June 2004

Academic Authors and the Crisis in Publishing

Barbara Fister
Gustavus Adolphus College, fister@gac.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/atg

Part of the Library and Information Science Commons

Recommended Citation
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.4344

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.
he stopped by the library to see what we had in the way of journals in his field. Unfortunately, we had none since he was the first neuroscientist on campus and nobody thought to mention it to the librarians. (We have a seat on the curriculum committee, but this new curricular development hadn’t shown up in the paperwork of course proposals or program changes. Nor, unsurprisingly, had it revealed itself in a mysteriously increased library budget.) Apart from expecting the library to support undergraduate research and study in his area, he quite reasonably planned to set up his own research—something not only needed for his own growth as a scholar, but required for tenure and promotion at our liberal arts college. He had been assured that interlibrary loan would supply materials we didn’t own locally. When I explained the “5/5” rule, he was appalled. Five? While the rule might not daunt a humanities scholar, used to quarterly journals that publish perhaps twenty articles a year, many science journals publish well over a thousand articles annually. It didn’t make sense to him. What’s the point of publishing results if they can’t be shared?

Herein is the core message of scholarly communication. The Constitution gives Congress the power “to promote the progress of science and useful arts, by securing for limited times to authors and inventors the exclusive right to their respective writings and discoveries”—a fairly straightforward balance between social and individual interests to be orchestrated by Adam Smith’s “invisible hand.” We can quibble over what is meant by “limited time,” and we do, but the concept rests on the uncompli"
call for disinterestedness. We need to look beyond whatever field we’re tending and think about the health of the entire ecology of knowledge. Because ultimately, when we treat the work that academics are expected to do to fulfill their contract with society as more intellectual property, rather than as a contribution to a public resource, we run the risk that contract will not be renewed.

A bill recently introduced in Congress by Martin Saba, the “Public Access to Science Act,” takes a breathtakingly simple approach to this — it would remove copyright protection from works arising out of federally funded research. Why should the public pay for it twice? This solution, while bold and apparently sensible, is problematic because even those frustrated by the current system don’t want their work to be subject to alteration or reuse without attribution — actions that could harm the research record and won’t serve the public interest in the long run. We can negotiate better ways to retain sufficient incentives for authors and publishers while honoring the benefits of public knowledge.

We have a republic — if we can keep it. Can we strike the right balance? That’s not just an academic question.

Works Cited

Peer Review in the Internet Age: Five (5) Easy Pieces
by Gerry McKiernan <GMCKIERN@GWGATE.LIB.IASTATE.EDU>

“...[In] the digital world, the evaluation process stands ready to be reinvented in a clear, rational way by the relevant research communities themselves.”

— Jean-Claude Guédon

Purpose of Peer Review
In general, peer review can be defined as “the assessment by an expert of material submitted for publication.” Specifically, its purpose is to ensure that published research is important, internally-consistent, original, technically-reliable, timely, well-presented, and most importantly, benefited from guidance by experts. Overall, “the underlying strength of editorial peer review is the concerted effort by large numbers of researchers and scholars who work to assure that valid and valuable works are published, and conversely to assure that invalid or non-valuable works are not published.”

Problems with Classical Peer Review
While established peer review has its supporters, it has long been criticized as “... slow, expensive, profligate of academic time, highly subjective, prone to bias, easily abused, poor at detecting gross defects, and almost useless in detecting fraud.” In a recent review article on the peer review process, Rowland analyzes and briefly characterizes many of the deficiencies of classic peer review as follows:

- Subjectivity
  Summary rejections by editor without sending the paper to referees; choice of referees by the editor (choosing for example, a known harsh referee for a paper the editor wishes to see rejected);
- Bias
  Discrimination against authors because of their nationality, native language, gender or host institution; situations where author and referee are competitors in some sense, or belong to competing schools of thought;
- Abuse
  Too many articles out of one piece of research, or duplicate publication; intellectual theft: omission or downgrading of junior staff by senior authors; plagiarism (stealing others yet unpublished work that has been sent for review), defraying publication of potentially competing research;
- Detecting Defects
  Identification of factual errors within submission
- Fraud Misconduct
  Fabrication of results; falsification of data; false claim of authorship for results

continued on page 32

<http://www.against-the-grain.com>