Open Access: Walking the Talk

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Open Access: Walking The Talk

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From all sides of the academic spectrum, a debate of vastly varying opinions continues over the future of scholarly publishing under an open access model. As more journals begin to experiment with open access, I've compiled here some views on the viability of open access as a long-term business model in the future.

Oxford Journals On Open Access — Some Hard Evidence

We've very recently published findings into the effects of open access on our journals. Claire Saxby, Senior Editor, Oxford Journals, carried out a large scale survey into the views of authors and readers on Nucleic Acids Research (NAR) under a full open access model. CIBER (University College, London), and LISU (Loughborough University) have also conducted research using our open access content to evaluate effects on user behaviour, usage and citations. All three reports are available to download from the Oxford Journals Website: http://www.oxfordjournals.org/news/oa_report.pdf.

I'll return to Oxford Journals' views on the future for open access shortly, but first of all I wanted to consider the other key parties who are affected by the open access model, and what their thoughts on the future of the model might be.

The Readers' Perspective: It's Free, and It's Getting Used

As a publisher it's not always easy to hear directly from our readers and gauge their opinions. But it's pretty clear from the experiments we have conducted that readers are using open access content, and journals moving to an open access publishing model do see noticeable changes in user behaviour. Open access articles show higher access and usage compared to subscription articles in the same journal volume.

The model also seems to affect the type of content downloaded, with PDF versions of open access articles being downloaded more than abstracts, and users suggesting preference for PDF over full text HTML.

From these findings, readers seem to be benefiting from having open access content available, and it's likely that they would be the group most in favour of an open access model continuing in the future. There certainly don't seem to be any obvious downsides to the model from the readers' perspective. Interestingly though, some of the findings above also show that there can be benefits to authors, librarians, and publishers from changing reader behaviour, as usage is driven up — surely the one thing we all want to achieve, regardless of our role in the scholarly communication chain.

The Author's Perspective — Some Gains But Some Questions Too

Authors want to achieve faster, wider dissemination of their research, and also increased citations through open access, and the findings above show that more papers are being read more quickly under this model. The results of the NAR author survey suggest that the majority strongly support an open access model.

Interestingly, from the results of the LISU experiment, there are also knock-on benefits to other subscription content by open access publishing: the experiment revealed that there was also an increase in downloads of subscription articles published in the same journal issue as open access content. So even authors not publishing open access can apparently gain from the model.

It's not a simple "all in favour" for this group however. Firstly, from the results of the LISU study, there was, as yet, no conclusive evidence to show that authors receive a higher level of citations through open access publication, so this particular wish has so far not been conclusively achieved.

continued on page 89

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The dotted red line marks the point at which NAR became fully open access. Also, there seemed to be significant variation in the position taken by institutions (for NAR authors at least) as to whether funds are made available for publication charges, and whether open access publishing is encouraged. There are obvious implications here for the long-term viability of this model. While there are positive benefits for authors, there are numerous questions that need to be answered to decide how successful and beneficial an open access model is for this group.

a little disappointing. But with JXB Mary notes that the majority of authors currently choosing to publish open access are mainly authors at the start of their careers, rather than the well-established, more prestigious authors who would be more likely to gain high citations. Mary thinks that a change in the type of authors submitting open access that may come with higher awareness of the model in the future will change this. More data across a longer period of time will show whether this is the case.

JXB, at least for the time being, will remain under this optional author-pays model: there are no plans to move to full open access. The main reason for this is that JXB is charging very low open access charges (£1200 standard and £250 discounted for members with institutional access), and income from this alone would not be enough to support the journal. It’s hoped that if open access grows, the journal will be able to reflect this change in revenue by having a more realistic open access charge while lowering subscription prices—something that will also be reflected in the subscription costs for all our open access journals. This has already been implemented for 2007; the subscription prices of three journals in the Oxford Open Initiative (Bioinformatics, Computational Genetics and Human Molecular Genetics) have been adjusted to reflect how original research material was made freely available in the first phase of the initiative.

So back to the big question: what will we be making freely available to all library collections in the future and what will continue to be sold only to those paying a subscription fee?

The results above seem to suggest that making a journal freely available as rapidly as possible, and making it easy to locate and use in all situations, is likely to generate sales and subscriptions. So in turn, what does this mean for librarians and the journal collections of the future?

There are two things to consider: firstly, will there be enough take up of open access in Oxford Journals in the future to significantly affect how we sell our content to you, and secondly, will libraries continue to subscribe to journals even if much of the content in them is free?

Clearly, it is difficult at this stage to draw any firm conclusions from our own open access results: it’s still too early in the experiment to see the long-term effects of open access on usage, and much more data needs to be collected.

As far as Oxford Journals is concerned, our approach to open access has been one of responsible experimentation: as part of Oxford University Press, one of our core remits is to make the highest quality research available to the widest possible audience, and a route that seemingly offers that, like open access, is compelling. At the same time we’re not in a position to put our business at risk—any new business models that we move into must be financially viable. The flip side of this is that we’re in a much better position to experiment with new models than smaller independent publishers, and it’s for this reason that we’ve been more than happy to share the results of our experiments within the community, to increase knowledge and understanding of open access, and to provide hard evidence into the effects it has on our journals and their consumers.

We will use this evidence to help direct us, and other publishers, towards a viable business model for the future. Part of this may indeed include open access, but if the current trends continue, this will not be for all journals within our collection. In a perceptive address at last year’s Charleston Conference, Rick Anderson referred to Open Access as a “boutique phenomenon.” Our experience so far seems to confirm this. The take up of open access in our journals is mixed, and very much split by disciplines: there has been a much greater interest in open access from the biomedical sciences than in any other subject area, and even within disciplines the take up seems to vary widely from journal to journal. Oxford Journals will be publishing the first full year of data from its optional open access model, Oxford Open, over the summer, so that we will again

continued on page 81

80 Against the Grain / November 2006

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Open Access: Walking The Talk from page 80

help to show what is happening with uptake across all disciplines.

Availability of funding will be another key factor in the uptake of open access in the future. Who is to say whether the attitudes of institutions and funding bodies to open access will stay the same, or whether there will be an increased impetus towards providing money to pay for open access, in turn pushing up the number of open access papers published, and the usage of these papers. I think it's very likely that we will see some change in this area, particularly as more evidence into the effects of open access for authors and research itself becomes more widely available, but nothing is certain, and again I think we can expect wide variation between subject areas.

My only real prediction for the future is that libraries will need to continue paying, at least in part, for journal content, to ensure that users can continue to get access to content where open access is not taken up, and where extra content and functionality beyond primary research (as is the case for JXB) is on offer: the likelihood, in the short term at least, is that a subscription model will continue to operate for a large part of our journal content, and it's my tentative prediction therefore that the collection we provide to you in the future will still be subscription-driven.

Even if open access does start to have a higher take-up, libraries can, and no doubt will, continue to play a significant role in subscribing to journal content to benefit their research, but I suspect that, in the short term, this is not likely to be significant.

I'm sure I'm not alone in my belief that a future model of scholarly journals publishing is far from fixed. In fact what seems to be emerging is that there will be a number of business models all operating simultaneously, to try to benefit all of those people we work with as best we can. Open access is just one of many possibilities on offer.