



# Open access builds momentum

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# *ARL Bimonthly Report 232*

## February 2004

### Open Access Builds Momentum

*by Peter Suber, Research Professor of Philosophy, Earlham College; Open Access Project Director, Public Knowledge; and Senior Researcher, SPARC*

Momentum for open access (OA) built tremendously in 2003. Keeping up with it has left me little time to take stock and gain perspective, but even this early in the new year I can offer the following observations.

2003 was the year that research funders realized that if research is important enough to fund, then it's important enough to share. Open access isn't just an abstract public good; it's a concrete way to make literature more useful and thereby to increase the return on investment that funders make in research.

In the Bethesda Statement on Open Access Publishing, major private funders of biomedical research committed to open access.<sup>1</sup> The Howard Hughes Medical Institute (HHMI), which hosted the Bethesda meeting, announced its support of open access and new policies that provide authors with grant funds to pay publication charges. HHMI will reimburse investigators up to \$3,000 in FY2004 for the costs of open access publishing.

The Wellcome Trust, a U.K.-based independent research-funding charity that aims to improve human and animal health, participated in the Bethesda meeting and issued its own separate public endorsement of OA soon after; the Trust will allow researchers to use contingency funds from research grants for open access publishing costs.<sup>2</sup>

In the Berlin Declaration on Open Access to Knowledge in the Sciences and Humanities, major public funders from Germany and France committed to open access, along with some of the most important public funders from Greece, Hungary, Italy, and Norway.<sup>3</sup>

We saw independent support for open access by public research funders in Australia, Canada, Holland, India, and the U.K. The United States is conspicuously late for this party. The Sabo bill, introduced in 2003, shows some legislative interest in the U.S., but not yet enough for a national commitment and not yet sufficiently precise to promote OA without needlessly alienating other stakeholders and their friends in Congress.

2003 was also the year that the Public Library of Science became a publisher. It made a huge splash with the launch of *PLoS Biology*. The combination of exemplary research and exemplary PR made the launch an event to which science organizations of all kinds had to respond.

2003 was the year that objections to OA shifted from ignorant (OA bypasses peer review, OA violates copyright) to skeptical, from belligerent to curious, from dismissive to constructive. Scientists, journals, and organizations not yet committed to OA now make it clear that they appreciate and even desire the benefits of OA. But they ask whether the business model for OA journals is sustainable and whether it leaves anyone out. These are good questions, and fortunately the answers are amenable to empirical investigation. In that sense, the debate has finally shifted from ideology to science. Many independent researchers are gathering evidence, with the help of cooperative journals willing to share their business data. Many skeptics are on record as willing to examine the evidence. Even society publishers are joining the investigation, thanks in part to a public statement by the Association of Learned and Professional Society Publishers urging societies to experiment, not merely to await the experiments of others.<sup>4</sup>

This empirical turn in the debate about open access is a very positive development. It's exactly how important change ought to take place in science and scholarship. The only downside is that the growing interest in studying the track record of OA resources focuses one-sidedly on OA journals and overlooks or deemphasizes OA archives. Let's hope that this is

because the economic sustainability of OA archives is less open to doubt, and therefore less in need of investigation. It would be ironic and regrettable if this inexpensive, useful, and sustainable avenue to OA were neglected by users simply because it was neglected by skeptical investigators.

2003 was the year that the Lund University Libraries' *Directory of Open Access Journals* was launched,<sup>5</sup> an event that will appear more and more important as time goes on. Not only does it give us a quick and increasingly accurate measure of the number of peer-reviewed OA journals, but it helps scholars find OA journals in their fields. Authors who support OA need this information in order to know where to submit their work. Readers need this information to know what to monitor, where monitoring is easy. The *Directory of Open Access Journals* is providing a host of useful auxiliary services, including metadata records for library catalogs and (coming soon) full-text searching of participating journals. We need an equally comprehensive, up-to-date, and useful directory of open-access, OAI-compliant archives.

Two of the year's major open-access developments occurred in December. On December 10, the U.K. House of Commons Science and Technology Committee launched an inquiry into the prices and accessibility of scientific journals, including the question whether the government should support open-access journals. Committee Chairman Ian Gibson told *The Scientist*, "If research is funded by public money, then it should be available to the public for free."<sup>6</sup>

On December 10-12, The U.N. World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS)<sup>7</sup> met in Geneva and approved a Declaration of Principles and Plan of Action that contained explicit endorsements of open access to scientific information.

