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A Wel(l)come development: research funders and open access

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Abstract

This paper discusses the implications of the Wellcome Trust agreement with Blackwell, OUP and Springer in which authors of accepted papers are able to pay an open-access publication charge to make their article freely available online. In bringing together flexible licence terms and clear funding streams, the agreement has the potential to be used as a way of migrating towards possible new business models for journal publishing. It also has the potential, if implemented more widely, to deliver greater open access in such a way as to work in the interests of a broad range of stakeholders.

Introduction

At first sight, the announcement made by the Wellcome Trust in December 2005 regarding its agreement with Blackwell, Oxford University Press and Springer did not seem to be saying anything new. The agreement was that the publishers would “provide for research published in their journals to be immediately available online and without charge to the reader” on payment of a per-article fee.¹ This does not immediately seem remarkable since, after all, a number of publishers already had in place policies allowing authors to pay to have their articles made freely accessible. For example, Springer’s ‘Open Choice’ option was already well established. However, on closer examination, the Wellcome Trust initiative may be far more significant than it might at first seem. It might be suggested, in fact, that the initiative has enormous potential for research publishing in general. If more widely implemented, it has the potential to deliver greater open access, and deliver it in such a way as to work in the interests of researchers, publishers, librarians, funders and governments. As such, it surely merits consideration by other research sponsors in the UK and beyond.

The Wellcome Trust initiative differs from previous developments since it involves the coming together of two key features: flexible license terms and clear funding streams. The licence terms put in place by the participating publishers as a result of their agreement with Wellcome are in general different from those previously available. Previously, some publishers would (on payment of a fee) make an article openly available on their own website. They usually maintained control of the content and placed tight restrictions on how the article could be downloaded and reused. Now, in contrast, standard licence terms have been made more flexible so that all those

papers for which an open-access charge has been paid can be copied, transmitted and stored elsewhere for non-commercial purposes in their published form.

For example, information given by Blackwell regarding their 'Online Open' offering (as they call it) states that "in addition to publication online via Blackwell Synergy, authors of Online Open articles are permitted to post the final, published PDF of their article on a website, institutional repository or other free public server, immediately on publication."² There are similar statements describing the 'Oxford Open' and 'Open Choice' policies.³ All three publishers have also agreed to deposit themselves a copy of papers by Wellcome-funded researchers in the PubMed Central repository.

It should be observed that the extent to which these 'open' licence conditions are a change from previous policies varies from publisher to publisher. OUP already had relatively flexible license terms in place. In contrast, Springer's Open Choice licence has undergone considerable change such that it is now compatible with the Creative Commons Attribution Licence, something which was not the case before the Wellcome Trust agreement. The Wellcome Trust negotiations have then prompted the publishers to introduce new or refine existing policies, although the 'open' licences are not exclusive to Wellcome-funded authors.

For their part, the Wellcome Trust has explicitly identified funding for authors (the second key feature of the initiative). Wellcome-funded researchers are being encouraged to use their research grants to pay open-access publication charges. The Trust has also set up procedures by which they will when necessary provide grant holders with additional funding to ensure articles can be made available on open access.

Benefits for the Wellcome Trust

The motivation of the Wellcome Trust in securing this agreement is not difficult to fathom. Wellcome now has a well-publicised policy in place which "supports unrestricted access to the published output of research"⁴. In particular, it mandates that papers which have been produced as a result of its grants be deposited in PubMed Central. Wellcome is now setting up UK PubMed Central to house this content. With its open access agreement in place, it will now be possible to include papers published by Blackwell, OUP and Springer in UK PMC. It will also be possible to add value to these papers by, for example, linking them to relevant data sets or other published sources. In addition, the Wellcome will be able to preserve them for long-term public access.

Benefits for the publishers

So, what is in it for the publishers? The fact that the publishers have agreed to carry out the deposit of articles in PMC themselves (once charges have been paid) indicates they think it will be beneficial for them. There are perhaps a number of benefits. Firstly, there is income generation. Their agreement with the Wellcome gives publishers a new income stream without shutting off existing subscription income. Secondly, the policies give publishers competitive advantage in attracting authors. For Wellcome-funded authors, publishing in Blackwell, OUP and Springer journals becomes more attractive because they know that their work can be easily made

available on open access at the expense of the funder. Thirdly, there is the benefit of improved journal visibility and citation rates. The empirical evidence shows that open-access papers tend to be downloaded and cited more,⁵ meaning the journals in which the papers are published are likely to have improved impact factors. Fourthly, there is the consideration of good public relations. The agreement allows the publishers to point to the fact they are giving customers what they want in such a way as to benefit the research community.

