

## “Open Don’t Mean Free”: A Reflection on the Potential Advantages and Disadvantages of Publishing Research via Open Access

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# “Open Don’t Mean Free”: A Reflection on the Potential Advantages and Disadvantages of Open Access Publishing

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Earlier this year, the British government approached Wikipedia’s founder, Jimmy Wales, to assist in making “taxpayer-funded academic research more widely available online.” The logic behind this decision was two-fold: like Wikipedia, open access (OA) publishing can translate into distributing research in a more timely fashion than traditional modes. Just as importantly, the Wikipedia approach attempts to disrupt the traditional model. That is, research is paid for, or subsidised by, public money but the public often does not have access to it unless they pay either a subscription or a “pay-per-view” fee. In essence, the public pays twice for the same goods. An OA approach could equate to getting what we, the public, paid for the first time.

Shortly after, the Finch Report (also known as “Accessibility, Sustainability, Excellence: How to Expand Access to Research Publications”) was released in the U.K., sparking much debate and discussion. The Report is a significant attempt to ensure that research is made available openly and for the benefit of everyone, including the public and others outside of academe. “The issue we are addressing, therefore, is how to expand and improve access to research publications for the benefit of all who have a stake or an interest in research and its results. Barriers to access—particularly when the research is publicly-funded—are increasingly unacceptable in an online world: for such barriers restrict the innovation, growth and other benefits which can flow from research” (Finch, 2012).

Despite that promising précis, not all those dedicated

to OA are pleased with the Report. The Report fails to acknowledge that “scholarly publishing is not just about authors. It is not just about librarians. It is not just about publishers. Therefore any discussions of the success or growth of open access publishing practices must include a discussion of the broader context of the stakeholder relationships within scholarly publishing” (Reinsfelder, 2012). In other words, as much as it seemed that those involved with OA would have welcomed the Finch Report, many attest that the Finch Working Group did not sufficiently consult with those directly involved in both research and in the OA movement. The resulting negative feedback centred on a common criticism: if followed, the Finch Report will actually damage the current research environment. It is commendable that the Report is attempting address the issue of OA head on. However, forcing their recommendations onto researchers and universities is hardly the solution.

Cost remains the most significant consideration which is not adequately addressed in the Report, because as many academics point out, open don’t mean free. For example, to publish something in an OA journal often requires the author to pay up front—in some instances of up to £1000 (~\$1,580). For institutions to allocate monies to support this cost on behalf of the researchers is one thing; however, in practice it is a rather dubious stealing from Peter to pay Paul-type situation. Monies that would have been distributed to support research or the purchase of the published work are redirected to support the author publishing fees. In other instances of the “author pays” model, no money is allocated to cover these costs, yet



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there remains the expectation that academics still conduct, disseminate and demonstrate impact of their research. Instead of a more equitable means of sharing valuable research and information, the process is still unequal and even more complicated.

There is also a divide in terms of the possible cost-benefit. A project commissioned by JISC, a U.K. higher education funding body, determined that there is an “economic case for open access publishing” and the “U.K. higher education sector could have saved around £80 million [~\$126.7 million] a year by shifting from toll access to open access publishing” (2009). Nonetheless, the assumption about potential savings is short-sighted: “Oxford [is] predicting a potential rise of spending on publishing of 350 percent” if the system moves to what is commonly known as gold open access which the U.K. government believes is the “best way to increase access to publicly-funded U.K. research” (Jump, 2012). Therefore, profit margins remain one of the biggest impediments, as Dave Price, vice-provost for research at University College London explains “that the Finch report does not propose any regulation of article fees, without which ‘publisher profits will continue to be high at the expense of the public purse’” (Jump). This potential problem was also pointed out in an Open Access Working Group Advice Paper developed by The League of European Research Universities. Specifically, universities could “incur new costs with no immediate savings on subscriptions” (LERU, 2012). The numbers don’t add up which underscores the need for more time, more consultation, and more reflection.

It comes as no surprise that academics are distrustful of the Finch Report’s suggestion of developing a plan to make research more accessible. Taken one way, a pay-per-view fee of about £20 (~\$32) handles part of the problem. However, the Report goes on to say that there is “the growing range of non-specialists who are interested in the results of research [but they] have not seen the same fruits of increases in access” (Finch, 2012). As one academic I spoke to from the University of Sheffield critiqued, “I can’t understand research papers outside my discipline, so what chance does a non-expert have, whether or not the work is publicly funded? This is missing the point. Evidence as I see it would seem to suggest that OA led to lower, not higher impact for work.” In other words, the OA process must not simply water down the work. The publication of research is distinctly not for the general public’s understanding; it is predominantly for practitio-

ners in a very specialised area of knowledge. It is one thing for OA to make the research findings easier to obtain by other researchers in the field. However, we have lost the real value of disseminating research findings if there is an attempt to persuade scholars to make their research easier to comprehend by a broader audience.

In a related issue, The Guardian reports that the Wellcome Trust “plans to withhold a portion of grant money from scientists who do not make the results of their work freely available to the public, in a move that will embolden supporters of the growing open access movement in science.” Robert Kiley, head of digital services at the Wellcome Trust, says “It’s all about changing behaviour. Getting researchers to accept that, if they’re going to take Wellcome Trust money, then open access is not just an option, it’s a requirement” (Jha, 2012). This move is certainly in accord with what the Finch Report wants, and as one can see, it may very well work, but only if the grantors are committed to financially supporting OA. In this instance, the Report is certainly en pointe, but there are plenty of other issues, which remain obstacles to some sort of qualified return on investment.

Reinsfelder’s critique underscores the importance that “all stakeholder groups must deal with uncertainty about the future and adapt to a rapidly changing environment. These changes are forcing all stakeholders to redefine or establish new relationships with one another” (2012). But the Finch approach does not adequately and equally address all stakeholders; namely, the researchers, the librarians, the publishers, and the administrators. I wholeheartedly agree that research needs to be open, particularly if that research has been conducted using public funds. However, major costs are inherent to implementing an oversight infrastructure to ensure compliance—who will be footing that bill?

And ironically, the government and universities themselves may be hindering OA, because they have reduced or eliminated subsidies for academic publications, positing that competition for manuscripts will bring down price (author fees) and competition for readers will increase quality. To ensure equal and open access, the competitive model may very well need to be re-evaluated. Thus, simply saying that research has to be made open is only a first step.

Indeed, the evolution of OA is important, but proposed

OA approaches have not yet resolved issues involving dissemination and distribution of research. Imposing OA requirements on funded research may risk alienating scholars. It also fails to discuss implications of financial involvement of corporations in academic research. The Finch Report addresses so many important issues, but on reflection it misses key issues which need to be considered if OA is to have a lasting impact on the dissemination of high quality research.

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