

# What makes a scholarly journal happy?

Research  
note

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To function, scholarly journals require certain resources, notably financial means. On the ground, this reality leads to this ever-present question: how much budget is necessary for a journal to keep operating in an open access environment? However, a closer analysis shows that budgetary criteria are not the sole predictors of whether a journal runs well, which depends greatly on the environment in which it operates. In other words, scientific publishing is not split between “poor and flawed” journals on one side, and “rich and healthy” ones on the other. The situation is more nuanced.

What are the factors that lead to a happy journal?

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[ COALITION  
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# The Cost of Operating a Scholarly Journal

Over the last few years, several studies have been conducted to evaluate the financial impact of open access on scholarly journals, notably in the fields of the humanities, the social sciences, the arts and literature (HSS) ([Paquin 2015](#) ; [Lefebvre 2018](#) ; [Comité de suivi de l'édition scientifique \[France\] 2019](#)). The majority of these studies relied on a socio-economic perspective and their authors were attempting to calculate the budget required to operate a scholarly journal in an open access environment.

The study titled [Canadian scholarly journals in the humanities and social sciences](#), conducted in 2019 and published in 2021 under the supervision of Vincent Larivière, professor of information science at the Université de Montréal and the Scientific Director for Érudit, had this same objective: by surveying a pool of journals, it was trying to identify the [inputs and outputs, whether financial, material or symbolic, involved in the production of a scholarly journal](#).

The objective was to collect and standardize the data related to revenues and expenses for these journals, but also the “in-kind” contributions that some journals enjoy (for example, access to facilities or computer equipment) and the hours worked by the editorial teams. The desired result of the study was to create a complete picture of how they function in economic terms, and, in so doing, to identify the amounts that were actually involved during their transition to open access<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> The sample analyzed for the study *Canadian scholarly journals in the humanities and social sciences* contained twelve scholarly journals selected based on four criteria (field, country of origin, commercial status, language). The data collected came from interviews conducted with the leadership team of each journal and from a standardized matrix containing organizational and financial data. Statements made in interviews by the leadership teams of eight additional journals, who did not fill out the matrix, were also taken into account.



# The Happiness Index

We found something interesting, but that also seemed contradictory. While we expected to find a clear distinction between “poor and flawed” and “rich and healthy” journals, this study revealed a situation that was much more nuanced.

To function well, scholarly journals absolutely do require certain resources, notably financial means. However, a substantial number of editorial teams which we interviewed said that their journal was running well despite having lower revenues, while others stated that they were worried about their ability to keep operating despite having larger budgets.

While the collected data supports the popular adage that “money can’t buy happiness,” we went further to try to identify what it was that “happy” journals had that “unhappy” ones did not.

## What makes a scholarly journal “happy”?

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The journals that were most satisfied with their situations, the “happiest” in other words, had three common characteristics: they enjoy real institutional support, they face no issues finding qualified contributors for peer review in their field and they were up to date on current issues in the field of scientific publishing.

## INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT

Among the editorial teams that filled out our survey, the happiest were the ones that enjoyed strong institutional support. This can take the shape of in-kind contributions (offloaded administrative tasks, access to a working space, Internet and phone access, etc.) or dispensations from teaching classes for those responsible for the journal.

The dispensations are usually given to professors whose research or creation activities require an important investment in time and energy. This provides concrete support to researchers by freeing up their time for editorial tasks, while also symbolically recognizing the importance given to these tasks by the institution.

Those who benefit from this support greatly appreciate these dispensations, and their statements highlight how much they value the time being freed up by the reduced teaching load. This aspect of institutional support is a key factor in the way teams perceive the vitality of their journal and the conditions in which it operates.

→ **A happy journal enjoys material and symbolic means that reflect the essential role it plays in the research ecosystem.**

## RECRUITMENT OF REVIEWERS

Peer review of submitted manuscripts is the process by which scholarly journals guarantee the quality of their content. This practice is a key point when evaluating how happy a journal is, particularly in the fields of HSS. Indeed, considering the lack of institutional recognition for this labour and the explosion in the number of submitted manuscripts, it is not uncommon that a journal must ask a pool of anywhere from three to six competent reviewers to find one who will accept the task of evaluating a manuscript, which makes recruitment of such reviewers a particularly thankless and time-consuming task.

Happy journals highlighted the importance of the support given by an editorial board actively involved in their operations and, particularly, in the manuscript review process. Several teams also noted that researchers responsible for thematic issues can help make this process more efficient by proposing names of potential reviewers and by strategically participating in the exchanges with the experts being contacted.

When the work is more evenly split, peer review, rather than being dreaded by journal editors, becomes a reflection of the position a journal holds in an intellectual network that supports it and to which it in turn contributes.

