



Open Access - Utopia Round the Corner?

Marie Lenstrup
Asia Studies Book Services, Netherlands
marie.lenstrup@asianstudiesbooks.com

The goal of the Open Access (OA) movement is universal, free access to all publicly funded research. In the last few years the movement has gained a significant following among academics, tax-payers, and more recently among grant-giving bodies and legislators. Not surprisingly, though, established publishers and subscription-funded learned societies are less enchanted with the idea. The drive towards OA is strongest in the natural sciences, but as the movement gathers impetus, it is set to become an increasingly pressing subject for Asia Studies scholars.

Sophisticated, yet demanding

OA is a child of the internet. The first part of its mission is uncontroversial: Since all scholars have access to this marvellous resource for mass storage and global searching, it follows that all scholarship should be available online. Most publishers already achieve this-few journals still exist that do not have web versions, and an increasing number of academic books are available in e-versions. The second part of the OA mission, however, is what alarms many publishers: that all the scholarship posted should be available free of charge and free of (most) author copyright.

In the early stages, much OA material consisted of self-archiving: authors posting their research publications on their own or their institutional web sites. At that time, many journal publishers were happy enough to allow article texts to be posted for free. But as the amount of material posted online increased, publishers became concerned that having most of a journal's content available for free on the internet might result in subscription cancellations.

Alongside the growing interest in posting research findings, the concept of OA has developed into something rather sophisticated and somewhat demanding. Today, the formal definition of open access to scholarly texts is free availability on the internet immediately on publication, permitting users to read, download, copy, distribute, print, search or link to the full texts. Furthermore, all material must be placed in organised repositories which are clearly structured and globally searchable.

This definition has two important effects: Firstly, it essentially does away with author copyright, leaving only the right to be properly acknowledged and correctly cited. Secondly, it establishes the need for institutional repositories which have the necessary hardware and software to perform three essential tasks: storing material, allowing scholars to deposit new material, and enabling anyone to search and access all material.

Stewards of scholarship

The arguments for OA are obvious and compelling. Firstly, the more widely accessible scholarly and scientific works are, the better for scientific endeavour in particular and the community in general-and to be truly globally accessible, it must be free (although users will still have to pay for the mode of access, i.e. a computer). Secondly, since most university (and much non-university) scholarship is funded from the public purse or by charitable institutions, it is intuitively wrong that shareholders in commercial publishing houses should profit from selling the resulting publications back to those same universities. Proponents of OA believe that universities should not be customers for their own research, but should instead be its stewards, making it available through their repositories.

Academic journal publishers counter that they provide an indispensable service to the academic community, through editorial improvements and dissemination efforts, and most importantly by arranging peer reviews. They argue that this guarantees the quality of published scholarship, allowing it to be used without further quality control for tenure decisions and research assessments. (Furthermore, they fear that OA could spell the end of scholarly journals publishing, an industry that provides many jobs and a net contribution to the balance of payments in English-speaking countries - but that is an empty and purely change-averse argument). The Association of Learned and Professional Society Publishers have added their concerns that many scholarly associations survive on the small income they garner from publishing a journal, and that an end to subscriptions could mean an end to these associations.



Some journals, both new and established, are responding to these issues by experimenting with turning their business models upside down: instead of taking payment for their work from subscribers, they charge authors (or rather their institutions or funders) for publishing their work, or charge a set fee for the permission to make their published articles available in OA

repositories. These are not revolutionary new practices-publishers have often had to ask for author contributions, for example to cover illustration costs or to part-fund publications that are deemed otherwise not commercially viable. This has not generally harmed academic value, as publishers have a vested interest in continuing to operate the peer-review process to safeguard their standing as reputable and trustworthy guarantors of good academic quality. But preparing an article for publication is not cheap, and prices currently start somewhere around USD 1000 and continue up beyond USD 3000 per article.

To compel or not to compel

Provision of work for OA repositories is still mostly on a voluntary basis, with some scholars ensuring that all their work is available, and some journals providing free access a set time after publication. But voluntary arrangements make for slow progress, and several funding and political bodies are keen to move towards compulsory provision of OA material, or have already made that move. Organisations that have already taken this step include the National Institutes of Health in the U.S., the Wellcome Trust in the United Kingdom and the Australian Research Council. It begs the question, where will the funds come from to pay for OA infrastructure and for author-pays publication fees if a majority of funding bodies move towards mandatory OA provision. There's not much left to shave off library budgets, even if libraries were to save significant sums on subscriptions.

Recently, the European Commission weighed into the debate with a proposal to make OA provision mandatory within six months of publication for research funded by EU agencies. However, following strong protest from a group of

leading academic publishers, the Commission decided earlier this year to take a step back, and instead it has set aside some EUR 50 million to develop OA storage infrastructure and EUR 25 million for research on digital preservation. However, new grants from the European Research Council are likely to include funding for publishing costs and a proviso that OA must be provided after a short embargo period.

Consequences for cash flow?

The rising popularity of OA will undoubtedly have an effect on article authors. That said, the monograph or edited book remains the more important vehicle for communication in Asia Studies, and while several publishers are experimenting with providing free access to online extracts of their books (mainly for marketing purposes), no-one is yet suggesting that OA should apply to whole books.

If, however, proponents of OA are successful in winning research funders' support for compulsory OA provision of all scholarly articles, there will be a subtle but significant impact on book publishing and thus book authors. Journal subscriptions are paid up-front, before the journal is delivered to the customer, while most book sales are subject to several months' customer credit. As a result, journal subscriptions make an important contribution not only to publishers' profits but also, significantly, to their cash flow. Most large, and many medium-sized, publishers produce both books and journals, so if one side of their business is threatened - whether the threat is real or just perceived - it is likely to impact the other side of their business too. It will be interesting to follow developments over the next few years to see whether it is the bearers of glad tidings or the prophets of doom who turn out to be (most) right.