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Manufacturing doubts about Open Access

"Doubt is our product", a cigarette executive once observed, "since it is the best means...of establishing a controversy". David Michaels's excellent "Doubt Is Their Product" provides numerous examples about uses of pseudoscientific arguments to mislead the public manufacturing and magnifying scientific uncertainty. In an age of unprecedented disinformation and misinformation by those whose interests are in risk, an attack to open-access model (OAM) is not a surprise.

In "Who's Afraid of Peer Review?", John Bohannon and Science were mostly interested in highlighting the dark side of OAM. Curiously, however, a paper about peer review was not peer reviewed. It permitted that only journals with article processing charges were considered (which represent only 25% of titles of this kind), no random selection was used and no control was implemented (for instance, submitting the same paper to subscription-based publishers). It appears that the creators of this example of sensationalist journalism were afraid to submit this paper to journals that do not accept that a publicly-funded research reports should be accessible to everybody.

The implication of Bohannon's article was that, if publishers have a pecuniary incentive to accept a paper, since they only get paid in such a case, then they will inescapably admit garbage in their journals. However, no conclusions can be drawn about the degree in which the bogus effect is specific to OAM journals or about the overall prevalence of the phenomenon in this realm. This flawed study shows only three well known things: that there are predatory publishers, that some journals indexed as a part of OAM are in this category, and that peer review is easier said than done. For anything else, it is scientifically unsound.

What it has been done here is to fabricate another version of the tricks many manufacturers of the doubt carry out daily, in the same way denounced by Michaels.

Luis Carlos Silva Ayçaguer, Editor, *Cuban Journal of Information in Medical Sciences*