

# Rigor or Symmetry? Reflections on Fifteen Years of Diamond Open Access

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In an academic landscape where business models increasingly overshadow research models, *Biointerface Research in Applied Chemistry* marks fifteen years of continuous publication under a fully free Open Access policy. No article processing charges. No institutional subsidies. No transformative agreements. No strategic sponsors.

Only commitment, voluntary effort-and, quite literally, personal financial support.

Such species still exist.

## Diamond Open Access: An Inconvenient Experiment

Over the past decade, Open Access has become a global standard-often accompanied by a discreet invoice. In this context, sustaining a journal for fifteen years without charging authors or readers may appear either financially imprudent or academically idealistic.

We chose idealism.

We believed that scientific knowledge should circulate freely. That a young researcher from an underfunded institution deserves the same visibility as one affiliated with a well-resourced center. That scientific merit might matter more than proof of payment.

What we discovered instead is that the system possesses remarkable creativity when it comes to criteria.

## Indexing as a Moving Target

We have undergone evaluations. We have received recommendations. We have implemented structural revisions. We have rebuilt platforms, optimized editorial workflows, expanded international boards, and ensured functional DOI infrastructures-precisely as requested.

Because this is where the story becomes interesting.

For journals already indexed, certain criteria appear to function as flexible guidelines. For those applying, they become existential thresholds. What was sufficient yesterday becomes insufficient today. What is considered “under improvement” for some becomes a reason for rejection for others.

Standards evolve. Interpretations refine. Requirements expand.

But not uniformly.

There exist journals long established within prestigious databases that do not fully meet the standards currently imposed on new applicants. Retroactive compliance, however, is rarely demanded. They are “established.” Others remain “under evaluation.”

### **Editorial Triage and the Precision of Formalism**

Our most recent experience illustrates the structural dimension of this asymmetry. After a two-year embargo period following delisting, the journal reapplied for evaluation in March 2025. The submission was formally acknowledged; however, an Editorial Triage decision was communicated in November 2025, at which point the journal did not proceed beyond the preliminary evaluation stage. The decision was based not on the scientific archive accumulated over fifteen years, nor on peer-review practice, citation performance, or thematic relevance, despite the fact that the journal had previously been indexed within the same evaluative ecosystem under broadly comparable technical conditions, but on technical and formal considerations-matters that are entirely legitimate to flag and correct, yet which might reasonably allow for a temporary suspension of evaluation pending remediation rather than necessitating a complete restart of the process and an additional cycle of months before re-assessment in an era defined by digital immediacy..

Among the issues identified were website architecture clarity, specification of contact responsibility, temporary DOI resolution errors for a specific issue, the functionality of links to ethical guidelines, discrepancies between publisher metadata across registries, and inconsistencies in the publisher name as reflected in the ISSN Portal record.

Each observation is legitimate. Each correction is feasible. One may reasonably ask, however, why such correctable technical matters necessitate outright rejection rather than a temporary pause in the evaluation process to allow clarification and remediation, followed by resumption from the same stage - particularly when the alternative is re-entering a queue that may require many additional months before reconsideration.

The DOI-related observation is particularly revealing. In our case, temporary resolution errors for specific articles were flagged as grounds for failing Editorial Triage. DOI functionality is indeed essential in contemporary scholarly communication, and its reliability is non-negotiable.

However, it is difficult not to observe that there are currently indexed journals - some with established Impact Factors - that do not merely experience intermittent DOI resolution issues, but do not assign DOIs at all, nor maintain Crossref membership. Their inclusion predates the universalization of DOI infrastructure requirements.

Similarly, discrepancies in ISSN Portal publisher metadata-records administered by national ISSN centers rather than directly editable by journals-become evaluative signals at triage stage, even when corrective authority lies partially outside editorial control.

The distinction, therefore, is not between compliance and non-compliance, but between historical context and contemporary enforcement.

It is equally instructive to recall that, in earlier phases of database expansion, large cohorts of journals were incorporated into newly created indexing tiers with limited preliminary scrutiny. Subsequent recalibrations of citation metrics then resulted in the conferral of quantitative indicators upon thousands of titles by structural adjustment rather than renewed individual reassessment. Against this historical background, the application of increasingly granular technical triage criteria to journals reapplying after delisting invites reflection on the temporal symmetry of evaluative thresholds.

Professionalization is invoked. Infrastructure must be flawless. Internationalization demonstrable. Digital traceability impeccable.

All legitimate aspirations.

