



Raising the bar for national language open access journals

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Why Latin American journals are published predominantly in open access

Open access is the dominant publishing model of scientific journals edited in Latin America (LA). Most of them typically publish national authors. As a result, the region has become the most dynamic region for open access journals publishing. In fact, while the United States and Eastern Europe publish less than 15% of their research via open access journals. By contrast, in Latin America, this figure is greater than 25%, as per data indexed by the Web of Sciences or Scopus bibliometric databases.

The success of open access in the region is due to the support provided by the Scientific Electronic Library Online ([SciELO](#)) scholarly communication programme, in operation for the past 17 years. During that time, SciELO has progressively networked journal collections—typically operated at national level—from 11 LA countries together with journal collections from Portugal, Spain (limited to health sciences journals) and South Africa. Altogether, the network represents about 1,000 journals and over 500 thousand articles. It is therefore one of the most important and comprehensive international cooperation initiative in open access.

Considering that each participating country contributes with financial and infrastructure resources so all the research contents are freely available, SciELO contributes to a regional boon and the global common good.

To achieve this, it relies on a methodology, combined with technology, which enables the online indexing, preservation, publishing and interoperation of peer-reviewed journals. It follows basic and common principles such as open access,

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decentralised operation and funding, common standards to maximise interoperability, quality control, performance evaluation and the strengthening of the editorial independence and transparency. The selection of journals to be indexed in each collection is carried out under the supervision of a national advisory committee, following pre-established criteria.

The adoption of a SciELO-like integrated and networked approach to run not-for-profit and independent quality journals by other regions and countries—particularly in the developed ones—faces barriers mainly at the political level. Indeed, it requires research agencies' commitment and leadership to build authoritative, sustainable and transparent managerial and funding models.

History of a network

SciELO as an open access scientific communication model was launched in Brazil in 1998. It resulted from a research project led by the São Paulo Research Foundation (FAPESP) in partnership with the Latin American and Caribbean Centre on Health Sciences Information of the Pan American Health Organisation / WHO also known as Biblioteca Regional de Medicina (BIREME).

The model was adopted in the same year by the Chilean National Science Council, thus starting the development of SciELO as a network. SciELO Brazil acts as the secretariat of the network and is in charge of methodological and technological development as well as the follow up of national collections according common established criteria. These institutional roots set by leading research and scientific information organisations represented a big boost for SciELO's credibility. Most of the countries that adopted SciELO model after Chile did under the leadership of national research agencies.

Over the years, SciELO became an integral part of the national research infrastructure in the countries it operates. Progressively, SciELO also garnered international recognition which is expressed by the inclusion of the SciELO Citation Index in the Thomson Reuters Web of Science Platform and more broadly by the decision of UNESCO to publishing our story in a [book](#) SciELO - 15 Years of Open Access: an analytic study of Open Access and scholarly communication.

We should note however, that SciELO success is also due to its pioneering entry in online and open access journal publishing. This contributed to its development and consolidation with the different stakeholders. In 1998, there was no serious competitor to SciELO. Today, any country considering adopting the SciELO model will face the resistance of different solutions already in place.

Web-ready journals

One of the particularities of our collections is that they cover journals from all the disciplines and thematic areas—be they owned by scientific societies, academic institutions and other research and development related organisations. In addition, we adopt a [multilingual approach](#), which accepts journals publishing articles in one or more languages—even simultaneously in two or more languages.

This means that SciELO is contributing to the advancement of national research programs and projects, particularly when their results are better communicated via national journals. The platform provides these journals with indexing and extensive interoperability on the web. This advantage is in addition to the continued evaluation, quality improvement and promotion of innovations following the international state of art in journal editing and publishing. International indexing is also provided by Google Scholar and the SciELO Citation Index as part of the Web of Science platform.

The research published by SciELO journals varies in different degrees with respect to international versus national scope. While an increasing number of journals tends to be fully aligned with the mainstream research in their respective thematic areas, most of the research we communicate appears in journals which publish national authors.

The reasons are multiple. Authors choose our journals either because the research subjects are of local focus and interest. It could also be because it is written in the national language of their country—which is not English. Or it

could even be because authors perceive that work as not being suitable for foreign journals. In other cases, authors submit to local journals papers that were rejected by high-impact foreign journals.

On average, over 80% of the articles published by our journals is of national research. Consequently, considering the total of LA articles indexed internationally every year, more than 20% are actually published by national journals. These figures reveal the strategic nature of the role of SciELO in raising the profile of the quality national journals. It has also contributed in making the research they publish increasingly visible and valued, thus demonstrating the importance making research accessible without barriers.

Expanding impact metrics

However, results emanating from research performed at the national level, which are published in our journals, tend to have a low impact in terms of citations received per article. This is compared with the performance of international journals published in Europe and United States.

In fact, even when open access contributed to increase the visibility of journals from LA, more than 80% of these journals indexed in the World of Science or Scopus collections perform below the median of the distribution of citations related indicators in their respective thematic areas.

This low performance is due to several factors, including the national focus of the research, the use of non-English language, the lack of international cooperation and the absence of main stream cutting-edge research. All these factors contribute to limit the impact metrics to domestic citations. The trouble is that many research communities—particularly those habituated to high-impact journals—ignore or perceive negatively the national journals, which represents a barrier to their continued improvement.

We are working towards counteracting this perception by broadening the scope of evaluation. Indeed, we are considering qualitative indicators based on peer opinions, citations from large coverage indexes such as SciELO Citation Index and Google Scholar—particularly for social sciences and humanities journals—as well as the number of access to and downloads of articles, which altogether they currently average more than one million per day. However, these indicators do not provide international benchmark but they do permit to follow the evaluation of the journals.

SciELO has succeeded in developing its services while retaining a high degree of autonomy vis-a-vis the traditional dichotomies North-South, Center-Periphery or Mainstream-Regional. It has contradicted narrow minded editorial gatekeepers and research authorities' attempts to discredit independent national journals and the research they publish. We have largely succeeded in overcoming this discrediting syndrome through an indexing and publishing model based upon an unprejudiced appraisal of journal quality and, particularly, the relevance of the research they communicate. A critical foundation of our undertaking is the postulate that good research requires good and interconnected publishing capacity and infrastructure. This is becoming more obvious with the emergence of open science.

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