

Collaboration: The Key to Unlock Open Access Publication

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Abstract

Access to academic information is vital for world health, for economic growth and for personal educational development. The opportunities presented by new technology - particularly networks - are not being realised due to barriers of cost, licensing and technical protection measures. Open access publication will release information to the world's population. The key to unlock the barriers and enable the potential of open access to be realised is collaboration between authors, academic institutions, funding agencies, publishers and librarians. New economic models have to be developed to fund publication while enabling free access to all who need information. Open access publication provides opportunities for existing organizations in the information world and for new entrants, but collaboration between stakeholders in information will be vital for these opportunities to be developed. Collaboration of this nature has already begun to a limited extent in some countries but much more remains to be achieved.

The importance of information in personal and community life is well-recognised. Nations recognise the power of information to stimulate economic, social and political growth. Each human being can benefit from information they obtain through education. We all benefit from information obtained by those who supply services to meet our physical and mental needs. In the case of medical services, this information can be literally vital to our survival, and arguably information is also vital in respect of our educational development. We cannot grow in personal development without information, and available through the Internet is all the information most of us will need in a lifetime. Through the power of search engines across the networks you can find references to information on any topic you can imagine. This information is placed there by institutions or by individuals. Some of it is authenticated by peer-review or by the status of the institution supplying the information, some of it is subjective and personal (although in some topics maybe no less reliable than authenticated information). So much information is available through the Internet that efficient search engines and services are needed to take the reader quickly to the small amount of information that fits their particular need. Once the reader finds a reference to the information they need, often they find that they cannot open the reference to read the information. They may be asked to pay a fee to read the information, a fee they cannot afford. They may be able to afford the fee and access the information themselves, but then find that they cannot copy the information to the people working with them on the same topic. They may find that a technical barrier has been placed between them and the information they need. Barriers of cost, of licensing and technical protection measures prevent much of the world's population from reading the information they need for their or their community's well-being.

Access to information has been restricted for many hundreds of years, but when all information was hand-written or printed, the restriction was primarily that of physical format. Most people had to visit a library to find the information they needed, and this acted as a barrier to access. Infrastructure problems still exist in many countries, but networking is gradually overcoming the physical restriction upon access to information. Users of information then ask why they cannot read the information when they have come so close to it on the Internet and it is only a mouse-click away. The reason is simply that

those who have paid to make the electronic information available require those who use the information to pay to use it, and they place barriers in their way until the user pays. If the cost of accessing information were affordable, the barriers would not be of any importance, but the high cost of information prevents much of the world's population from accessing information they need, including many in the richest countries in the world. If information is so important to us all, can we not devise another way of recompensing the world's creators of information without placing barriers in the way of its use?

That is what the open access movement is trying to achieve in respect of academic information, particularly information published in journals: free access for users of information while meeting the legitimate costs of making information available. Most of the cost of producing official information is already met by taxpayers in countries across the globe. Our taxes pay for research undertaken by governments, universities and other official bodies. So the legitimate costs that have to be met in order to offer free access to users are usually not the costs of producing information but the costs incurred in making it available - in "publishing" it. Those costs have various components, such as the authentication of the information or its ongoing availability on the electronic networks. The advocates of open access recognise that legitimate costs exist and they have to be allowed for in a new economic model to permit the free use of information. The Budapest Open Access Initiative¹ offers two strategies for allowing barrier-free access to users while meeting legitimate costs: the deposit of academic content in institutional repositories (where the cost is met by the institution managing the repository), or access through electronic publications funded by up-front publication payments rather than by subscription payments at the user's end of the publication chain.

Few people would deny that the vision of world-wide barrier-free access to information described in the Budapest Open Access Initiative is a worthy goal to aim for, but some would feel that it is not practical or realistic. The thesis in this paper is that open access for the world's population to the world's information is achievable given commitment and collaboration from the world's producers and suppliers of information. Authors need the support of funding agencies, employers or publishers to make their work freely-available. Funding agencies and employers need the support of authors in open access initiatives. Publishers need the support of funding agencies, employers and authors to ensure that the legitimate costs of publication are met. Librarians need the support of their employing institutions to encourage the development of open access content, for example through institutional repositories which many librarians manage. Many producers and suppliers of information are committed to open access, others are not. Some are willing to engage in trials and pilot projects of open access publication. Some universities have already set up institutional repositories and are encouraging their academic staff to deposit pre-prints of journal articles². The leaders of some funding agencies have already committed themselves to the support of open access to the results of research they fund³. Some

¹ The vision statement and strategies of the Budapest Open Access Initiative can be read at www.soros.org/openaccess/ .

