Beyond Open: Expanding Access to Scholarly Content

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Although open access has only recently become established as a business model, publishers have been providing some degree of public access to content for much longer—primarily through philanthropic programs. These programs are intended to provide readers who can't afford to pay for a subscription (such as researchers in developing countries, patients, and their caregivers) with access to the content they need. In many cases, this access is completely free of charge; in others, it is very deeply discounted. This paper will describe and, where possible, evaluate some of the major public/low-cost access initiatives, as well as consider some possible ways forward.

One of the earliest such initiatives was the New School for Social Research's Journal Donation Project [http://www.newschool.edu/nssr/centers-special-programs/?id=104450] (JDP); it was launched in 1990 in response to the critical need for scholarly journals in the former Soviet Union and in East and Central Europe, where they had been unavailable for almost 45 years. The JDP now works with 246 libraries in 25 countries to provide free or deeply discounted access print subscriptions (many of which now also include online access). These countries include Russia, Nigeria, Cuba, and Vietnam, as well as countries throughout the former Soviet Union and Eastern and Central Europe. The free access may be granted by the publisher or sponsored by a foundation grant, and the JDP currently provides subscriptions to over 4,000 journals from more than 200 publishers. Because the project is primarily print-based, usage information is not available.

More recent publisher-supported public access initiatives include Research for Life [http://www.research4life.org/] , the International Network for Access to Scientific Publications [http://www.inasp.info/en/] (INASP), and Electronic Information for Libraries [http://www.eifl.net/] (EIFL), all of which—as part of their mission—provide online access to scholarly content for libraries and researchers in developing world countries. Other public access initiatives include patientACCESS [http://www.publishers4patientaccess.org/] , which provides access for patients and their caregivers and Access to Research [http://www.accesstoresearch.org.uk/] , which provides access to UK public library users. In addition, the Emergency Access Initiative [http://eai.nlm.nih.gov/docs/captcha/test.pl?url] (EAI) provides temporary free access to biomedicine titles to healthcare professionals, librarians, and the public, following a disaster. I will outline each of these and, where available, provide recent data on usage and reach.

INASP was established in 1992 and "aims to strengthen access to, production, and use of knowledge and evidence in Africa, Asia, and Latin America," including making scholarly content available to libraries and researchers in their partner countries. Initially this was achieved via the Programme for the Enhancement of Research Information (PERI) which, in 2013, was superseded by Strengthening Research and Knowledge Systems (SRKS). SRKS works via consortia in participating countries to provide very low cost—or sometimes free—access to content from over 50 publishers and aggregators. In 2014, there were 2.6 million article/item downloads from 37,000 journals at 1,903 institutions in 68 countries through the SRKS program.

In 1999, EIFL was launched by what was then the Open Society Institute (now Open Society Foundations)—a private grant-making foundation that is part of the Soros Foundation network. EIFL works with libraries to enable access to knowledge in developing and transition economy countries in Africa, Asia-Pacific, Europe, and Latin America. EIFL's four programs, Licensing, Copyright and Libraries, Open Access, and Public Library and Innovation help people to access and use information for education, learning, research, and sustainable community development. The Licensing Program works with consortia to negotiate affordable access to commercial e-resources. The most recent data available when this article was written ishows that ,in 2013, use of the Licensing Program resulted in 3.7 million full text downloads in 1,928 institutions across 47 countries.

Research4Life's HINARI [http://www.who.int/hinari/en/] Access to Research initiative was founded in 2002, and the program has subsequently expanded to include three other programs—Access to Global Online Research in Agriculture (AGORA [http://www.fao.org/agora/en/]), Online Access to Research in the Environment (OARE [http://www.unep.org/oare/]), and Online Access to Research for Development and Innovation (ARDI [http://www.wipo.int/ardi/en/]). HINARI is the largest philanthropic public access program and has more than 7,800 registered institutions. Depending on the program(s) they are eligible for, the institutions can access content from up to 15,000 journals and 30,000 books from around 500 publishers. Access is either free or very low cost, depending on a variety of factors [http://www.research4life.org/eligibility/] . Full usage data are not currently available, but there were over 8.3 million [1] [#N1] downloads through the HINARI program in 2013.

The EAI was set up in 2005, following Hurricane Katrina, by the US National Library of Medicine, the National Network of Libraries of Medicine, the Professional/Scholarly Publishing Division of the Association of American Publishers, and other publishers. It provides free, temporary access—typically for four-week periods—to full text articles from major biomedicine titles to healthcare professionals, librarians, and public citizens affected by disasters. During the most recent access period—August 12 through December 12, 2014—the EAI site was visited well over 5,500 times to help those involved in the Ebola outbreak in West Africa.

patientACCESS began life in 2013, launching formally in September 2014. It provides patients and their caregivers with access to relevant content about specific diseases and diagnoses from participating publishers (currently six). Usage information from all publishers is not available as of the time of writing, but Wiley reported close to 3,000 requests for articles from 279 journals by 2,141 individuals in 69 countries, between May and December 2014. The vast majority of users (over 96%) requested between one and three articles, and 57% of requests were from individuals in the USA.

