

## Hogging research

Letter to the editor, Times Higher Education Supplement  
26 August 2005

It is ironic that René Olivieri's criticism of supporters of open access ("Making a pig's ear of an unscientific free-for-all", Soapbox, August 19) often lapsed into the polemical, as this was a label he was trying to pin on his opponents. Despite his calls for the debate to be more scientific, he omitted to mention many of the relevant facts. In particular, he failed to acknowledge the anomalies of the current system of research publishing. Universities generate research papers, give them free of charge to publishers and then buy them back at high prices. Researchers give their services as authors, referees and editorial board members all free of charge and yet their institutions have to buy back the value they have added. Prices are high because (as the Office of Fair Trading has observed) price competition does not properly operate in the academic periodicals market. This means institutions cannot afford to purchase all of the periodicals they would like and so researchers do not have easy access to all of the literature they need.

Furthermore, society cannot get access to research funded by public money. Researchers want their work to be read and cited, and yet the impact their work can make is being limited. The rise of the web, which makes wide distribution of content quick and easy, is making the system - which was developed in a paper-based world - look anachronistic.

Open access has the potential to overcome many of these problems. It is not just an interesting theory. There are a number of working examples, ranging from institutional databases of research papers to new peer-reviewed journals. Many mainstream publishers are experimenting with open-access models and funding bodies are investing in experiments and studies to see what the future holds.

Increasingly, research funders and governments are coming to see the benefits. Better communication means better science. Widening access will benefit the scientific community but will also bring benefits to health care, knowledge transfer and the public understanding of science. Empirical evidence of these benefits is beginning to emerge. Further work should be encouraged for the benefit of the academic community and society in general. Rather than try to turn back the oncoming tide, publishers such as Olivieri would be better advised to ride the wave.

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