

Dr Jane Winters (IHR)

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‘Open access publishing’

I’m sure that many of you will have heard the term ‘open-access publishing’ with increasing frequency over the last year to eighteen months. If you have published anything in an academic journal recently, you may have noticed that the copyright form you’ve been asked to sign has changed – perhaps to allow you to publish an unedited version of your paper on a personal web page, perhaps to allow you to publish it in an institutional repository after a one- or two-year embargo. You may also have come across it in research council communications or publications.

So what do we mean by ‘open access’? The Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) provides a helpful definition: ‘Open Access occurs when full-text journal articles, plus other research information such as data, conference proceedings and theses, are made freely available online’. The inclusivity of this definition is significant – to date, most of the debate about open access has focused on research articles published in learned journals, but other types of publication will inevitably be affected. It’s also important to note that open access is not intended to bypass traditional systems of peer review – much of the material published in this way will already have been subject to traditional peer review, or to evaluation as part of a research council award.

There are currently two main open-access models under discussion: self-archiving; and author-pays. Self-archiving does not mean simply that an author posts his or her article on a personal, departmental or society web page. Rather, researchers are encouraged to deposit their papers and other material in institutional – or more rarely subject – digital repositories (sometimes called ‘e-repositories’). There are more than 50 such repositories in the UK at the time of writing, and the number is growing rapidly. Most do not yet have much in the way of content, at least for arts and humanities

subjects, but this will change as funding bodies, and eventually even institutions, mandate deposit.

To give a couple of examples, Dspace@Cambridge (so-called because of the DSpace software used by many universities) is one of the most well-established in the UK. Everything held within the repository can be searched or browsed – by author, title, subject and date – and is also accessible through search engines such as Google. Although the project has been underway since 2003, take-up in many subject areas is still limited. Browsing by subject, for example, reveals only 23 items categorised as ‘History’. A more recent development is the School of Advanced Study’s repository – SAS-Space – launched in December last year. It uses the same software as the Cambridge site, so the searching options and so on are identical, but the material that it contains is almost exclusively for the humanities and social sciences.

As I mentioned at the start of this presentation, many academic publishers and learned societies are already having to accommodate self-archiving in their standard copyright forms and licensing agreements. As awareness of the open-access movement grows among authors and their host institutions, this is something with which many learned and record society publishers are going to be faced.

The second model, and one which might seem fanciful in the under-funded arts and humanities sector, is that of ‘author-pays’. Under this system, an author makes a payment to the publishers of, for example, a journal, to ensure that his or her article will be freely available to the end user. Some academic presses, while not abandoning traditional publishing models, are attempting to accommodate author-pays within their existing structures. Wiley-Blackwell, for example, gives authors the choice to pay a fee in order to ensure that their article is published on an open-access basis – it will still be published under the auspices of a learned journal, but not behind the usual subscription wall. The fee, however, currently stands at £1,300 per article.

More common, is publication through a journal which is entirely open access, and only publishes material free at the point of use. The number of these journals is increasing steadily, and most employ strict peer review. At present, the Directory of Open-Access Journals, based at Lund University, encompasses 2627 such journals, 97 of them dealing with 'History'. The running costs of some of these journals are covered by their host departments or universities, but many adopt some form of author-pays model.

So, should we be concerned about the open-access movement? Well, yes and no. At the moment, while there is obviously potential for open access to impact negatively on traditional academic publishing models, no-one is yet sure how it is going to develop. Some of the measures that have already been taken to accommodate open access may offset the worst of the financial impact on smaller society publishers. It is also the case that there is some concern about the sustainability of all of this. If responsibility for preservation of research material is devolved to the institutional level, who is to say that shifting funding priorities may not in future years lead to the dismantling of digital repositories. We simply do not know how it is going to unfold.

What is certain, however, is that is not something that can be ignored in the medium term. In June 2005, Research Councils UK published a draft position statement on what it called 'access to research outputs'. It's hard to argue with the view that 'Ideas and knowledge derived from publicly-funded research must be made available and accessible for public use, interrogation, and scrutiny, as widely, rapidly and effectively as practicable' or that 'The outputs from current and future research must be preserved and remain accessible not only for the next few years but for future generations'. More contentious are the mechanisms for achieving this, chief among which is open-access publication.

It was proposed that, from 1 October 2005, 'a copy of any published journal articles or conference proceedings resulting from Research Council funded research should be deposited in an appropriate e-print repository (either institutional or subject-based) wherever such a repository is available to the

award-holder. Deposit should take place at the earliest opportunity, wherever possible at or around the time of publication'. It has now been left to individual research councils to decide the date from which these recommendations will take effect. While the AHRC has still to make a decision, five out of the seven UK research councils, including the ESRC, have already mandated open-access self-archiving. They have also made provision to allow expenditure associated with author-pays publication to be included in research grant applications.

It is also the case that there is considerable pressure on publishers to be seen at the very least not to hinder the worthy aim of making research available to the widest possible audience. The JISC-funded SHERPA project, for example, makes available a watch-list of publishers, with information about their policy on open-access. The non-compliant are clearly visible, and ultimately may come to be viewed negatively by their respective research communities.

One of the big problems facing the arts and humanities is that these developments are driven and shaped by scientific publishing, where costs to the end user are frequently prohibitive, where more research funding is available, and where, crucially, the shelf-life of a particular piece of research is much shorter. The concerns of, and resources available to, researchers and small publishers in the arts and humanities are often very different, and the impact of open access consequently even more difficult to assess. It will certainly affect authors' attitudes to copyright, and it may well adversely affect income from publication, perhaps in some cases making it unsustainable. The publishing landscape may look very different in five to ten years' time.