Yet a broader structural question emerges. If journals indexed under earlier, less technically demanding frameworks are not retroactively harmonized to present-day requirements, while new applicants must satisfy the full contemporary architecture of compliance before substantive evaluation even begins, then the system reflects chronological advantage as much as quality differentiation.

Contemporary applicants are examined with forensic precision. Incumbents often operate within the tolerance afforded by historical timing.

Progress is necessary. Standards must mature.

But when the threshold for entry becomes more exacting than the threshold for retention, evaluation risks reinforcing historical positioning rather than exclusively measuring scholarly merit.

The issue, therefore, is not rigor.

It is symmetry.

### **Discretion or Discrepancy?**

The discretionary application of criteria generates an uncomfortable paradox: entry barriers rise over time, yet incumbency offers immunity. Emerging journals are required to comply with stricter technical, structural, and formal standards than pioneers once faced. Journals with fifteen years of continuous publication and a substantial scientific archive are evaluated as though newly launched.

The difficulty lies not in the standards themselves, but in their selective enforcement.

### **When Form Overshadows Substance**

In the pursuit of technical conformity, we risk losing sight of the primary objective: scientific quality. Interfaces are scrutinized more rigorously than ideas. Metadata sometimes outweighs methodology. Procedural architecture risks eclipsing intellectual contribution.

Ironically, journals that have grown organically-without commercial backing or institutional funding-often bear the heaviest burden of proof.

Visibility can be purchased. Credibility must be built.

### **Fifteen Years Later**

After fifteen years, *Biointerface Research in Applied Chemistry* continues its mission under the same founding principles: rigorous peer review, unrestricted access, and academic independence.

We are not perfect. We evolve. We refine. We adapt to legitimate advancements in publishing standards.

But we remain committed to a simple conviction: scientific dissemination should not be contingent upon financial capacity.

If such a model appears inconvenient within an increasingly commercialized ecosystem, that may be precisely why it deserves to persist.

Because beyond metrics that fluctuate and criteria that shift with prevailing winds, one principle must remain constant:

Academic integrity.

And integrity does not depend on indexing status. It depends on consistency.

### **Structural Asymmetry and Scholarly Equity**

If evaluation frameworks evolve without retrospective harmonization, asymmetry is not merely procedural-it becomes structural. Entry barriers rise, while established positions solidify.

In such an environment, inequity does not emerge from explicit exclusion, but from cumulative advantage. Journals supported by extensive publishing infrastructures, technological resources, and institutional networks adapt more easily to escalating compliance architectures. Independently sustained titles, particularly those operating under non-commercial models, must allocate disproportionate effort toward infrastructural perfection before their scholarly contribution is even considered.

This dynamic shapes the ecology of scientific communication. Visibility becomes increasingly mediated by scale, integration, and proximity to dominant publishing systems. Evaluation mechanisms, even when designed to ensure quality, may inadvertently reinforce existing hierarchies if their thresholds evolve unevenly across time and cohorts.

The concern, therefore, is not individual decision-making, nor the integrity of evaluators. It is structural concentration. When evaluation, metric production, and large-scale publishing infrastructures intersect within the same ecosystem, the boundaries between quality assurance and market consolidation may become difficult to disentangle.

For the scientific community, the consequence is subtle but significant: diversity of publishing models narrows, and non-commercial initiatives face escalating barriers to recognition.

A mature scholarly system must safeguard rigor. But it must also safeguard pluralism. Without symmetry, rigor risks becoming selective. Without pluralism, excellence risks becoming standardized.

Fifteen years of Diamond Open Access have taught us that integrity is sustainable. The question that remains is whether evaluative architectures can sustain equity with the same consistency.

### **Acknowledgment and Uncertainty**

Finally, this editorial would be incomplete without acknowledging those who have sustained this model over the past fifteen years. Editors, reviewers, authors, and collaborators have contributed not for financial incentive, but out of commitment to the principle that knowledge should remain accessible without economic preconditions.

The continuity of this journal has not been the result of institutional abundance, but of collective effort-often demanding, often invisible, and frequently disproportionate to available resources. Maintaining a fully free publication model in a progressively commercialized environment requires not only conviction, but endurance.

Whether such a model can continue indefinitely remains uncertain. Sustainability in the absence of structural support is never guaranteed. Yet the fact that it has endured for fifteen years is due entirely to the dedication of those who believed that academic integrity and open dissemination were worth the effort.

To them, this milestone belongs.

Whatever the future holds, the commitment that built this journal will remain its defining legacy.