

Forum

Debating Open Access

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Abstract

The issues involved with Open Access are actually much more complex than this simple principle, so if you support Open Access you will agree that it is a good thing that UK research councils have rashly gone ahead with a policy that all research they fund must be published in Open Access journals rather than waiting for the inevitable long debate to reach some conclusions.

Key Words: open access, journal, debate, UK research council.

Starting in April the UK research councils have pushed ahead with a policy that all research they fund must be published in Open Access journals so that everyone has free online access to the research they funded. The issues involved are actually much more complex than this simple principle so if you support Open Access you will agree that it is a good thing that they have rashly gone ahead rather than waiting for the inevitable long debate to reach some conclusions.

Now the [British Academy has published 9 short articles](#) by academics presenting their opinions. The British Academy supports the Humanities and Social Sciences and this is reflected in the fact that only one of the articles was written by a scientist (a biologist). The principles for publishing in the humanities are not very different from those in the sciences but support for open access from the humanities tends to be less enthusiastic than it is from the sciences.

One of the articles by historian Robin Osborne is particularly negative. He argues that academics should not be obliged to publish in open access because they get their skills and information from a wider range of sources than just those they are paid to look at by the research councils. He also claims that research should not be free to view by the public because they do not have the training to understand it. I think many people will agree with me that these arguments are outrageously misguided, yet he may represent the opinion of many academics in both the humanities and sciences so it is important to have these points debated openly.

The other articles recognize many of the complex issues involved such as the effect of open access on learned societies who are funded by their publishing empires and the wider questions about how peer-review needs to evolve. Another point made which is too frequently overlooked is the conflicting motivations behind the open access movement. For many scientists and mathematicians the main purpose of open access is to destroy the business model of private publishing houses which have been making vast profits by charging academics for their own research through their libraries. Just look up articles on the subject by [John Baez](#) or [Timothy Gowers](#) to see how true this is (the linked posts are just the most recent of many and I mostly agree with their views).

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On the other hand the [Finch Report](#) which is behind the open access policy in the UK makes no mention of this and is only concerned with the need to make research more available to industry and the public. In fact they aim to protect publishers and increase the amount of the research funding spent on publishing in order to increase access. It is not difficult to see why this is. Elsevier is one of the top FTSE listed companies and the UK cannot afford to risk damaging such industry giants (even if they are really based in another country) Despite pressure from an academic boycott Elsevier-Reed have seen a more than 50% increase in their share price in the last year (see [here](#) for latest figure). They are also using their influence to push back on the extent of open access e.g. by arguing strongly against copyright reforms and trying to lengthen embargo times on green open access. See their [position statements for the UK policy makers](#) to get an idea of how this works.

Update: Robin Osborne has posted some of his article on the [Gaurdian Network](#). It would be helpful if there were some rational comments to explain to him why it is wrong to stop the public reading academic research in case they misunderstand it.

Reference

1. <http://blog.vixra.org/2013/07/08/debating-open-access/>