



The primacy of authors in achieving open access

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The primacy of authors in achieving Open Access

Of all the groups that want OA to scientific and scholarly research literature, only one is in a position to deliver it: authors. It is authors who decide whether to submit their work to OA journals, to deposit their work in OA archives, or to transfer copyright.

If you support OA, then the good news is that authors do not need anyone else's permission or cooperation to provide OA to their own work. But the downside is that researchers are notoriously individualistic and as authors do not act as a bloc. If you oppose OA, then simply switch the good news and the bad.

So even though readers, libraries, universities, foundations, and governments have their own perspectives on OA those that support the concept can guide, help or nudge authors. In this sense, authors have primacy in the campaign for OA, and the single largest obstacle to OA is author inertia or omission.

Once we recognize this, we can then focus on four author-centric strategies for achieving OA: educating authors about it, helping them to provide OA to their work, and creating incentives and removing disincentives for them to do so.

Educating authors about OA

Author inertia or omission is not necessarily a sign of opposition. I believe that usually it is a sign of ignorance or inattention. Most scientists and scholars are too preoccupied with their research to know what open access is - even today, after years of rising public recognition. A new ALPSP study shows that 82% of senior researchers (4,000 thousand in 97 countries) knew 'nothing' or just 'a little' about OA¹. Even if the numbers are better for junior faculty, we clearly have a long way to go just to educate the scientists and scholars themselves.

Supporters of OA have campaigned vigorously, but more needs to be done. If you are a research scientist who supports OA, then talk to your colleagues about it. Talk to them on campus and at conferences. Talk them to them in writing through the journals and newsletters that serve your field. Talk to your students, the authors of tomorrow.

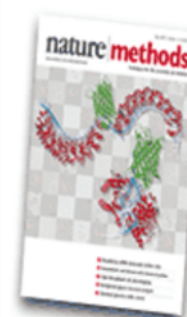
If you have provided OA to your own work, talk to your colleagues about your experience. Firsthand testimonials from trusted colleagues are much more effective than policy arguments, even good policy arguments. They are also more effective with this audience than advice from librarians or university administrators, even good advice. The chief problem is getting the attention of busy colleagues and showing them that this matters for their research impact and career. Only researchers can do this for other researchers.

A surprising number of OA converts - I am one - did not go beyond understanding to enthusiasm until they provided OA to their own writings and saw for themselves, sometimes suddenly, the signs of rising impact. There is a discernible increase in e-mail from serious readers, inclusions in course syllabi, links from on-line indices, invitations to important conferences and citations in other publications. When you experience this in your own case, although anecdotal it is compelling. When you hear it from a trusted colleague, it is persuasive. OA is about barrier-free sharing of research results with colleagues worldwide.

This enlarges our audience and increases our impact². This is the message that our busy colleagues must understand.

If you do not have time for sustained campaigning, then at least respond to misunderstandings. Do not let damaging myths circulate without correction. When someone says that OA 'bypasses peer review' or 'violates copyright', correct them. When someone says that OA is naive because 'there's no free lunch', point out that no serious OA advocate ever said that providing OA was without expense. The question is whether there are better ways to cover those expenses than by charging readers or their libraries for access³.

Researchers are busy. But anyone who takes half an hour to email an updated bibliography to the department chair or to snail-mail offprints to colleagues on other campuses should


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Helping authors

Even when scholars see the connection between OA and research impact, they have to set priorities. It is not surprising that they give new research priority over enhancing the dissemination of completed research. Librarians can help faculty members deposit their work in an Open-Access, OAI-compliant archive, such as the university's institutional repository.

Universities which support open access could fund librarians to provide this kind of assistance, and also help by paying the processing fees charged by OA journals when funding agencies will not do so. They could offer workshops on how authors can retain the rights they need to authorize OA, and suggest model language for authors to use in copyright transfer agreements.

Removing disincentives

When Franz Ingelfinger was the editor of the *New England Journal of Medicine*, he adopted a policy not to accept any article that had previously been published or publicized elsewhere. As the policy spread to other journals, it became known as the Ingelfinger Rule. It seems to be in decline nowadays, although it is hard to tell because many journals do not say explicitly on their web sites whether or not they follow the rule. The rule, and the uncertainty about where it applies, deters authors from depositing their preprints in OA archives. Researchers who proudly disregard the risk that their work will offend church and state flee from the risk that preprint archiving will disqualify their work for later publication in a peer-reviewed journal.

I believe that journals should remove this disincentive, abandon or modify the Ingelfinger Rule and to say so publicly. Journals should allow their authors to take advantage of on-line preprint exchanges, while refusing to consider submissions that have been formally published elsewhere. To allow authors to make informed decisions, journals should at least make their policies on this issue clear and explicit on their web sites.

Creating incentives

Universities and funding agencies, who support the principle of OA could demand that their researchers make their articles available on OA. A February 2004 study by JISC and OSI, although weakened by a low-response rate, nonetheless found that when authors are asked 'how they would feel if their employer or funding body required them to deposit copies of their published articles in one or more [Open-Access] repositories...[t]he vast majority, even of the non-OA author group, said they *would do so willingly*.' (Emphasis in original.)⁴

Finally, we could provide a significant incentive for authors if we could make OA journals as prestigious as conventional journals of the same quality. One way to boost prestige is to recruit eminent scholars to serve on the editorial board, a method used effectively by *PLoS Biology* and BioMed Central's *Journal of Biology*. Another way is for eminent scholars to submit new, excellent work to OA journals. This will tend to break the vicious circle by which any new journal needs, on the one hand, excellent submissions to build prestige and, on the other, prestige to attract excellent submissions.

Thinking about how to achieve OA is different from thinking about who benefits or by how much. It is when we think about how to achieve OA that we must recognize the primacy of authors. Many groups suffer from dysfunctions in the current system of scholarly communication, but authors are at the frontline of control over the solution. Author decisions will affect the degree to which we achieve OA and the rate at which we achieve it.

Peter Suber

Research Professor of Philosophy at Earlham College, the Open Access Project Director at Public Knowledge, and Senior Researcher at SPARC. He is the author of the SPARC Open Access Newsletter and editor of the Open Access News blog. peter.suber@earlham.edu

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