

The open access future

Por Frederick J. Friend

THE POSSIBILITY OF OPEN ACCESS to academic journal articles has already made an impact upon the strategies of funding agencies, universities, authors, publishers and librarians. So much publicity has been given to open access that even its severest critics have found it necessary to respond, often by modifying their own strategies to give either lip-service or real substance to improvements in access. When the *Budapest Open Access Initiative*¹ was first launched in February 2002 it attracted some initial support, much interest and also a large measure of scepticism, even ridicule. The general response was that open access is a worthy vision but totally impracticable. Over the past three years those reactions are still there but in different proportions. The support for open access and the interest have both grown at the expense of scepticism and ridicule. Open access has been shown to be feasible as well as visionary.



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Some organisations have favoured a subject rather than an institutional repository, as this approach enables easy access for researchers and teachers to work written by their peers in other institutions. For the objective of achieving open access, both institutional and subject repositories are valuable, provided that the repository metadata complies with the standard set by the *Open Archives Initiative*³, enabling the metadata to be “harvested” by information providers and services.

The most significant growth in support for open access has come from funding agencies and from universities, particularly within Europe. Organizations in many European countries are now supporting the *Berlin Declaration*², which aims for the practical implementation of the two strategies towards open access identified in the *Budapest Open Access Initiative*. Perhaps the greatest publicity has followed the first strategy, loosely called “self-archiving”, which calls upon authors to deposit copies of pre-prints or post-prints in open web-sites. Many universities have now created sections of their institutional web-sites, known as “repositories”, into which they either require or encourage their academic staff to deposit copies of their work. Such repositories usually have a wider purpose than making research results openly available, as other types of academic work (such as theses or teaching packages) may also be deposited in the repository. When fully-developed, a repository can provide a complete record of the academic work of an institution, and the ongoing nature of the institution provides a secure base for the long-term preservation of that content.

Funding agencies and universities have also been supporting the second open access strategy, viz. the publication of open access journals or the conversion of existing subscription journals to an open access business model. This strategy is often referred to as “author-pays”, because the open access business model moves payment from the libraries and individuals at the end of the information-chain to the authors at the beginning of the chain. “Author-pays” is no more accurate a term than “self-archiving”, because as with repositories so with publication payments, *organizations* as well as individuals have an important role to play. The dissemination of research is an essential part of the research process and it is therefore proper for the cost of disseminating research to be treated as part of the cost of research itself. This principle is proving relatively easy to adopt for the biomedical community, where research grants can cover the relatively small open access publication charge, but more challenging for research agencies and authors in other disciplines. Much will depend on the way in which the publishers in all disciplines respond to the challenge of conversion to an open access model.

Many publishers are responding to this challenge in a very positive way. No word on conversion to open access has come from the biggest journal publisher of all, *Reed Elsevier*, but even that company may be forced to act if more of their competitors follow the example of *Oxford University Press*, *Springer*, and *Blackwell Publishers* in offering authors the option of making their work available on open access. Competition is also coming from publishers who only make their journals available on open access, notably the

Public Library of Science and BioMed Central. The competition will become significant as authors see the higher use and citations resulting from open access publication and start to compare the price charged by various publishers for open access publication in relation to the value they receive from the publisher. Under the subscription model the cost of publication is hidden from the author because libraries not the author bears the cost through subscriptions.

Many publishers, including *Reed Elsevier*, have been more supportive of the “self-archiving” route to open access, allowing authors to deposit their work in repositories. However, such permissions are now being questioned by publishers who fear that readers will use the repository copy of journal articles rather than their subscription copy. It is possible that such concerns will encourage more publishers to start open access publishing options for authors rather than see repositories take away their business. Another strategy adopted by some publishers, particularly US learned societies, has been “delayed open access”. This term is a misnomer, as true open access is immediate, and the hope must be that as learned societies see that their existence is not threatened by open access, the delay will gradually be removed.

Many academic writers remain unsure of open access developments. This state of affairs is not surprising, given the relatively-new open access publication opportunities now open to them and the academic weight behind the current publication system. However, author opinion is changing in favour of open access. A survey⁴ conducted by *Key Perspectives Limit-*

ed for the *UK Joint Information Systems Committee* and the *Open Society Institute* found that 79% of authors would comply willingly if required by their employer to deposit their journal article in a repository and 71% who had published in an open access journal would willingly do so again. This willingness may take several years to translate into widespread action by authors but the omens are good. Combined with growing support from funding agencies and authors and with increasing willingness by publishers to provide authors with open access opportunities, there is cause for optimism that within a few years access to academic research results will be much easier, more barrier-free than it is under the current regime of high-priced subscriptions and user-unfriendly licensing terms.

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Notes

1. The text of the *Budapest Open Access Initiative*, its initial supporters and information about progress since the initiative was promulgated can be found through the web-site:

<http://www.soros.org/openaccess/>

2. The text of the *Berlin Declaration*, a list of its current signatories and conference documents can be found at:

<http://www.zim.mpg.de/openaccess-berlin/berlindeclaration.html>

3. *The Open Archives Initiative* is a technical development in parallel to the *Budapest Open Access Initiative* but the two are not to be confused.

<http://www.openarchives.org/>

4. http://www.jisc.ac.uk/uploaded_documents/JISCOAreport1.pdf

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