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'ONOS' and Expanding Access to Research Journals

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The government's One Nation, One Subscription scheme seeks to expand digital access to academic journals, which are usually very expensive. But questions remain about the true extent of coverage and the savings centralised subscriptions may finally offer.

A new centralised publication service for scientific journals in India is an attempt to deal with the exorbitant pricing of journals. Announced by the central government, it has been given the government's preferred moniker 'One Nation', One Subscription (ONOS). This is to be a 3-phased programme that is to begin in January 2025. Yet, questions remain about the extent of coverage, whether there will be any savings, how transparent the decision-making will be, whether there will be biases in selecting journals, when colleges and private universities will be covered, and about the absence of Indian publishers from the scheme.

International (poor) practices

ONOS is a response to the 'serials crisis'. Higher education and research institutions worldwide are afflicted by the ever-rising subscription costs of academic publications and scholarly journals. Costs have outpaced library budgets, seriously limiting the access of students, scholars, researchers, and faculty to quality library resources. Often, subscription costs appear directly proportional to budgetary allocations, because publishers tend to set prices at a level they assume their subscribers can afford. No financial allocation for libraries appears to be adequate to subscribe to resources.

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The rising cost of journals and scientific publications has little to do with the cost of publishing. Journals rarely pay their authors and reviewers. The content, the main ware of the trade, is acquired at nearly no cost. The cost of publishing journals and serials is limited to the expenses of editorial time and expertise, copy editing and laying out pages, and marketing, including distribution and selling. Expenses on paper and printing have fallen as most journals are now published and distributed digitally. Many publishers also recover a significant proportion of their expenses from the authors through moderate to hefty 'article processing charges'.

Publishers of scientific journals and serials seldom suffer due to price elasticity. They position their products as unique and distinct and are thus regarded as irreplaceable. They uphold and perpetuate their stranglehold by arguing that they charge for the quality and impact of their journals. This quality proposition often brands new journals, and even those published by societies and academic institutions, as poor in quality, even predatory.

The increasing insistence that faculty, researchers, and research scholars publish in peer-reviewed, refereed, indexed, and impact factor journals for ranking and accreditation further strengthens the stranglehold of corporate publishers. So much so that several prestigious publications by academic institutions, scientific societies, and professional bodies have transferred the publication and distribution rights of their journals to such publishers. Publishers thus can behave as monopolies and charge prices at will. They have made a net profit as high as 40%.

Libraries have tried to economise within the constraints of copyrights and intellectual property laws. They have formed consortia to pool their economic resources, to share costs and resources through inter-library loans; and to minimise commonalities and duplications. Even so, the rising costs have forced libraries of academic and research institutions to limit or curtail the number of resources they can subscribe to, much to the detriment of their users.

Indian Response

The worst affected are underdeveloped and developing countries, which suffer from a double whammy of rising costs and declining exchange rates for their currencies.

In India, libraries and higher education and research institutions have traditionally subscribed to journals and scientific publications autonomously and independently, according to the needs and requirements of their users, albeit within their budgetary constraints. This practice continued even after publishers and aggregators gradually began offering resources digitally.

> As internet connectivity to universities, colleges, and other knowledge institutions improved, the consortium's coverage of higher education institutions and the number of those benefiting from it increased considerably.

In 2003, the UGC INFONET Digital Library Consortium was launched to bring about a "qualitative change in academic libraries" and provide "access to scholarly electronic resources, including full-text and bibliographic databases, in all subject disciplines to the academic community in India". Managed by the Information and Library Network (INFLIBNET), an Inter-University Centre (IUC) of the University Grants Commission (UGC), this consortium initially subscribed to and provided "current and archival content to over 5,000 core and peer-reviewed journals and nine bibliographic databases in different disciplines from as many as 23 publishers and aggregators."

As internet connectivity to universities, colleges, and other knowledge institutions improved, the consortium's coverage of higher education institutions and the number of those benefiting from it increased considerably, making it the largest in the country in terms of users.

In 2015, all consortia funded by the Ministry of Human Resource Development were merged into a single consortium, the e-ShdodhSindhu, to eliminate overlap and duplicate subscriptions, and to economise on resources and gain economies of scale.

The e-ShodhSindhu consortium currently caters to 98 centrally funded technical institutions (CFTIs), 217 universities, and 3,800 colleges by enabling access to 10,000 e-journals, 199,500 e-books, and other resources. Since it serves a variety of higher education institutions, its resource base, though dominated by science and technology, also includes e-resources in humanities, languages, and social sciences. However, to save on subscription costs, all the subscribed resources are not provided to all the member institutions. Instead, the members are required to identify and requisition a limited number of resources.

