

## Issues Related to Open Access

### Economic Impact of Open Access Literature

Commercial publishers, as well as professional societies, are concerned about the move toward open access publishing. They believe it is an untenable business model that threatens the viability of niche journals. Nevertheless, they recognize that OA is here to stay, and may even become the dominant scholarly publishing model.<sup>1</sup> They are experimenting with different business models, including online subscriptions offering free access to content after an embargo period (usually two to 12 months).

Since there are no costs incurred for licensing, rights management, or subscription fees, it should theoretically cost less to produce open access journals than their traditional counterparts. In fact, a study of the economic impact of open access shows that it is too early to tell whether full open access is a viable business model. Most full OA journals are not generating surpluses and most depend on revenues from grants, authors, and institutions, and on volunteer labor.<sup>2</sup>

For commercial publishers, the changes associated with online publishing in general are having a greater influence on their operations than the OA movement, but it has definitely made an impact.<sup>3</sup> Scholarly societies often support the concept of OA but are concerned about the loss of subscription revenues that support their other activities.<sup>4</sup> The Medical Library Association studied the impact of providing open access to its journal and found that revenue from subscriptions dropped sharply after the introduction of open access. On the positive side, OA did not affect the number of association members, and actually increased the readership and reach of the journal.<sup>5</sup>

### Open Access and Quality Control

Questions have been raised about the quality of articles published in open access journals, since many more articles can be published online than in print journals, and authors can self-publish. In fact, serious e-journals perform quality checks, and most commentators see no reason why the traditional refereeing system with editorial boards can't be used in the online environment. The quality of content is based more on the specific quality control systems in place than the publishing medium.<sup>6</sup>

Some proponents of open access have argued that, in reality, the traditional peer review and publication process has not assured quality control or "efficient scientific exchange."<sup>7</sup> Much important information probably gets lost in the process because it is essentially a thumbs-up or thumbs-down approach that rejects the majority of submissions.<sup>8</sup> Instead, open access allows for a variety of new forms of quality control:<sup>9</sup>

- Open peer review offers an open, general debate about a manuscript
- Mixed systems allow a combination of open and anonymous peer review

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- Different levels of quality control and refereeing standards can be used for different types of papers
- Labeling can indicate the level of quality control or screening a manuscript has received
- Ex-post quality control allows for correcting errors, attaching reader comments and ratings, and better citation and use tracking calculations

In short, open access has the potential to revolutionize the current peer review system by allowing it to become “a multi-dimensional communicative process,” instead of a unidirectional activity.<sup>10</sup>

### Future trends in Open Access Publishing

In the scientific, technical and medical fields, there have been several recent initiatives to make the results of publicly funded research freely available online. These include repositories such as [BioMed Central](#) and the [Public Library of Science](#). In 2005 the National Institutes of Health (NIH) requested that its grantees upload manuscripts to an online repository no later than 12 months after publication. But researchers have been slow to comply. A year after this voluntary policy took effect, NIH estimated that fewer than four percent of eligible manuscripts were uploaded, and there is now a push toward a mandatory policy.<sup>11</sup>

National legislation has been introduced that would require every federal agency that sponsors more than \$100 million annually in research (a total of 11 agencies) to establish an online repository and make its grantees deposit articles within six months of publication.<sup>12</sup> There is also increasing pressure from outside the U.S., particularly in the European Union, to have mandatory posting of publicly sponsored research in centralized free online repositories.<sup>13</sup>

These pressures are causing grave concern among commercial and professional society publishers, and it is too early to determine what direction these developments will lead.

Some commentators predict that open access will inevitably become the norm for scholarly communication, and that “once a critical mass of scholars publishes in open access journals, their colleagues will follow.”<sup>14</sup> They envision an all-electronic, unified publication archive for all pre-prints and refereed papers that provides for different levels of quality control review and labeling.<sup>15</sup>

Others in the scholarly community, particularly those in the humanities and social sciences, see a different scenario. They believe that for the foreseeable future, print and electronic journals will coexist in a complementary fashion. “Economic and functionality concerns are pushing scholarly journals toward electronic media, while traditional views of the prestige and importance of publication for the advancement process act as a counterforce.”<sup>16</sup>



Stay tuned for the next installments in the open access saga!

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<sup>1</sup> Hawkins, 40.

<sup>2</sup> Kaufman-Wills Group, 24-25.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Banks, 164.

<sup>5</sup> T. Scott Plutchak, "The Impact of Open Access," *Journal of the Medical Library Association* 93, no. 4 (October 2005), 419.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Nentwich, "Quality Control in Academic Publishing: Challenges in the Age of Cyberspace," *Poiesis & Praxis* 3, no. 3 (July 2005), 192.

<sup>7</sup> Ulrich Pöschl, "Interactive Journal Concept for Improved Scientific Publishing and Quality Assurance," *Learned Publishing* 17, no. 2 (April 2004), 105.

<sup>8</sup> Nentwich, 192.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 184-189.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 193.

<sup>11</sup> Lila Guterman, "NIH Has Little to Celebrate on 1st Anniversary of Its Open-Access Policy, but Changes May Be on the Way," *Chronicle of Higher Education* (May 11, 2006), <http://chronicle.com/>, accessed 5/16/06.

<sup>12</sup> Sara Ivry, "Some Publishers of Scholarly Journals Dislike Bill to Require Online Access to Articles," *The New York Times* (May 8, 2006), <http://www.nytimes.com>, accessed 5/8/06.

<sup>13</sup> Guterman.

<sup>14</sup> Banks, 164-165.

<sup>15</sup> Nentwich, 196; Miller and Harris, 88-89.

<sup>16</sup> Jordan J. Ballor, "Scholarship at the Crossroads: The *Journal of Markets & Morality* Case Study," *Journal of Scholarly Publishing* 36, no. 3 (April 2005), 161.