Open Access: Walking the Talk

Richard Gedye
Oxford University Press, richard.gedye@oxfordjournals.org

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Open Access: Walking The Talk

by Richard Gedye (Sales Director, Journals Division, Oxford University Press, Great Clarendon Street, Oxford OX2 6DP, UK; Phone: +44-(0)1865-353785) <richard.gedye@oxfordjournals.org>
www.oxfordjournals.org

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.

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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.

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