There is another important point. The publishers are able to experiment with new business models and to work on possible transition scenarios towards greater open access. All of the statements by the participating publishers in the Wellcome Trust press release touch on this point. For example, Bob Campbell, President of Blackwell, is quoted as saying: “Our experience in doing this will be shared with our society partners who are all interested in how the market might develop and whether there are new sustainable business models.”⁶

Ostensibly, the Wellcome Trust agreement gives publishers the time and space to look at this new approach to payment without making any immediate threats to their current profits from subscriptions. Usage, citation and financial data now need to be collected and analysed in order to see how the policies operate in practice. It would be useful if much of this was made publicly available so that it could contribute to ongoing discussions. Without wishing to pre-empt the emergence of this data, it is already safe to say that if a move to greater open access to research publications is going to be possible, then this initiative looks more like a transition model than anything else we have seen up until now.

The idea of “transition” does, however, have important implications. Perhaps the most important of these is that there should be a progressive shift in the relative levels of the two main publisher income streams. As the level of income increases from open-access charges, the level of income from subscriptions should correspondingly decrease. Something like this scenario was suggested as a possibility by David Prosser in 2003 as a way of “transforming journals from closed to open access.”⁷

However, one key issue to do with such a transition process remains unclear. Will publishers reduce their subscription income as their open-access charge income rises? And what are the incentives for them to do so? If this does not happen, the research community ends up paying twice. Many advocates of open access may object to the Wellcome hybrid model because of this (although others may support it for pragmatic reasons as a way of prompting change). Further down the line, as a greater proportion of articles becomes available on open access, it will be in the interests of publishers to ensure they can stay afloat with just publication charges since subscribers will begin to cancel. However, this would be some way off. It is more difficult to see what would prompt publishers to begin the process. It is interesting that OUP have already explicitly stated that they will take into account income from Oxford Open in setting subscription prices: “generally speaking, the more Open Access content published in a journal during the first phase of this initiative [2006], the lower the 2007 online subscription price will be.”⁸ In contrast, Blackwell are more cautious, stating that during the trial phase of 2006 they will not take levels of uptake in Online Open into account in setting 2007 subscription charges.⁹ Mechanisms need to be identified

which will help to ensure that the shift in income levels *does* occur when the system becomes more established.

Despite this potential problem, the approach taken by the Wellcome Trust in partnership with these publishers seems to be one which has the potential to bring wider benefits. Benefits are possible not merely for the funder and the publisher but also for other stakeholders in the research publishing process.

Researchers

The benefits for Wellcome-funded authors are also fairly obvious. Their work becomes more visible and more citable. Just as publishers are likely to see improved impact factors for their journals, so authors can expect to see improved download and citation rates for their papers. In fact, higher download and citation levels are likely to become more quickly apparent for individual open-access papers than for hybrid journals as a whole, and so it will be important that usage and citation statistics are carefully analysed at the article level to get early indications of what is happening. There is anecdotal evidence to suggest that some authors will feel more comfortable with increased visibility when their paper is made available in its formally published form.

Anticipating these benefits, the Wellcome Trust has tried to make it as easy as possible for authors to take advantage of the agreement. Wellcome authors can call on two sources of funding to pay open access charges. Firstly, authors can use money from their Wellcome research grants. The Trust currently has a grants budget of around £450 million per annum and in any one year approximately 4000 research papers are published that acknowledge support from the Trust. Therefore, with open-access charges ranging from between £500 and £2000, any publication charges will only ever be a small proportion of a total grant. Secondly, authors can apply for additional Wellcome Trust money to fund publication charges. Even if their research grant has run out, the Wellcome will still pay for subsequent publications when authors apply directly to them. For their ‘top 30’ UK institutions (in terms of grants awarded by the Wellcome), the Trust has handed over a special fund to be held centrally by each institution on which local authors can call to pay for publication. Both Wellcome funding streams can be used to pay open-access charges to other publishers, including those for ‘conventional’ open-access journals, such as PLoS.

