

THEME: OPEN ACCESS

Open Access Today and Tomorrow

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Like all forms of human endeavour, library and information work is prone to fashions and enthusiasms. Some of these mutate into the mainstream and others fade quietly away. Crucial survival indicators for innovations are that they are a better way of doing our job, that they are not rapidly overtaken by something even better, that they deliver tangible benefits to the library's paymasters - and above all that library users like them.

Open access (OA) is a single, value-laden term for a wide variety of activities, and in this paper only its relevance to conventional scientific, technical and medical (STM) publishing is covered. In one form or another OA has been on the agenda for nearly 10 years and there are currently two basic genera. OA gold is a direct alternative to the traditional subscription journal methodology, with the costs being met by the author and/or the author's funding agency; OA green is where the article is formally published in a journal and its text is then separately placed by the author in an archive which is open to all. Passions can run high on all aspects of OA, but in reality there is a growing general acceptance of OA green and almost all of the major commercial and learned society publishers have author agreements which accommodate self-archiving. Elsevier was one of the first to change its policy in this regard and our agreements give authors the right to archive the full post-print version as soon as the article appears on ScienceDirect. Publishers and subject repositories are negotiating ways of co-existing. Institutional repositories are less of a threat to what subscription-based STM publishers see as their essential interests, and many publishers are working with universities to ensure that repositories develop to serve as fully as the technology allows the emerging intra-mural functions of archiving, staff management, administrative efficiency, institutional marketing and so on. There are issues to be resolved where deposited texts are linked (particularly by third parties) to in effect reconstructed parallel publications, but for almost all STM publishers for almost all of the time OA green is not a contentious issue.

OA gold is a stickier matter. For almost all STM publishers this is a matter of practicality rather than principle: commercial and society publishers alike would happily embrace publishing-charges as a methodology provided that it meets all the requirements of scientific publishing and provides a viable, sustainable business model. Many of the major publishing houses are experimenting with OA in one way or another. Even those like Elsevier which are still looking on from the sidelines are paying the closest possible attention, with an eye to the future. The simplicity and operational advantages of OA are plain to all and not seriously in dispute, but there are still some very significant difficulties to be worked through:

Financial viability

The cost of bringing an article from submission to the point where it is ready to be released to the printer or the online service is a constant, regardless of the revenue model. Springer are charging \$3,000 for their OA option, which is close to Elsevier and other estimates of an economic price, and there is no evidence as yet that the author community is ready to pay publication charges at this level.

Commercial consumers of STM information

Industry is a large net consumer of scholarly STM publications (ie they buy a lot but publish much less). Under an OA regime this revenue would be lost from the system and would need to be replaced from somewhere - personally I find assertions that industry would continue to pay similar amounts out of a sense of moral duty, to be a little fanciful, and think the additional burden would fall on the scholarly community in some form.

Divorcing payment from consumption

As a general rule of service provision, the greater the consumer influence the more likely that the service will be efficient, relevant and in tune with user needs.

Meritocracy

One of the great, resilient strengths of traditional STM publishing is that, in principle at least, the blind peer review process on which it rests produces a pure meritocracy - top class papers get into top class journals regardless of the status of the authors. In the real world of academic life, author fees will be in effect rationed, and their allocation will be governed by internal power politics. In an OA environment, highly-regarded journals will be charging higher publication fees than their lower status rivals. Junior staff and researchers from poorer institutions and developing countries will struggle to achieve their current level of access to *The Lancet*, *Cell* etc.

Elsevier does not regard the adoption of OA publishing as a moral issue. As the world's largest STM publisher, we are ready to embrace any methodology that matches the requirements of all the participants in the scholarly communication process and which is financially sustainable in the long term. At the moment we do not think the case is near to being proven. Until it is, we will continue our policy of being responsive to the needs of customers and sensitive to those outside the first-world library network - working with patient information groups and above all with the HINARI and AGORA programmes to provide free or minimal-cost access to our full-strength ejournal service.

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