The UK's Access to Research program, launched in February 2014, makes over 10 million academic articles from 24 publishers available, free of charge, in participating public libraries. Currently in a two-year pilot phase, it was set up in response to recommendations from the Finch Group, a committee of publishers, societies, librarians, and academics. The Finch Group was charged by the UK government to explore how access to publicly funded research could be expanded. Over 90% of the UK's 206 local authorities, representing more than 3,000 public libraries, have now signed up for the pilot. In the year since it launched, there have been over 50,000 users, who have viewed more than 85,000 pages. Libraries in London have seen the most usage—almost 10,000 page views; perhaps more surprisingly, Blackburn – a town of less than 150,000 people—recorded the second highest number of page views (6,329).

So what do these facts and figures tell us about the value of these sorts of initiatives? Whom do they really benefit? Are they just a stepping stone towards full open access or are they valuable in their own right? Should we be seeking to expand them further or letting them die?

There is no doubt that, globally, many thousands of institutions and individuals are benefiting from this free or low-cost access to scholarly content, as shown through Research4Life's Unsung Heroes video [http://www.research4life.org/casestudies/nasragathoni/] and booklet [http://www.research4life.org/celebrating-the-unsung-heroes-librarians-and-research4life/] , the case studies in INASP's annual report [http://www.inasp.info/uploads/filer_public/2014/12/17/2013-2014_annual_review_1.pdf] , or EIFL's E-Library Myanmar Project [http://www.eifl.net/eifl-in-action/e-library-myanmar-project] . According to their latest figures, usage is around 15 million downloads across RESEARCH4LIFE (HINARI only), INASP, and EIFL. This is encouraging, although less so when compared with usage in developed countries. HINARI's impressive 8.3 million plus downloads in 2013 are roughly equivalent to those of Yale University during the same period.

Public access initiatives are also of great value to publishers, enabling them to increase access to and usage of their content beyond traditional core markets in ways that are relatively risk-free. For example, pilot programs such as patientACCESS and Access to Research allow publishers to experiment with expanding access to new audiences, either as a possible first step to full open access, or in order to develop other products and services that better meet the needs of those audiences.

But wouldn't full open access solve the access problem? Views are somewhat divided. EIFL certainly thinks so. To quote their website, open access "is a powerful solution to the barriers that researchers in developing and transition countries face trying to access and share critical research that can improve people's lives"; their Open Access Program [http://www.eifl.net/programmes/open-access-programme] is central to their work. INASP and Research4Life are also supportive of open access, though both organizations point out that much of the research literature that developing country scholars need to read is still available only through subscription; therefore,offering affordable pricing is crucial. INASP emphasizes that, "it is not enough simply to provide access to research literature. For it to be used, researchers and

academics need a reason to be reading; an ambition to get their own work published and visible is an important driver." Their SRKS program therefore includes training in managing access to online research literature, information literacy, proposal and research writing (supported by their AuthorAID [http://www.authoraid.info/] program), online publishing, and quality strengthening for local journals and books. Research4Life, too, offers an extensive program [http://www.research4life.org/training/] of face-to face and online training in the skills and understandings that are necessary to gain the most benefit from access to the online scientific research its programs provide.

One of the known challenges of open access content—especially for readers (and authors) outside of academia in the developed world—is how to assess the quality. Although there are many high-quality, rigorously peer-reviewed open access journals, there is also a long tail of poorer quality titles including those from so-called predatory publishers. Jeffrey Beall's list [http://scholarlyoa.com/publishers/] of predatory publishers is probably the best known and most authoritative; it currently includes details of well over 750 such publishers. Helping readers and authors to evaluate the content that's freely available online is, therefore, critical. Whether they are scholars or the general public, readers and authors alike could benefit from learning how to assess a publication's credentials, such as by checking to see if it has been peer-reviewed. EIFL, INASP, and RESEARCH4LIFEIFE all have programs to address this.

Another open access challenge is that there really is no 'one size fits all' approach. Different communities and disciplines have different needs—social scientists typically don't have funding to pay for article publication charges (APCs), but biomedical researchers do; the half-life of a mathematics journal is 49–60 months, compared with 25–36 months for one in health sciences. As a result, it's highly unlikely that there will be universal open access to all scholarly content in the foreseeable future. Instead, there will be a mix of gold (pay to publish, immediate access to the version of record) and green (access to the author accepted manuscript after an embargo period of six months or more)—which, in turn, relies on the continuation of the subscription model.

In summary, continuing—or even expanding—public access initiatives such as those described above will likely be important for some years to come. There are clear benefits for readers (researchers, professionals, and the public) of having access to high-quality scholarly content and to publishers for providing this access. It is therefore essential to continue to identify audiences that require this access and find ways for publishers, information professionals, and other interested parties to collaborate and deliver it.

Organizations that could benefit from such access in future include small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). These include small professional practices (for example, dental or veterinary surgeries, law firms, environmental consulting companies), community colleges, and high schools teaching advanced placement or equivalent classes. Some of these organizations now get access to scholarly content via aggregators such as Ebsco or Proquest. However, many cannot afford to license these databases; in addition, current content is often excluded in order to avoid cannibalization of full-rate subscriptions and licenses, thus limiting the value to readers. From the publisher's perspective, the benefits of expanding free or low-cost access to these sorts of organizations would include the opportunity to reach and build engagement with new audiences, as well as increase usage of their content, including the ability to monitor this—usage data provided by aggregators is typically minimal. It will be interesting to see whether publishers—individually or collectively—will experiment further with potential win/win opportunities like this in future.

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Note

1. This number includes data from 27 publishers representing the vast majority of content available [#N1-ptr1]