

# *ARL Bimonthly Report 227*

## **April 2003**

### **On the Transition of Journals to Open Access**

*by David Prosser, Director, SPARC Europe*

*Editor's note: The author, working from an idea introduced by Tom Walker (University of Florida), circulated a proposal for conversion of subscription-based journals to open access. This proposal is based on the idea of a transitional hybrid journal that offers different pricing models at the article level. The author's complete proposal follows.*

There has been a great deal of debate recently regarding open access journals. Open Access journals make the papers published within them freely available online to all interested readers with access to the Internet. This marks them out from "closed access" journals that only allow papers to be read by somebody with a subscription to the journal (either directly or through their institution).

Open access journals are not free journals--only free to the reader. There are significant costs in the peer-review process and production of a journal (even if it is only online). Open access journals will survive only if they can raise sufficient funds to cover the costs of publication (plus whatever profit margin is considered reasonable by the journals' owners and is supported by the market).

The open access model is attractive to many as it immediately and significantly extends dissemination of an author's paper from those at a few hundred institutions worldwide lucky enough to have a subscription to all interested readers with access to the internet. As peer review is independent of medium and funding model, open access journals can have the same quality standards as closed access journals. Quality concerns therefore are not necessarily relevant when considering the transition to open access.

One area that is affected by the free availability of papers to readers is the visibility and impact of the papers. Initial research is beginning to show that papers that are open access are cited more frequently than those that are only available to subscribers. A move to the open access model should see an increase in a journal's impact factor.

Many are now convinced of the benefits of open access to researchers (both as authors and readers), to libraries, and to society. However, there is widespread concern that we will not be

able to convert the current system of subscription-based journals to author-payment journals. This proposal outlines a possible transition mechanism.

Imagine a well-established, relatively large, high impact, niche journal. It is financed mainly by institutional subscriptions, plus some personal subscriptions (priced at or close to cost), author color charges and/or some page charges, reprint and offprint sales, and a small amount of advertising revenue. As well as covering costs (both direct and indirect) the journal makes a profit for its owner (part of which is retained for further investment, the other part goes to shareholders or to further the aims of the owner, for commercial or not-for-profit publishers, respectively). The journal is produced in two formats--paper and online--and online access is restricted to subscribers.

The owners of our typical journal are convinced of the theoretical benefits of a transfer to an open access model, but they have a number of concerns:

1. Many of their authors (who come from a wide geographic spread) do not have the funds to pay for publication.
2. If the journal was available for free online many (if not all) subscribers may decide to cancel their subscriptions, so resulting in a disastrous decrease in revenues.
3. The owners do not have sufficient financial reserves to carry the journal through a transition period until most authors have funds to pay publication charges.

The owners face a Catch-22 situation. They cannot expect authors to pay until they have funds. However, funding bodies are not going to give funds while authors can publish for free (or are willing to find funds to cover color and page charges). The journal is "trapped" in closed access.

The proposed solution presents a way to manage the inevitable transition period, with little financial risk to the owners. It is based on the model provided by Tom Walker in *Florida Entomologist*, published by the Florida Entomological Society <<http://www.fcla.edu/FlaEnt/>> and the journals of the Entomological Society of America <<http://www.entsoc.org/pubs/>>. Authors would be presented with two options:

1. To pay a publication charge--the paper is then made open access on publication.
2. Not to pay the publication charge--the paper is only made available to subscribers.

This would result in a hybrid journal in which access to each paper would depend on the authors' willingness to pay the publication fee. This is a low-risk strategy for the journal's owner as they would still collect subscription revenue. In year one (say 2004) authors would be invited to pay for open access. The subscription price would be set to what is required to cover costs if no authors took up the offer. Any author payments would then be a bonus! In year two (2005), the subscription price would be set based on the experience in 2004.

So, if half the authors chose to pay in 2004, the 2005 subscription price could be half the 2004 value. Over time, as the proportion of authors willing to pay increased, the subscription price would continue to be reduced. Alternatively, if no authors were willing to pay publication

charges the subscription price would increase year-on-year and would continue to cover the full publication costs, as it does currently.

## **Advantages**

1. Authors who are willing and able to pay receive the benefits of open access (i.e., wider dissemination, higher citation, greater kudos, etc.).
2. Authors who are unwilling or unable to pay for open access can still publish in their journal of choice.
3. The benefits to authors of open access can be accurately measured--comparisons can be made in downloads and citations for open and closed papers in the same journal.
4. As the benefits of open access become clear researchers will pressure their funding bodies to provide grants for publication. No author will want to be at a disadvantage.
5. As the proportion of open access papers increases so should the journal's impact factor.
6. The owner is provided with a smooth transition period as the decline in subscription revenue is matched to the increase in publication revenue.
7. The journal moves at the same rate as the international research community. It is not left behind (as other open access journals proliferate) or bankrupted (as subscription revenues fall without a matched increase in other revenues).

