

How does Open Access impact you

In the previous section, we tried to describe some of the ‘bigger picture’ bases for OA. Almost everyone agrees that it is good in principle - for the society, the economy, and for global scholarly knowledge production. But there are also some more pragmatic and intrinsic reasons for individuals and communities for why they should care about OA.

There is a direct link between Open Access and you through the additional research impact it generates. Conceptually, it is hopefully not difficult to see that if more people can access and use something, that makes it more impactful.

While there is a clear ethical and moral case for OA, communicating the personal impact it can have on individuals helps to leverage intrinsic motivations for researchers. As in, there has to be something in it for them. We recognise that virtually no researcher can behave purely selflessly for notions of a greater ‘common good’, and there is almost always a trade-off with a number of intrinsic or extrinsic constraints that affect publication behaviour.

Thankfully though, there is a strong - almost universal - case for an increased impact advantage for researchers who choose to publish OA.

For example, a traditional measure of research impact is the number of citations and article receives. Most studies that have analysed the “Open Access citation advantage” have found that OA articles tend to receive more citations. Again, this is conceptually common sense. If more people can access and read your work, more people can cite your work. As citations still function as a sort of ‘academic capital’ in research communities, getting more citations is generally a good thing. You don’t have to agree on the use of citations in this way to see that the phenomenon still exists.

[ADD OA CITATION IMPACT FIGURES HERE - ERIN’S]

But it isn’t just citations which OA influences. There are a number of other ways in which OA helps to amplify the reach and re-use of your work.

For example, a 2016 study found that the odds of an OA journal being referenced on the English Wikipedia are 47% higher compared to paywalled journals. Therefore, it seems that OA has a significant “amplifier” effect for the diffusion of scientific research communicated via other such platforms.

A study by Erin McKiernan and colleagues has perhaps said it best:

Open access, open data, open source and other open scholarship practices are growing in popularity and necessity. However, widespread adoption of these practices has not yet been achieved. One reason is that researchers are uncertain about how sharing their work will affect their careers. We review literature demonstrating that open research is associated with increases in citations, media attention, potential collaborators, job opportunities and funding opportunities. These findings are evidence that open research practices bring significant benefits to researchers relative to more traditional closed practices.

So, problem solved, right? Open Access is good for you, your career, and for, well, everyone!

Are there any potential downsides to Open Access?

Almost no one disagrees with OA in principle. However, as with many things there is a divergence between the ideology behind, and the actual practices of, OA.

As with each module, we do not want to pretend like openness is this magical cure to all the problems in academia. We would rather encourage participants to be critically reflective of behaviours and practices, rather than blindly following whatever information we are sending your way. And this forces us to be honest with you about potential problems with OA, rather than recklessly hailing it as some sort of magic bullet solution.

There are constant and vigorous debates about all aspects of scholarly, and Open Access is no exception. It is our duty to communicate some of the potential barriers and limitations to OA here.

Nicely, some good work has been done on this already. In 2018, Gareth Johnson looked at the barriers to OA in the national context of the UK:

Notably, while participants represented an array of potential mechanistic, policy or legal blocks, it was the academic community's knowledge of and attitudes towards OA that were shown to present the greatest obstacles. Despite the endeavours of OA practitioners who were devoted to advocacy, the majority of scholars' understanding or embrace of openness within research dissemination practice was found to be 'patchy', 'ill-informed' or 'confused'.

Hm. Well, if only there was some sort of peer-to-peer learning community to help overcome that. Like this MOOC! You are part of the process to help close the knowledge/attitudes and behaviour gap in the world of Open Access.

There is also the fact that often, publishing OA does cost money. We discuss this in detail a lot in SECTION XXXX, and describe a lot of free alternative routes. However, the reality is often that if you want to publish OA in a specific journal, there will be charges associated with that. It is not secret that a lot of the 'top journals' in some disciplines charge a lot of money for OA publication. Therefore, it is up to you and your co-authors to be aware of potential funding sources that might be available to you. As well as the options for parallel 'green OA' or self-archiving that the journals permit.

Further reading

If you want to find out more about this, there is actually a fun side to Open Access! Check out the Publishing Trap board game from the UK Copyright Literacy team.