In most respects, therefore, the label ‘author pays’ when applied to this process is misleading. It is very obviously ‘funder pays’. However, it is important to note that the Wellcome has set up the process so that the author is still involved in initiating and managing the process. The Trust has not for example agreed to pay fees directly to publishers. There are at least two reasons for this. Firstly, the Wellcome recognises that a great deal of research is funded jointly by more than one agency. The Wellcome would not wish to establish a precedent where it was directly paying the entire fee for articles where the research had in fact been funded by a number of sponsors (although in practice it seems that the Trust is happy to allow authors to effectively do so themselves, at least for the time being). Secondly, the Trust wants to establish a system where the producers and consumers of research content are directly involved in the economics of the process. In the current system, many authors and readers have no direct involvement in the purchase of content. They are only dimly aware or not

aware at all of movements in subscription costs. This means that the market does not easily respond to movements in price. The Wellcome did not wish to perpetuate this ‘disconnect’ between researchers and the economic realities of the market. In the new system, authors will then be aware of publication charges and be able to draw comparisons between different journals and publishers.

As publishers become more reliant on open-access charges, this new system has the potential to create greater competition as different players try to maintain attractive publication charge levels. The fear that, if implemented more widely, this might lead to a decline in quality (as publishers accept more papers in order to increase their income) ignores the way in which academic journals actually work. Quality is at such a premium in the research community that as soon as a journal begins to compromise on quality (either in terms of the content of papers or editorial practices) researchers will soon ‘vote with their feet’ and switch their loyalties elsewhere. In any case, there is absolutely no reason to believe that the guardians of content quality (editors, editorial boards, and referees) will behave any differently in a new system. There is also no reason to believe that journals with parent bodies, such as learned and professional societies or academic institutions (who are not primarily motivated by profit), will be allowed to compromise on quality. In other words, the journal publishing system would retain enough checks and balances (which are also in the existing system) in order to ensure that quality is maintained. There would certainly be no greater temptation to lower quality in order to increase quantity in this new system than there is in the existing system (where increases in the number of pages can sometimes be used as a reason for increasing subscription charges).

The wider availability of quality-controlled literature will also be a significant benefit to researchers in their capacity as readers and, by extension, to the research community in general. The benefits of open access for researchers wishing to gain access to the literature have been widely discussed.¹⁰ It is important that the benefits of any system are considered in relation to readers as well as authors.¹¹ This system has the potential to benefit both.

Wider potential

However, the real potential significance of the initiative does not just apply to Wellcome-funded researchers. The Wellcome Trust has negotiated new license terms with publishers which can in fact be used by anyone. They are not exclusive arrangements for the Wellcome only. Other research funders can now also encourage their researchers to use these policies. As they are for the Wellcome, the costs would be very low compared with the overall research grant outlays. It is in the interests of organisations which fund the kind of research that goes on in academic institutions to make the results of that research as widely visible as possible. This applies to governments, charities and private foundations. Funders such as the National Institutes for Health (NIH) in the USA, which has already had the vision to set up PubMed Central, could further encourage their authors to deposit their work there in the way the Wellcome does – by paying open-access charges for articles. Funders of research in other academic disciplines, such as the UK research councils, could encourage their authors to make their work available via the publishers’ web sites, or alternatively to use any appropriate subject-based repository, or take advantage of the

network of institutional repositories which have been set up in the last two to three years.

Of course, the best way for research funders to ensure this happens is to follow the two-pronged approach of the Wellcome Trust. Firstly, a robust mandate that requires authors to make their work available on open access should be put in place. A mandate is required since empirical evidence (such as the NIH experience) indicates that ‘encouragement’ is often not enough. Secondly, the mandate should be backed up by establishing systems, processes and funding which make it possible and easy to implement it. The securing of agreements with publishers and establishing of clear publication-charge funding for authors falls into this second category. The Wellcome is also setting up UK PMC. However, other funders could easily choose to recommend deposit in existing repositories, and perhaps recommend minimum standards for these services, particularly in terms of interoperability and preservation.

