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Open access

History

Open access has come to symbolize the revolution in scholarly publishing, though the revolution goes much deeper and is much wider. Fundamentally, open access means what it says, access to scholarly works in the open -- on the open Web. This concept has been around for at least 20 years (actually longer than the Web) and had its roots in what became known as the crisis in scholarly publishing, the double-digit inflation in the prices of serials over a decade or so that threatened to completely upend the relationship between books and journals in collection development. At one time many thought that moving scholars' research results to freely accessible institutional or disciplinary servers would ultimately bring down the prices of journals, if not eliminate the need for them altogether. This has turned out to be illusory. Publishers have us over a barrel for the most part, and they know it and act accordingly. It is ironic that it's our own content that they use to reap their generous profit margins from us, but we're the ones who willingly give over the content and then fork over the money to buy it back. What do we expect normal ordinary for-profit publishers to do? They owe allegiance to their shareholders.

Well, enough crying over the spilt milk.

Today

Open access is gaining traction; Peter Suber's Open Access News reports new OA journals nearly every day; there are advances on legal fronts; and business models are evolving to acknowledge the inevitability of OA. It only seems a matter of time before the opportunity will be a reality for every single scholar to have his or her work available freely on the Web. But that same work will in many cases still be published in exactly the same journal that the scholar might have published in 20 years ago, though it will have gone through a couple of name changes and be owned by one of the 2 or 3 publishers left in the field. Consolidations have been pro forma. This is not to say that there won't be grand departures from the norm also, new modes of scholarly communication and publication, but I think that we'll have quite traditional publishing with us, though not alone on the stage as it is today, for a long time.

As content stops being king, services are likely to take its place. Publishers will compete for subscription dollars based not on what articles they allow you to make available, but on what services they allow you to offer built on the corpus of freely available materials. It will be interesting to see whether competition in services will be more robust (i.e. affecting prices) than competition in scholarly articles is. That was always a big part of the problem with content as king: articles were not fungible. One journal's content could never substitute for another's. Articles are unique, as are their authors. But services are a bit more copyable, except to the degree that they are based on patents, but let's not get off on that tangent.

Open access resources

There are so many sources for information on this topic. Thankfully we have the ability to organize a few here and send you on your way. You'll discover others as we will, little by little. But assuming you don't want to become an evangelist, but just want to know the basics so that you can take advantage of the enhanced visibility OA provides, the first stop is [Peter Suber's Open Access News](#). I've assembled some good sources of information on our [Scholar's Space](#) blog, and another good collection is on our Libraries' [Scholarly Communication](#) page. In fact, your library is probably your best bet for good pointers to information about open access. Libraries have been in the forefront of this revolution for some time. They are being joined today by more and more publishers, who are aware that the times are a-changin'. Many libraries offer services to their institutions' faculty to help them take advantage of options their publishers give them to archive their pre- and post-prints, and to negotiate modifications to their contracts that allow for archiving if the publisher does not allow it by policy. You can determine what most publishers' policies are regarding open access at Sherpa's [RoMeo](#) site.

My favorite source for information about open access is blogs. There are many blogs on the subject of scholarly communication that address the broader issues, not just open access, but they certainly mention open access quite often. I have a list of them on the blogroll at [Scholar's Space](#), and you'll find many more if you start to read them as we all reference our favorite blogs on our blogs.

Open access mandates and recommendations

Several prominent funding agencies have mandated that the results of research they fund must be made publicly available, and others are considering such mandates. The Howard Hughes Medical Institute is one of those that does this. The [NIH requires grant recipients to publicly post their NIH supported research results](#) in PubMed Central, to be made publicly available as soon as possible after publication. The writing is on the wall. This is the direction of change and there is little likelihood that we're going back.

So learn enough about this to ask good questions, visit with your librarian, ask your peers what they do and what they know. But please do start taking advantage of your opportunity to enhance the visibility of your research, with the attendant increase in citation, the increased opportunity for collaboration with different scholars than you might heretofore have encountered (cross-disciplinary, for example), the chance to add to the growing corpus of works that are open to secondary research and services that no one can predict today. If affecting ordinary people forms part of your research objective, open access offers students and teachers, regardless of their resources, scholars in institutions that are not wealthy, professionals, and small libraries and schools, as well as ordinary citizens all over the world, the chance to read articles that are frankly out of their reach right now. This is truly remarkable -- something to celebrate.

University of Texas Libraries | PCL 3.200 | P.O. Box P, Austin, Texas 78713-8916

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