² Links to some university repositories are on the SPARC Europe web-site www.sparceurope.org .

³ The Bethesda Statement from the leaders of several funding agencies can be read at <http://www.earlham.edu/~peters/fos/bethesda.htm> .

publishers have already committed heavily to open access⁴ while a number of others are preparing to change their economic model either for their entire production output or for selected titles.

Experience of open access is still very new for everybody. A small number of open access publications have been available for many years but in the past two years - since the Budapest Open Access Initiative provided a strategic framework - the number of open access publications has increased substantially. There is nothing in the experience gained so far to suggest that either of the two strategies - institutional repositories or open access journals - is impracticable, but what is clear is that the success stories are based upon collaboration between everybody who has an interest in the dissemination of academic information. Extensive collaboration already exists between international organizations committed to open access, such as the collaboration between the Open Society Institute⁵ and SPARC⁶ in publishing business guides for publishers considering a move to open access publication. In turn the Open Society Institute and SPARC have been represented at meetings of initiatives managed by other organizations. Within the UK, the programme to support the development of institutional repositories managed by JISC (the Joint Information Systems Committee) has an international advisory board⁷. This international collaboration illustrates the importance attached to open access in many countries and the way in which collaboration can assist initiatives at different stages of development.

Collaboration is also benefiting the relationship between publishers and the academic community in open access developments. Major financial decisions are faced by those publishers willing to trial open access publication and it is important that open access advocates understand the risks faced by publishers. The Open Society Institute made it clear from the launch of the Budapest Open Access Initiative that it wished to work with publishers in developing open access economic models. A practical example of this collaboration has been the meetings held in the UK between members of the Association of Learned Professional and Society Publishers (ALPSP) and representatives of OSI, SPARC and JISC. These meetings have explored the implications for publishers of a switch to an open access economic model. Clear answers about the future economic model are not available as yet, but some society publishers understand open access publication payments to be the way forward. Many publishers will admit privately that the current dependence upon library subscriptions cannot continue and they are looking to closer collaboration with the academic community in order to ensure the survival of their important journal titles. Amongst many members of the academic community there is a parallel concern that the high cost of many journal subscriptions cannot be supported and yet a wish to see important peer-reviewed journals survive. Given that common interest between the academic and publishing communities, it is in everybody's interest that a way is found to reduce the dependence of publishers upon declining library subscription income. An open access economic model based upon publication payments by authors or

⁴ A list of current peer-reviewed open access journals prepared by Lund University with funding from the Open Society Institute and SPARC can be found at www.doaj.org.

⁵ The Information Program of the Open Society Institute is described on the web-site www.soros.org.

⁶ SPARC, the Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources Coalition, www.arl.org/sparc/.

⁷ The JISC FAIR (Focus on Access to Institutional Resources) is described at http://www.jisc.ac.uk/index.cfm?name=programme_fair.

by funding agencies could benefit learned society publishers.

Behind many of the open access initiatives there is a subtle but significant change in the attitude of authors and funding agencies towards the publication of research papers. Many authors and funding agencies are concerned that people who wish to read their research papers cannot gain access because of the barriers of cost, licensing and technical protection measures. Whereas the publication process was seen in the past as a separate activity, increasingly it is seen as part of the research process. The priority of academic authors in the past was solely to publish in journals with a high impact rating, and while this factor continues to be important, other factors are entering the publication-decision. Some funding agencies are indicating that publication payments for open access publication are as legitimate a charge upon research funds as colour charges for publication in subscription-based traditional journals. Some authors are already paying publishers for extra features, so why not pay to enable subscription-free open access for users? The degree of change in attitude by authors and funding agencies should not be exaggerated, but it is real and it marks a recognition of common interest between authors and funding agencies in the dissemination of research papers. That sense of common interest is beginning to turn into collaborative action, witness the support of authors and funding agencies for the Public Library of Science open access journals⁸.

The networking of information can provide benefits for the whole of humankind. The networking of academic information can be funded in ways which enable legitimate costs to be met and open access enabled through institutional repositories or subscription-free journals. Collaboration between organizations and individuals with a common interest in access to academic information has already begun and is beginning to bear fruit. If the vision of open access is to prove realistic further collaboration is essential. Information is too important to the world's population for all those ensuring the flow of information not to collaborate further.

⁸ Public Library of Science web-site www.plos.org .