
*Disclaimer

Comments: Blog campaigning for Open Access in the scientific field and specifically mentions that libraries and scientists have been feeling the pinch from rising subscription costs, the traditional publishers have been doing very well indeed. One of the leading publishers of traditional, pay-to-read journals, Reed Elsevier, reported profits of 477 million British Pounds from their Science & Technology and Health Sciences division in 2007.

Related Links:

- [Why Open Access - ScienceBlogs](#)
- [Some Thoughts About the Open Access Kerfuffle - Mike the Mad Biologist](#)

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Why Open Access?

ScienceBlogs.com

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Timo Hannay just responded, over at one of Nature's blogs, to the hordes of bloggers who were somewhat displeased with the tone and content of Declan Butler's recent Nature article. Now that someone from Nature has returned fire, and other bloggers have fired back, it's likely that this whole thing is going to turn into one of those multi-day, multi-article kerfuffles that do so much to maintain blogging's reputation as the WWE of the scientific world. Which is cool, as far as I'm concerned. It's been a while since I've grabbed a folding chair and climbed into the Cage of Death. I'm ready to go.

But not quite yet.

Before we start throwing each other onto collapsable tables, or driving bulldozers through the ring, it might be good to stop and look at the idea that's at the core of this conflict: open access. Just what is open access? More importantly, why is it something that so many scientists get worked up over?

In an open access journal, there's no charge for reading articles. This stands in sharp contrast to most scientific journals, where either the reader or the library he or she is sitting in have to pay a subscription charge to access the journal.

Yes, that's pretty much all there is to the definition. So why on earth do so many people get so worked up over open access? Sure, it's nice to get something for nothing, but it's not exactly an everyday occurrence. I doubt that most people would get that worked up over not having free access to the New York Times, or the Wall Street Journal. So what is it about scientific journals that makes them so different?

There are quite a few reasons to favor open access, and most of them are good. Most scientific research is communicated through journal articles. The bulk of scientists will go through their careers without

authoring a single book, but it's not at all unusual for a scientist who has been around for a while to be an author on well more than 100 journal articles. If you want to be a good scientist, you need to remain aware of the work that's going on in your field. If you want to remain aware of the work that's going on in your field, you need to read lots of journal articles. If it costs lots of money to get access to lots of journals, the only way you are going to be a good scientist is if you have access to lots of money - and that's before you go into a lab or conduct a single experiment.

The problem is that not everyone with the potential to become a good scientist has the money needed to easily access all the journals they need. The traditional access system is a substantial burden for researchers in developing countries, or those in poorer communities. Opening access levels the playing field quite a bit.

There's also the issue of public access. A great deal (if not most) scientific research is funded through government grants, which use taxpayer dollars. The results of that research are then published in scientific journals, which most citizens can only access with great difficulty and inconvenience. Open access makes it easier for the informed taxpayer to see what they've paid for.

Still, cynic that I am, I suspect that for most scientists their own need and ability to access the scientific literature is probably more of a motivating factor than someone else's access, no matter how needed or deserved. I've got a feeling that one of the factors that has most benefited the open access movement has been the incredible greed and stupidity of several of the major academic publishers.

Scientists must publish their research in the peer reviewed literature. A scientist who does not publish will very rapidly become painfully acquainted with the prefix "un-" - as in untenured, unemployed, and unemployable. Journal publishers, smart cookies that they are, know this very, very well. Scientists do not get paid to have their articles published. In many cases, they fight tooth-and-nail for the privilege of giving their work away to the journal they want to appear in. In some cases, they even pay to get their paper published. Since every scientist needs to publish in the peer reviewed literature, there's also a lot of pressure for scientists to further contribute to their field by (voluntarily) serving as a reviewer, or for providing their time (gratis) as an editor...