

Editorial

Scientific Publications – Free For All?

One of the most important elements of the Antarctic Treaty is the requirement to provide open and free access to all information collected south of 60° S. For this reason the current focus on making all published science free for everyone strikes a sympathetic cord. Led by various institutions promoting web posting of published material and the Public Library of Science enthusiasts proposing open access through the author-pays model there is a ferment of activity at present around the world to convert scientists and librarians to this new religion.

There are two schemes at present under development. The simplest is the posting of papers on institutional web sites after publication in the normal journals. Spearheaded initially by the Los Alamos preprint server this has a growing number of adherents from across the disciplines. This does not change the present financing in that libraries continue to buy journals on subscription but the copyright agreement allows for a separate posting. Users find papers by using existing search engines. Questions about long-term support for such institutional repositories remain to be answered, as do the controls on the standard of papers posted there.

The second scheme is more radical. In this the author meets all the costs of publication and the papers are published electronically with free access. The impetus to set up this new framework came from a group in the USA who were appalled by the rapidly increasing costs of journal subscriptions, especially those of Elsevier Reed, which dominates the scientific publishing market and have clearly been making huge profits (up to 34%) from subscription journals. Library budgets simply cannot support this so some form of change is essential.

Concern about the costs of journals has raised the political profile of scientific publishing. After an exhaustive investigation, with a wide range of witnesses, the UK House of Commons Select Committee on Science and Technology has now published its conclusions at www.parliament.uk/parliamentary_committees/science_and_technology_committee.cfm. The report provides 82 Recommendations of which the thrust is that they support a mixed system in which they see the author-pays model as a major part. Requiring page charges from authors is common for many US journals - but they supplement that at present with a library subscription charge as well. The author-pays model will require considerable increases in these charges. The Committee recognises the problems this will cause to some key groups - including learned societies and charities that rely on journal subscription for their income (such as Antarctic Science Ltd) - but believe that in the end this will be a fairer system for both developed and developing countries. They were clearly not impressed by the bureaucratic obstacles that were presented to them by some witnesses and urged the UK Government to look at innovative ways of making the funds available. Interestingly, they underline the importance of unpaid peer reviewers in maintaining quality in the system and suggest it is time that researchers understand the real costs of publication.

Making the change is going to be difficult and slow unless a number of major institutions on both sides of the Atlantic agree to support its implementation. Journals serving small specialist groups like Antarctic scientists will need to follow the majority when it becomes clear how widespread the support is going to be.

My view is that there is still a great deal to discuss but that we will end up with a mixed system where authors with access to publishing funds will opt for open access journals whilst those with no money will continue to use journals that retain a subscription income. I suspect that the most highly rated journals in all areas will become open access - so be prepared for change!

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