> Taken together, these consortia, along with some higher education and research institutions, have been subscribing to e-journals, e-books, and online databases at an estimated annual cost of Rs 1,500 crore.

Meanwhile, many other government-funded consortia were formed under other departments and ministries of the union government. Over time, India has established as many as ten different consortia to subscribe to specialised e-resources in their domain areas, mainly in the engineering, science, and technology categories.

Taken together, these multiple consortia have been subscribing to e-journals, e-books, and online databases at an estimated annual cost of Rs 1,500 crore to the public purse (Munshi and Arora 2022). As would be expected, the multiple consortia for subscribing to e-resources suffer from varying degrees of commonality, duplication, and overlap. All of the resources of the MCIT Library Consortium appear elsewhere, and others are hardly better: NLIST (90.91%), DRDO E-journal Services (81.82%), and DeLCoN (33.33%) (Munshi and Arora 2022).

Barring e-ShodhSindhu, these consortia are run in a project mode with temporary and outsourced staff who are inadequately trained. This often leads to issues in managing and monitoring the access portals and resolving problems accessing resources on time. In many cases, it has been found that when consortia drop subscriptions to some e-resources, the publishers, aggregators, or e-resources vendors bar access even during the period for which the subscription has been paid.

All of this reflects the need for a more careful and cautious approach while negotiating the licensing terms of subscriptions (Chakraborty et al. 2020). Many international consortia have been able to negotiate favourable terms by paying nominal maintenance charges to vendors and publishers.

One Nation One Subscription

It is these limitations that could have prompted the idea of a single, centralised consortium, culminating in the union cabinet approving the new central sector scheme called the One Nation One Subscription (ONOS), to provide nationwide access to high-impact research in international journals.

The idea is not a new one and was apparently first mooted by a panel of members drawn from three scientific academies - Indian National Science Academy, Indian Academy of Sciences and The National Academy of Sciences - whose recommendations were published in 2020 in *Current Science* (cited in Madhan, 2024).

The ONOS scheme is now scheduled for launch on 1 January 2025. This is after time-consuming negotiations with international publishers, which resulted in two earlier deadlines being missed.

Will the ONOS scheme effectively address the limitations and deficiencies that afflict the existing consortia? We shall only know when the scheme's guidelines are notified. The only details we have so far are as outlined in a Press Information Bureau note and at a press conference held on 10 December 2024.

> A single nationwide consortium to subscribe and share e-resources may have significant cost advantages and can potentially procure identified resources at much more economical costs.

For now, we only know that the ONOS scheme seeks to aggregate all 10 government-funded e-library consortia to provide more institutions and individuals with access to additional resources. Resources are to be procured from international publishers, most of which will belong to the engineering, sciences, and technology sectors. So far, no official note has mentioned access to social science and humanities journals.

As of now 30 international publishers have been onboarded, as announced in the 10th December press conference. They include Elsevier Science Direct (including *Lancet*), Springer Nature, Wiley Blackwell Publishing, Taylor & Francis, IEEE, Sage Publishing, American Chemical Society, and American Mathematical Society.

University World News reports that the government could reduce the subscription costs to Rs. 1,800 crore a year for 13,000 journals from the initially stated Rs 4,000 crore. The government has allocated Rs. 6,000 crore for three calendar years, which averages to Rs. 2,000 crore per year, compared with the Rs 1,500 crore now being spent by the existing consortia.

The bureau heads of different ministries are believed to have been asked to ensure that all higher education and research institutions under their administrative control stop subscribing to e-resources that the ONOS scheme proposes to include. They have been asked to transfer the budget allocations for this to the ONOS scheme.

Beneficiaries will be able to access the e-resources subscribed to by the ONOS scheme through a portal run by the Department of Higher Education, which is under the Ministry of Education. Access will be extended to 6,300 higher education institutions managed by the central and state governments, and central government-run research and development institutions. It is unclear whether government-aided higher education institutions will also be eligible.

The recently established Anusandhan National Research Foundation (ANRF) under the Department of Science and Technology has been charged with periodically reviewing the portal to assess the extent and intensity of use. It will also estimate the demand for new resources.

Government officials have subsequently stated that ONOS would be implemented in a phased manner over three stages: the first phase to be launched in January to be implemented over three years, will be followed by the second phase which will see private educational institutions brought in through what is called a "public-private partnership" (which has not been elaborated on), with the third phase providing universal access through public libraries.