## **Disadvantages**

1. The journal becomes split with different access conditions for different papers (but this can be turned into an advantage--see item 4 above).
2. It is possible that libraries will cancel their subscriptions if a significant proportion of the journal is available for free online (even if the subscription price has been reduced proportionately). As the journal becomes less reliant on subscriptions (as the subscription price decreases) this should be a declining risk. Also, it is unlikely that many libraries will cancel until a very large proportion of the journal is open access.
3. If the subscription price is calculated using the previous year's take-up of publication charges there is a risk that there will be a revenue shortfall if the proportion of authors willing to pay the charge falls.

## **Additional Points**

1. One criticism of the model as implemented by the Entomological Society of America is that the publication charge does not reflect the actual costs of publication. I would suggest that the author charge should be set at or near the total required for online publication of that paper. There is no advantage in starting with an artificially low figure as authors will resent a rapid increase in publication costs over time.
2. The owner may wish to factor in the cost of making payment waivers to certain authors (e.g., those from developing countries). If it is expected that 10% of published papers will be from authors who will not be able to afford the charge the publication fee should be increased by 10% for those that can pay.
3. The discussions above have assumed that revenue comes almost exclusively from either

subscription of publication costs. There are, however, a variety of alternative revenue sources that may contribute to the financial health of the journal. A good place to look for expansion of this point are the "Guides to Business Planning" for open access journals put together by the SPARC Consulting Group on behalf of the Open Society Institute. See <<http://www.soros.org/openaccess/oajguides/>>.

## Scenarios

It may be useful to briefly outline a number of potential scenarios following adoption of this model:

1. No authors take advantage of the opportunity to pay for open access. In this case subscriptions continue to cover the entire cost of publication.
2. Low uptake (less than, say, 20%). Subscriptions cover most of the costs. Over time subscription price held or slightly reduced. Only a small proportion of papers is open access from publication. Owner begins to keep statistics on variations in usage and citations between open and closed access papers.
3. Medium uptake (20-80%). Subscription price can be reduced more quickly as authors take up open access option. Owner can acquire more interesting usage and citation statistics (as there are more open access papers).
4. High uptake (greater than, say, 80%). Subscription price falls to cover only printing and distribution costs (plus margin) for paper copies. Author costs cover online publication. Author payment made compulsory?

*This article was previously published in SPARC E-News (February-March 2003)*  
<<http://www.arl.org/sparc/core/index.asp?page=g29#6>>.

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<<http://www.arl.org/newsltr/227/openaccess.html>>.

## From the FOS News Weblog

<[http://www.earlham.edu/~peters/fos/2003\\_03\\_16\\_fosblogarchive.html#a91084510](http://www.earlham.edu/~peters/fos/2003_03_16_fosblogarchive.html#a91084510)>

David Prosser of SPARC Europe has written a plan for converting traditional journals to open-access journals. It's based on the Thomas Walker idea reflected in the *Florida Entomologist* and the journals of the Entomological Society of America. Basically, a non-OA journal might decide to provide OA to individual articles when the author or author's sponsor could pay the journal's dissemination costs up front. The ratio of OA articles to non-OA articles from the same journal might start small and grow over time.

(PS: I like this plan very much. Prosser lists seven advantages, but here are a few that he doesn't mention. Over time the journal will gain experience in the process and economics of OA publishing. The transition to OA can be as slow or partial as the journal wants, and needn't be considered an all-or-nothing proposition. Every author who likes this idea can

raise it with the journal of his or her choice, distributing the work of promoting OA to the authors who will benefit most. Finally, journals can experiment with OA before making any decision to go further. Their decision to experiment and their decision whether or not to go further will be rational business decisions made in their editorial offices far from the heated rhetoric of conferences. That's exactly how it should be put: a business proposition, not an insurgent action. I'd like to hear from authors who raise this possibility with journals.)

--Posted by Peter Suber <[peters@earlham.edu](mailto:peters@earlham.edu)>, March 20, 2003

## **Lund University Launches Directory of Open Access Journals**

Lund University Libraries recently launched the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ) <<http://www.doaj.org/>>, supported by the Information Program of the Open Society Institute along with SPARC. The directory contains information about 350 open access journals, i.e., quality-controlled scientific and scholarly electronic journals that are freely available on the Web. The service will continue to grow as new journals are identified.

The goal of the Directory of Open Access Journals is to increase the visibility and accessibility of open access scholarly journals, thereby promoting their increased usage and impact. The directory aims to comprehensively cover all open access scholarly journals that use an appropriate quality control system. Journals in all languages and subject areas will be included in the DOAJ.

The database records will be freely available for reuse in other services and can be harvested by using the Open Archives Initiative Protocol for Metadata Harvesting <<http://www.openarchives.org/>>, thus further increasing the visibility of the journals. The further development of DOAJ will continue with version 2, which will offer the enhanced feature of allowing the journals to be searched at the article level, and is expected to be available in late fall 2003.

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