

Open Access Week: a researcher's perspective

part II

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This week (October 19-23) is Open Access Week – a good opportunity to think and write about this topic. On Monday I wrote in a blog post:

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.

In that blog post I then wrote about the role of the researcher as a reader. Now I want to look at the perspective of the researcher as an author.

Choice of journal

The decision of where to publish a manuscript for most researchers probably works something like “find the best journal where I can publish my work with the least amount of trouble”. Best journal usually is a subjective decision, but probably correlates with the Impact Factor of a journal. As the average quality of manuscripts is higher in a better journal, this will help to value your research in the eyes of granting agencies and job search committees. Better journal often means higher rejection rates and/or higher numbers of readers. Both factors – and journals that publish a relatively small number of papers – favor a subscription business model¹.

Publication cost

Most Open Access journals use an author-pays model to pay for publication costs. Funding agencies or institutions may pick up these costs, but authors may be left with costs of \$2500 or more.

Institutional Repositories

Self-archiving in institutional repositories (green access) is a great way to make your publication freely available if the paper is published in a journal that is not Open Access. Unfortunately this often requires extra efforts by the researcher, and the publication will be more difficult to find in the repository than in the journal. This creates little incentive for a researcher to get involved in self-archiving.

Citation advantage

The effect of free access to the scientific literature on article downloads and citations is difficult to measure. Some², but not all studies³ show higher citation rates for articles that are freely available and this citation advantage might be modest⁴. Citations are generated by other researchers who have access to your paper, and therefore I'm not surprised if there is not much of a difference between papers in Open Access journals and popular journals that are subscribed by many institutions.

Better Access

Researchers in poorer countries will have easier access to papers published in Open Access journals, although many subscription journals waive access fees through initiatives such as Hinari. Open Access makes it easier for journalists, high school students, patient advocacy groups and many more people to read your papers. This is obviously of great value to these groups, but I haven't seen many examples where the paper author directly benefitted from this.

Social responsibility

The argument that publicly funded research should be available to everybody at time of publication can be a motivation for many scientists, but I would be careful to turn this into an obligation. Different countries have different traditions, but in my home country Germany the independence of research and researchers (including the decision where to publish) has become a constitutional right after the atrocities committed in the name of "science" in Nazi Germany. All major German research organizations support Open Access, but in contrast to other countries there is no Open Access mandate.

Summary

Publishing in an Open Access journal has surprisingly little benefits for the author of a paper, and often means additional costs. Unless we want to mandate Open Access publishing from authors because it benefits the other stakeholders (which at least in Germany would be difficult), we should make publishing in an Open Access journal more attractive to authors. It looks like PLoS ONE is doing exactly that, as 400 manuscripts published per month testify.

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