→ **The happiest journals said that they managed to reduce the amount of time wasted looking for reviewers by making the process more collaborative and personal.**

## UNDERSTANDING THE TRENDS IN SCIENTIFIC PUBLISHING

Lastly, the happiest teams stated that they were interested in editorial processes as such, beyond the disciplinary or scientific orientation of the published content. Familiarizing themselves with the practices, the issues and the challenges of scientific publishing is often a learning process for professors operating a journal, and they need the time and the material resources required to go through it.

That is especially the case today, as journals operate in the context of an accelerated shift to open access. Thus, foregoing subscription revenues implies, among other things, an in-depth rethinking of how tasks are assigned within the editorial team, sometimes in consultation with partners such as university presses, a process that takes time and reflection to be carried out successfully.

Similarly, new procedures, such as the implementation of automated manuscript management software, such as Open Journal Systems, require a financial situation that allows the journal to do more than simply survive.

→ **Keeping up with current scientific publishing practices allows editorial teams to position themselves in a quickly evolving environment.**

# What makes a scholarly journal “unhappy”?

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Editorial teams who described themselves as being in a less favourable position were apparently hampered by three issues: the lack of institutional recognition and support, the feeling of being at odds with the perspectives adopted by funding agencies, and the feeling of being trapped in a cycle of burnout.



## LACK OF INSTITUTIONAL RECOGNITION

Beyond the economic challenges, which are very real, that these journals face, the core of the issue is that they often perceive a lack of recognition for the work they do and its importance in the research ecosystem.

This symbolic lack of value can even take the shape of a concrete disengagement by academic institutions. The head of one journal even reports the case of a university that had transformed its in-kind contributions into paid services, invoiced to periodicals with limited budgets.

→ **The lack of value assigned to editorial tasks when universities evaluate their professors contributes to the unhappiness of a journal.**

## GRANT POLICIES AND FEELINGS OF LACK OF UNDERSTANDING

Less happy journals often feel misunderstood by granting agencies, whose policies are perceived as out-of-touch with the reality of editorial teams.

Every team finds grant applications demanding, but unhappy journals experience them as basically unsurmountable challenges and as sources of intense stress, two perspectives made even bleaker by the perception of intense competition. That is notably the case for relatively older periodicals, founded before the digital era and which had become well established, but which now see their position made less certain by the evolution of granting programs.

In the current context, the feeling of a gap between the reality experienced by journals and the requirements set out in grant policies is made particularly more acute by open access, often perceived as an arbitrary requirement that threatens the survival of periodicals which already contend with a generalized lack of resources. Grants are awarded on a competitive basis every three or four years, which naturally results in discontinuity when it comes to funding. Without other structural supports, like integration into a university ecosystem, journals face an ever-present risk of losing a grant, in full or in part, which makes their transition to open access treacherous. To add to that, this transition is very labour-intensive for the editorial teams.

→ **While grants provide significant support in terms of revenue for Canadian scholarly journals, the granting process itself can however become a source of anxiety, a perspective that characterizes unhappy journals.**

## TEAM AND RESOURCE BURNOUT

Finally, unhappy teams often feel trapped in a cycle of burnout, both for its staff and its material resources.

This spiral might start with the loss of a grant, which strips the journal of its capacity to pay its administrative or coordination staff. In these conditions, it becomes difficult to avoid delays when it comes to the management and publication of the journal, which in turn hampers its admissibility in the next round of grants, creating a vicious cycle from which it is difficult to escape.

Team burnout is also seen in the difficulties that some journals have finding candidates to join their editorial team when current members leave. If the same people are kept in place to keep publication going, the risk exists that only immediate activities get priority, while longer-term initiatives are neglected or pushed back, despite being key to the survival of a journal in an evolving context. Initiatives such as the decision to transition to open access, the creation of a communications policy for social media or the transformation of manuscript review practices could be delayed, as these changes require time, energy, and additional monitoring. Similarly, indexation into the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ) is a process that can take several years, during which there are no immediate benefits.

→ **A team whose sole concern is survival risks becoming unable to find ways to improve its journal and to ensure its long-term success.**

# The Recipe for a Happy Journal?

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The interviews conducted with teams from around twenty scholarly journals show that a journal is happiest when it exists within a network of forces that feeds and supports them, rather than pressuring them, which is something that characterizes less happy journals.

Some of these forces are internal, like the interest shown by the members of the editorial team for scientific publishing as such or the collaboration of an active editorial board. Nonetheless, journals can only thrive if their environments, notably universities and granting agencies, support and amplify these internal forces. A journal is happy when it can operate in a favourable context which provides it with both material and symbolic means, which can take a variety of shapes: financial, in-kind and course load dispensations. Even if money can't buy happiness, it sure helps...