

Public funded research and Open Access: Perspectives and Policies

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Abstract:

There are several arguments for promoting the necessity of Open Access (OA). Public funded research can be considered as a common good. From that point of view the accessibility of scientific information is crucial as a political instrument in strengthening a democratic society and to improve the knowledge driven society by efficient and effective distribution of scientific information

An important question is what are governments doing to promote OA? Do they consider OA as a priority on their political agenda? There is also the issue of accessibility of public funded research to improve existing systems of knowledge sharing among scientists.

This article analyses and reviews these issues relative to the present situation in the USA and several European countries (UK, France Germany). Ongoing initiatives will be addressed that strengthen the OA movement in general. The last issue to be addressed is the impact of open access journals. An analysis will show that the "business-model" of OA is not a blind alley.

The issue

Advances in digital technology have radically reshaped the landscape of scientific publishing. Parties involved are commercial publishers, scientific communities and institutions, governments, libraries and the public in general. The phenomenon of Open Access with various publishing models is hotly debated as a viable alternative to the traditional "subscriber pays" model. The final outcome of the debate is not certain. It is within the setting of the issues of rising serials costs, industry concentration, and advances in information technology and the emergence of other publishing policies for the distribution of online scholarly research that the solution for an open and affordable access to scientific information has to be found for the good of society as a whole.

A key issue in the OA debate is the *public* accessibility of the results of *public* funded research. One of the most heard arguments to support this is the taxpayer's argument. For instance the Alliance for taxpayers¹ in the US support the principle that American taxpayers are entitled to open access on the Internet to the peer-reviewed scientific articles on research funded by the U.S. Government because they have paid for it. This argument has some validity but it cannot be the defining argument.² It even can be misleading. It seems to suggest that OA is required for taxpayers and not the world. It can locate the individual benefit or it can locate the benefit for the public interest. Arguments for OA should be multi focused. Also on a political level as democracies and networked societies evolve and citizens can be better informed or at least want to have the opportunity to access scientific information like medical literature.

An economic argument for OA is that free distribution of information is the essential tool for economic development and material well being in our age and in this way stimulates innovation. Jan Velterop has correctly observed "that freely accessible research optimizes the scientific process as well as its 'translation' into societal benefits."³

An important step to realize this was taken last year when the OECD issued a *Declaration on access to research data from public funding* on behalf of OECD Committee for Scientific and Technological Policy at Ministerial Level⁴ as an incentive to develop international and national policies for free access to public funded research.

Old wine, new bottles?

From a historical point of view the principle of OA is not a new phenomenon in itself, on the contrary. Already Greek philosophers debated their views in public lectures. Another early example of OA was when Martin Luther nailed his handwritten 95 theses to the door of the Castle Church of Wittenberg in 1517 as a means to publish his theological views. In the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, scholars publicized their ideas and discoveries by writing letters to one another. Later in the seventeenth century as scholars

¹ The Alliance for Taxpayer Access, Source: <http://www.taxpayeraccess.org>

² For an extensive discussion about the taxpayers argument SPARC Open Access Newsletter, issue #65

³ Jan Velterop, Public funding, public knowledge, publication, in: *Serials. The journal for the Serials Community*, vol. 16, nr.2, p. 169-174.

⁴ Science, Technology and Innovation for the 21st Century. Meeting of the OECD Committee for Scientific and Technological Policy at Ministerial Level, 29-30 January 2004 - Final Communiqué, source http://www.oecd.org/document/0,2340,en_2649_34487_25998799_1_1_1_1,00.html