Repository managers, running either subject-based or institutional repositories, potentially have a great deal to gain from this initiative. Their parent institutions or organisations would also benefit. The benefits of repositories for the research community are now becoming more widely understood and have been rehearsed in the literature.¹² In the UK, the vast majority of the large research-led (‘Russell Group’) universities now have repositories in place.¹³ Work is now ongoing to ensure that all UK researchers will have repository facilities available to them to deposit their work, either in their institutions or provided on a national basis. Repository initiatives are up and running in most countries that have large research outputs. However, one of the current problems associated with repositories, with a small number of notable exceptions, is a lack of content. If the Wellcome Trust policy was adopted more widely by other research funders, the content problem may go away.

It is common to talk about two possible routes leading to open access: open-access journals and open-access repositories. These routes are often spoken about as alternatives. There has been a feeling that the two routes may relate to each other in some way but no one has really been sure precisely how. The Wellcome Trust initiative points to one possible way in which the two routes may be related. It also shows that they could coexist on an ongoing basis for the benefit of the research community.

Conclusion

It remains to be seen whether any other possible transition scenarios which are likely to lead to greater open access will emerge. However, in the meantime, the agreement between the Wellcome Trust and Blackwell, OUP and Springer is encouraging. If more widely implemented, this approach has the potential to create greater open access for the benefit of the research community in such a way as to work in the interests of research funders, publishers, authors, readers, repository managers and governments. Other research funders and publishers may be well-advised to look seriously at adopting similar policies.

Research funders are in a strong position to be able to initiate developments such as this by putting in place robust policies to support greater access and then setting up enabling systems to ensure their policies are implemented. They can work in

partnership with publishers and other stakeholders on this. Publishers themselves can, of course, also move in this direction independently. In fact, there are strong arguments to say that it is in their own interests to position themselves in the market this way. They are certainly being urged to do so by an increasing number of voices in the research community, the community which they are there to serve. This current initiative at the very least gives them an opportunity to experiment with possible future business models in a non-threatening way. As such, it is surely an opportunity to be grasped.

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¹ http://www.wellcome.ac.uk/doc_WTX027916.html

² <http://www.blackwellpublishing.com/static/onlineopen.asp>

³ <http://www.oxfordjournals.org/oxfordopen/> and

<http://www.springer.com/sgw/cda/frontpage/0,11855,1-40359-12-161193-0,00.html>

⁴ http://www.wellcome.ac.uk/doc_WTD002766.html

⁵ Steve Lawrence 'Free online availability substantially increases a paper's impact'. *Nature*, 411, 31 May 2001, 521 and *Nature: webdebates*; available at <http://www.nature.com/nature/debates/e-access/Articles/lawrence.html>. Kristin Antelman 'Do open-access articles have a greater research impact?' *College & Research Libraries*. 65, 5, 2004, 372-382; available at <http://eprints.rclis.org/archive/00002309/>. Tim Brody, Stevan Harnad, Les Carr 'Earlier web usage statistics as predictors of later citation impact', *Journal of the American Association for Information Science and Technology*, accepted for publication; preprint available at: <http://eprints.ecs.soton.ac.uk/10713/>

⁶ http://www.wellcome.ac.uk/doc_WTX027916.html

⁷ David Prosser 'From here to there: a proposed mechanism for transforming journals from closed to open access'. *Learned Publishing*, 16, 3, July 2003, 163-166.

⁸ <http://www.oxfordjournals.org/oxfordopen/>

⁹ <http://www.blackwellpublishing.com/static/onlineopen.asp>

¹⁰ For an overview of many of the arguments for and against open access see the *Nature web debates* at: <http://www.nature.com/nature/focus/accessdebate/archive.html>

¹¹ Stephen Pinfield 'What do universities want from publishing?' *Learned Publishing*, 17, 4, October 2004, 305-311; available at:

<http://ceres.ingentaconnect.com/vl=1423232/cl=83/nw=1/fm=docpdf/rpsv/cw/alpsp/09531513/v17n4/s7/p305>

¹² Stephen Pinfield 'Self-archiving publications', in G.E. Gorman and Fytton Rowland (ed.s). *International Yearbook of Library and Information Management 2004-2005: Scholarly publishing in an electronic era*. London: Facet, 2004, 118-145; e-print available at:

<http://eprints.nottingham.ac.uk/archive/00000142/>. Richard Jones, Theo Andrew and John MacColl *The Institutional Repository*. Oxford: Chandos, 2006.

¹³ For a list of repositories worldwide see, <http://www.opendoar.org/>