

Open Access Week: a researcher's perspective

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This week (October 19-23) is Open Access Week:

Open Access Week is an opportunity to broaden awareness and understanding of Open Access to research, including access policies from all types of research funders, within the international higher education community and the general public.

The following video from SPARC (the Scholarly Publishing & Academic Resources Coalition) is a good introduction:

Open Access can be looked at from many different angles, including the researcher, the science library, the institution, the funding organization, the journal, the science journalist, and the general public. Most arguments for or against Open Access depend on that angle. As a researcher, I am most interested in whether Open Access will make my work easier. Again, a researcher can look at Open Access from different roles:

- Reader
- Author
- Reviewer
- Editor

The role as a reviewer or editor for an open access paper should be essentially the same as for a paper with subscription-based access. The journal *Nature Communications* that launches in April 2010 with a hybrid publishing model of open access and subscription-based access will for example have reviewers and editors blinded to the author's choice.

In this blog post I will look at Open Access from the perspective of the researcher as a reader.

Access

As a researcher in a German university I am privileged to have institutional access to most journal articles that I need for my work. I use the program *Papers* as my main reference manager. *Papers* allows me to order my currently 1715 references (and PDFs of fulltext paper to most of them) by journal. Among

the 20 journals with the most papers in my library, my institution doesn't have access to three of them:

- Cell (don't ask)
- Lancet Oncology
- Nature Reviews Clinical Oncology

Obviously three important journals for someone doing clinical cancer research. I could ask my institution to start subscribing to these journals, start a personal subscription (I had a personal subscription to Nature Clinical Practice Oncology for two years before it was renamed to Nature Reviews Clinical Oncology) which would set me back 150-200 £ per journal, or I could pay for an individual article (either through my library or directly from the journal). All this requires extra time and money, worth only if I think a paper/journal is really important.

PLoS Medicine is the only open access journal among the 20 most popular journals in my Papers library (The BMJ has free access to its research articles and is the 24th most popular). Unfortunately there are only a few Open Access journals publishing papers that are relevant to my work.

As many others I do work from home in the evening or on the weekend, or while travelling. I am lucky that I can access my university network through VPN and therefore can get fulltext access to journal articles (one of the most important VPN uses for me). But some researchers might not be so lucky, or spend precious extra time setting up and using VPN.

Researchers that work in a poorer country, or for a smaller university or small biotech startup will have much larger problems. Medical doctors in community hospitals or private practice may not have easy access to any of the relevant journals, and they might depend on reprints given to them by colleagues or representatives from drug companies.

Sharing

If several people work on a research project, they also want to share the relevant literature in the field. Most subscription-based journals retain the copyright to the paper and don't allow storing in a retrieval system or transmitting of papers without permission. This could mean that you can't email the PDF of a paper to a colleague even if you are the author or his institution also has a subscription. And this could also mean that you can't use a reference manager such as Refworks or Mendeley to not only share references with your lab colleagues, but also the full-text PDF files. Strictly following the copyright can make something as common as a journal club a complicated affair.

Permissions

As most subscription-based journals retain the copyright to the paper, you have to ask for permissions when reusing tables or figures. Most often this is the case when giving a lecture on a topic. For longer lectures this could mean a large

number of required permissions, and the permissions might be granted just for a single occasion. Journals might not care much about using a single figure in a departmental seminar, but it definitely becomes an issue when the lecture is distributed electronically, e.g. as free OpenCourseWare publication of teaching material. Some journals provide Powerpoint slides for the tables and figures and explicitly permit the educational noncommercial use. In my experience most researchers aren't aware that they are using copyrighted material in their slides, and I rarely see the required copyright attributions.

Added services

This category has great potential, but is currently not yet that relevant in my daily work. Open Access to fulltext articles allows things that aren't possible or much more complicated with subscription-based access. This includes fulltext searches (to find information not in the title, abstract or keywords), semantically enhanced articles, and article-level metrics (recently introduced by PLoS).

Summary

Researchers at large research institutions often have institutional access to most relevant papers. They are often not aware of the restrictions imposed upon them by the copyright of papers retained by most subscription-based journals. Open Access papers not only are freely accessible, but allow the uncomplicated redistribution and reuse for research and teaching, as well as innovative ways to find interesting research.

The perspective of the researcher as a paper author is stuff for another blog post...