

Back Talk — Open Access, the Turning Point, and Methadone

Column Editor: **Anthony (Tony) W. Ferguson** (Library Director, University of Hong Kong; Phone: 852 2859 2200; Fax: 852 2858 9420) <ferguson@hkucc.hku.hk>

The dictionary definition for the concept of a Turning Point is “The point at which a very significant change occurs; a decisive moment.”¹ I wondered this past week as I read about the **Springer Open Access (OA)** agreement with the **California Digital Library** whether or not OA as a central feature of academic publishing was about to hit its turning point:

OAKLAND — The **University of California** libraries and **Springer Science+Business Media (Springer)** have concluded a groundbreaking experimental agreement to support open access publishing by UC authors. The arrangement is part of the journals license negotiated by the **California Digital Library** on behalf of the ten campuses of the **University of California**.

Under the terms of the agreement, articles by UC-affiliated authors accepted for publication in a **Springer** journal beginning in 2009 will be published using **Springer Open Choice** with full and immediate open access. There will be no separate per-article charges, since costs have been factored into the overall license. Articles will be released under a license compatible with the **Creative Commons** (by-nc: Attribution, Non-commercial) license. In addition to access via the **Springer** platform, final published articles will also be deposited in the **California Digital Library’s eScholarship Repository**. (For the entire press release go to <http://www.universityofcalifornia.edu/news/article/19335>.)

In that same news announcement, the justification given by **Ivy Anderson**, director of collections for the **California Digital Library** agreement with **Springer** for taking this course of action certainly seems to signal a turning point change in how at least a significant number of academics in California are viewing OA: “Faculty members have told us that they want open access publishing options in order to increase the impact of their published work and eliminate barriers to educational and research use ... Just as importantly, they want these options in the journals in which they routinely publish, without disrupting their normal research activity.” (Press release)

For me, these words of support for OA come on the heels of emailed comments from a leading science professor here in Hong Kong who said of the professed benefits of open access publishing:

To my mind, the incremental benefits of open access over more traditional means of disseminating the results of research are really rather marginal. Perhaps I am looking at this from the perspective of science/engineering, but the tax-paying public is not really going to benefit. We need to be accountable, of course, but Joe Blow in the street isn’t gonna want to read our papers. Potential collaborators can and do get together at disciplinary conferences. There are better ways for employers to seek qualified candidates. [He also said in another part of his email] I guess I would rather see the resources for whatever this might cost be used for the direct costs of research, rather than paying journals!

When I read these comments I perceived that he had indeed hit several raw nerves related to the typical arguments put forward in favor of OA:

- To justify OA in the name of the non academic public who doesn’t want to read research journals is meaningless.
- Using university/public funds to pay publishers to allow OA isn’t as good as paying scholars to do research.
- Scholars interested in collaboration find each other at conferences, not through the published literature.

So on the one hand we have scholars in California in favor of OA (or at least willing to go along with this OA experiment) and a fairly typical “doubting Thomas” in Hong Kong questioning the value of the whole enterprise. For me I fear that over simplifications of OA’s benefits or weaknesses simply cloud some of the most important points:

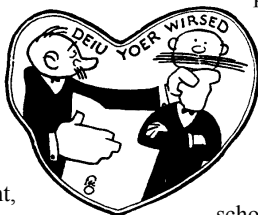
- OA communicates more widely than traditional academic publishing. While we may tout the importance of the public having access to research produced with the public dollar as a way of convincing governmental funding agencies to require

OA publishing, what OA will really do is share research findings with scholars who have little hope of reading very expensive journals because they are not at the top 500 universities in the world which are able to buy into the old scholarly paradigm of paying a handful of academic publishers enormous sums of money to share research results. OA, on the other hand, will involve the minds of thousands of more scholars globally and will enrich the entire academic enterprise.

- The open Web communicates more widely than traditional academic publishing. If the Web didn’t exist it would be simple to agree with the point of view that “It is cheaper for the top universities to pay the major STM publishers to pay costly STM serials subscriptions than to give each of their scholars money with which to pay the many times very costly OA fees.” But the Web has changed everything. Today’s students/tomorrow’s scholars start with the Web and only resort to the information found in the expensive journals much later on in the research process. OA academic information will be discovered much earlier and by more people than it was in the old days (20 years ago).

So where are we? Are we at the OA turning point? Especially for libraries, I think we have to recognize that OA is a revolutionary alternative scholarly communication paradigm compared to the current one where scholars are paid to do research and they publish in journals which survive on the money funneled through academic libraries to academic publishers.

But I also think we are gradually ambling toward an OA scholarly communication paradigm which is not dependent upon page charges — but we are not there yet. To use a very crass analogy, paying publishers to provide for open access is like giving crack addicts methadone. The addicts are still addicted but to a controlled substance in the hope that they will find something more socially acceptable and sustainable to do with their lives while they are eased off their need for crack. In this case we are in the paying publishers article charges to ease them into the OA world — with perhaps the unspoken hope that they will, like **Google**, find a different way of getting the money they need with which to pay the bills, e.g., advertising or by making subscription based e-journals outshine their OA equivalents. 🌱



Endnotes

1. See **Answers.com**: <http://www.answers.com/topic/turning-point>.