

Open Access: Scientific articles faster and free
From the Director, Ginger Saha

“Open access” is the disruptive technology that is changing the scientific publishing enterprise in a way that has shaken commercial science, technology, medical [STM] publishers and scientific societies to their core. Open access [OA] is not simply electronic versions of traditional journals, but is a fundamental shift in how the scientific literature is disseminated. The Directory of Open Access Journals <http://www.doaj.org> defines OA journals as those “that use a **funding model that does not charge readers or their institutions for access.**” In 2004 there were over 8,700 OA journals. OA journals are subject to the same rigorous peer review for scientific and ethical merit that traditional journals are, and the quality of the science has been maintained. Many OA journals are indexed in PubMed [MEDLINE] and Science Citation Index, and over 200 are being tracked by the Institute for Scientific Information for citation histories and impact factors. OA has entered the big time!

There are several OA business models in effect right now, ranging from one that is entirely supported by fees the author pays when an article is accepted for publication [PLoS], to a variation where an institutional membership yields lower author fees [BioMed Central], to a consortium of societies, publishers and libraries jointly producing and distributing OA journals [BioOne]. The most recent – and most publicized – entry into this movement is the National Institutes of Health’s Public Access proposal to make available the final manuscripts of all articles based on NIH-funded research within six months of acceptance through the freely available PubMed Central <http://www.pubmedcentral.nih.gov/>. The proposal has been heatedly debated among all parties concerned, and NIH received over 6,000 comments during the official comment period that ended in November. Dr. Elias A. Zerhouni, Director of NIH, recently published a clarification of the proposed policy in *Science*, Vol. 306, Issue 5703, Page 1895, 10 December 2004. [N.B. The final policy was announced February 3, 2005.]

What are some of the issues? They center on money and power – no surprise! – since the success of OA would mean a reduced revenue stream for publishers. Scientific society publishers argue that their journals support the overall operations of their societies, and that these societies contribute to the growth and excellence of their disciplines. Commercial publishers, accustomed to double-digit profit margins on their STM offerings, project a scenario of unhappy shareholders. NIH and organizations such as the Alliance for Taxpayer Access assert that the American public which paid for the research underlying the articles has a right to read the results of that research as quickly as possible and should not have to pay for it again through subscriptions or download fees. The momentum for OA is so strong that even its loudest critics have had to “get on board” and have drafted the “Washington, D.C., Principles for Free Access to Science.” The DC Principles encourage making selected important articles of interest available free online from the time of publication; having all the full text of journals available free online at some point; and offering journal content free online to scientists in low-income nations.

How are libraries being affected? The first OA journals were intended to be competition to established commercial predecessors, but without a track record, libraries could not cancel the established giants in favor of the untested newcomers, so subscriptions to the OA titles have been *in addition* to the already held titles, not instead of them. Even OhioLINK has dozens of OA journals in its Electronic Journal Center along with the Elsevier journals that have always been there. The fear that NIH’s Public Access initiative will result in widespread cancellation of hundreds of traditional STM journals is countered by the assurance that only about 10% of the articles in any given journal will be NIH-funded, and therefore libraries will have to continue to subscribe to have access to the other 90% of articles. Alas, that is probably true, which means that the ever-worsening squeeze on journal budgets will continue.

For more information visit:

SPARC <http://www.arl.org/sparc/>

PLoS <http://www.publiclibraryofscience.org/>

BioMed Central <http://www.biomedcentral.com/>

BioOne <http://www.bioone.org/>

NIH Public Access policy <http://www.nih.gov/about/publicaccess/index.htm>

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