiastic people involved, the software is robust and well managed and maintained, funding has been obtained for at least the next three years, and the disciplinary reach of the journal and the impacts of the work it publishes are further increasing. Looking into the future, we can see that the IJW, buoyed by its commitment to open access, will go from strength to strength. It is no wonder that we have been approached by major journal publishers who would like the IJW on their books. But, the IJW is not a commercial venture; it is an academic venture with the aim to disseminate useful information on wellbeing as widely as possible, and a commitment to open access.

Naturally, we still have many challenges ahead, such as keeping a pace with publishing trends and newer tracking technologies, sheer volume of submissions, more thoroughly indexing the journal with databases and search engines, and making sure we are not mistakenly thrown in with the new explosion of fake open access journals. But as for now, the IJW is still running well on all the hard work and enthusiasm of the open-access-inspired academics and others involved, and the coffee of course. We’d like to take this opportunity to thank all of the academics who find the time to help produce and disseminate quality research through open access channels – together we are making a difference.