Assessment

On the face of it, ONOS is a marked improvement over existing arrangements. As the sole subscriber to e-resources for the nation, ONOS may be in a much stronger position to negotiate with publishers, aggregators, and e-resources vendors. The consortia can bring publishers around to offer a 60% to 95% discount on the quoted prices. If implemented properly, ONOS could bring India into the league of well-known global library consortia.

ONOS may promote resource sharing, save individual institutions the hassle of subscribing to resources, and weed out duplicate and underutilised resources. Equally important, if not more, is the ability to identify, select, negotiate, subscribe, and grant access to quality resources efficiently, thus democratising knowledge. It can thus enable students, scholars, and academics to access relevant, quality e-

resources.

Doing this right will need extensive consultations with higher education and research libraries, and representatives of users of the subscribed resources. A perceived bias in identifying and subscribing to resources could violate the integrity of the ONOS scheme.

Pluses and Minuses

The idea of having a highly centralised system of subscribing to library resources has evoked mixed responses globally. It finds favour with those primarily concerned about cost and economies of scale. However, the academic fraternity has been generally circumspect about such initiatives.

It has already been pointed out by Madhan (2024) that while the government began negotiations with 70 journals it has finally landed deals with only 30 journals, a significant climbdown in number. Government officials now say that libraries can negotiate with other journals as well, outside ONOS.

Further, Madhan (2024) also notes that financial allocations under ONOS are almost double what Parliament was informed as recently in 2023. Does this mean ONOS is going to begin with a higher cost and smaller coverage, that in the process it is the journal publishers who have ended up with a better deal? Besides, critics say this centralised bulk negotiation strategy is falling out of favour in the West and libraries are exploring other strategies which are cheaper and give expanded access.

Students, scholars, faculty, and researchers are concerned that the model might restrict academic freedom in the choice and availability of knowledge resources. Therefore, the academic community is justified in insisting on a participatory and transparent approach to prescribing criteria and processes for identifying, negotiating, selecting, reviewing, and retaining resources.

> Given the prevalent propensity of the state to control higher education, there are valid concerns that a centralised subscription scheme may be susceptible to selectivity and subjectivity, thus restricting access to information.

Coming close on the heels of centralising admission to all central universities and introducing a single common entrance examination (CUET) for admission to medical education programmes, the ONOS scheme has heightened the sense that education is being over-centralised. Let us not forget that there has also been talk of One Nation One Examination, and introducing a One Nation One Student ID in the form of an Automated Permanent Academic Account Registry (APAAR). This concern is very important, given that India's ranking in the Academic Freedom Index (AFI) has slid to the bottom 20% to 30% of countries in the world.

Given the prevalent propensity of the state to control higher education, there are valid concerns that a centralised subscription scheme may be susceptible to selectivity and subjectivity, thus restricting access to information.

Ideally, universities should have academic, administrative, and financial autonomy to decide their curricula and pedagogy. They should be able to prescribe reading and reference materials and allow their faculty and researchers to pursue research and explorations in their chosen areas of interest and specialisation.

There are other issues to reflect on. Subscribing to resources for the nation is one thing, but ensuring universal access to them is different. Critically, higher educational institutions, particularly state universities and colleges, may have to be supported to upgrade and augment their information and communication technology infrastructure and network connectivity.

The Information and Library Network must be careful while negotiating licensing terms with publishers. E-resource publishers always seek to maximise their gains and may insist on inserting conditionalities that may prove detrimental to access and resource sharing.

Additionally, the library budgets of institutions may also have to be enhanced to ensure that they can continue to acquire resources and databases uncovered by the ONOS scheme. This is particularly important for humanities, languages, social sciences, and serials from within the country and abroad.

The ONOS scheme excludes students and faculty of private higher education institutions from accessing the subscribed resources. Given the rapid rise of the private sector, which now accounts for nearly half of the higher education enrolment, it appears desirable that they too be allowed access.

Finally, Open Access journals were begun partly in response to the exorbitant pricing power of journals. They have mushroomed over the past couple of decades. So, is there the need for an ONOS kind of scheme, even though open access journals have not fulfilled their promise?

Insisting on open source publishing may indeed substantially reduce subscription costs. Still, it may prove much costlier to higher education and research institutions because open source publishers demand steep article processing charges. Given its negotiating power, the government could prevail upon publishers to not only waive article processing charges but also insist that they pay royalties to authors and a reasonable fee to peer reviewers.

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