



Neuroimaging research is at the centre of a row about open-access publishing fees.

EDITORS QUIT BRAIN RESEARCH JOURNALS TO PROTEST AGAINST FEES

They say the charges to publish articles open access are unsustainable.

By Katharine Sanderson

More than 40 editors have resigned from two leading neuroscience journals in protest against what the editors say are excessively high article-processing charges (APCs) set by the publisher. They say that the fees – which publishers use to cover publishing services and, in some cases, make money – are unethical. The publisher, Dutch company Elsevier, says that its fees provide researchers with services that are above average quality for below average price. The editors plan to start a new journal hosted by the non-profit publisher MIT Press.

The decision to resign came about after many discussions among the editors, says Stephen Smith, a neuroscientist at the University of Oxford, UK, and editor-in-chief of one of the journals, *NeuroImage*. “Everyone agreed that the APC was unethical and unsustainable,” says Smith, who will lead the editorial team of the new journal, *Imaging Neuroscience*, when it launches.

The 42 academics who made up the editorial teams at *NeuroImage* and its companion journal *NeuroImage: Reports* announced their resignations on 17 April. The journals are open

access and require authors to pay a fee for publishing services. The APC for *NeuroImage* is US\$3,450; *NeuroImage: Reports* charges \$900, which will double to \$1,800 from 31 May. Elsevier, based in Amsterdam, says that the APCs cover the costs associated with publishing an article in an open-access journal, including editorial and peer-review services, copy editing, typesetting, archiving, indexing, marketing and administrative costs. Andrew Davis, Elsevier’s vice-president of corporate communications, says that *NeuroImage*’s fee is less than that of the nearest comparable journal in its field, and that the publisher’s APCs are “set in line with our policy [of] providing above average quality for below average price”.

Article costs

Publishers have introduced APCs – part of a pay-to-publish model – as an alternative to pay-to-read subscriptions as journals increasingly become freely accessible, and researchers typically pay APCs from their grant funds. Journal APCs vary, typically depending on factors such as the publisher’s size, the proportion of papers sent for peer review and metrics such as impact factor, as well as whether they employ in-house editors and press officers. *The Lancet Neurology*, published by Elsevier, has an APC

of \$6,300; the fee at *Nature Neuroscience*, published by Springer Nature, is \$11,690; and *Human Brain Mapping*, published by Wiley, charges \$3,850. (*Nature*’s news team is editorially independent of *Nature Neuroscience* and of Springer Nature.)

The *NeuroImage* editors say that the fees exclude many scholars who are based in countries where research is not well funded. They think that the charges don’t reflect direct article costs, and say it is wrong for publishers to make profit from science that they haven’t funded.

Elsevier says that it is committed to advancing open access to research and has schemes to support researchers in poorer countries. Davis says Elsevier helps researchers in 120 low- and middle-income countries to receive affordable access to nearly 100,400 peer-reviewed resources, through a public–private partnership called Research4Life. He adds that Elsevier automatically applies waivers or discounts on fees to publish articles in fully open-access journals when all authors are in a low-income country.

Open-access transition

NeuroImage launched in 1992, and became open access in 2020 with an APC of \$3,000, which has been raised twice. *NeuroImage: Reports* launched in 2021 to publish results, including null findings, and methods. In June last year, the editors, led by Smith, asked Elsevier to lower *NeuroImage*’s APC to less than \$2,000. Smith says Elsevier told them that was unlikely, but it would arrange further meetings. In March this year, the editors told the publisher they would resign if the APC could not be reduced. “We then had further discussions with Elsevier, but they ultimately declined to reduce the APC,” says Smith.

The publisher is disappointed with the editorial team’s move, says Davis. “We have been engaging constructively with them over the last couple of years as we transitioned *NeuroImage* to become a fully open-access journal,” Davis says. The journal will continue as normal, he adds. “The resigning editors will continue to handle papers already submitted and the new editorial team will handle all new papers. We have not announced their names yet but they will be added to the website soon.”

The editors decided to set up an open-access journal with MIT Press, based at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge. Ted Gibson, who sits on MIT Press’s editorial board and is an editor of its cognitive-science journal *Open Mind*, looks forward to hosting the new title. “These editors have done it the right way. I think it’s a slow process but eventually more scientists will resign from the profit-oriented journals,” Gibson says.

The APC for the journal hasn’t been set yet, says Smith, but they aim to make it at most half of *NeuroImage*’s \$3,450 fee.