From the Declaration of Principles:

- We strive to promote universal access with equal opportunities for all to scientific knowledge and the creation and dissemination of scientific and technical information, including open access initiatives for scientific publishing.<sup>8</sup>

From the Plan of Action:

- Encourage initiatives to facilitate access, including free and affordable access to open access journals and books, and open archives for scientific information.<sup>9</sup>
- Promote electronic publishing, differential pricing and open access initiatives to make scientific information affordable and accessible in all countries on an equitable basis.<sup>10</sup>

The effort to write meaningful endorsements of open access into the final WSIS documents was led by the Scientific Information Working Group, which was in turn led by the indefatigable Francis Muguet of l'École Nationale Supérieure de Techniques Avancées in Paris, France. (Disclosure: I am on the steering committee for this working group.)<sup>11</sup>

For press coverage of the WSIS endorsement of open access, see the "New Bibliography" section of the *SPARC Open Access Newsletter*, no. 69.<sup>12</sup> Most of the news coverage on WSIS ignored the open access issue, and focused on bigger issues such as freedom of speech and the digital divide. David Dickson of SciDev.Net was an exception, filing a series of helpful reports on the discussion and evolving language of the open-access endorsement.

And finally, 2003 was also the year that exorbitant price increases and oppressive bundling requirements, especially at Elsevier, pushed major research libraries beyond anger to cancellation.<sup>13</sup> Yes, they are captive markets; yes, faculty demand for journals makes cancellation normally unthinkable; yes, they have swallowed intolerable price increases in the past. But it was clear that this couldn't last, and the dam finally broke. Three important financial analysts concluded that the commercial journal business model is not sustainable.<sup>14</sup> This was proved in practice at schools as diverse as Cornell and North Carolina State, which cancelled hundreds of Elsevier titles with strong faculty support. When the U.K. House of Commons Science and Technology committee announced an investigation of journal prices and accessibility, most observers immediately concluded that this would harm Elsevier. These developments are only indirectly relevant to open access, since OA progress depends on OA initiatives, not Elsevier setbacks. But as prices get worse and cancellations grow, the interest in OA as a solution also grows.

For more information about open access milestones, see the author's "Timeline of the Open Access Movement" <<http://www.earlham.edu/~peters/fos/timeline.htm>>. This essay was adapted by the editors with the author's permission from his opening article in the *SPARC Open Access Newsletter*, no. 69; see <<http://www.earlham.edu/~peters/fos/newsletter/01-02-04.htm>>. To subscribe, see <<http://www.arl.org/sparc/soa/>>.

## Open Access in the News

The December 15, 2003, issue of *The Scientist* lists the [top five science stories of 2003](#). Open access was one of them:

The Public Library of Science published the inaugural issue of *PLoS Biology* in October, and BioMed Central, an open-access publisher and a partner of *The Scientist*, received official U.K. funding support in June.

The December 18, 2003, issue of *Nature* highlights [five major science stories from 2003](#), including the rise of open access:

Will the scientific literature in future be dominated by journals that do not charge their readers? That is the goal of the "open-access" movement, which argues that the costs of publishing should be borne up front by those who fund research, rather than those who want to read about it. Open-access journals, which charge publication fees, have been proliferating over the past few years. October saw the launch of the most prominent, *Public Library of Science Biology*, which is competing for top biology papers with *Nature*, *Science*, and *Cell*.

The December 19, 2003, issue of *Science Magazine* lists [seven "breakthroughs of the year" and "areas to watch in 2004"](#). Open access is one of them:

Open sesame. Will 2004 be the year scientists open their hearts--and their wallets--to open-access scientific journals? A slew of publishers will launch experiments in which authors will pay publication charges and journals will make their papers freely accessible over the Internet. Advocates say that the author-pays approach will speed the flow of scientific information, but critics predict that the business model will be a flop, particularly outside the relatively flush biomedical sciences.

In the December 30, 2003, issue, the *Wall Street Journal* included open access among the top 10 health stories of 2003:

Why should Americans pay to see the results of research underwritten by their tax dollars, open-access proponents argue? Their aim instead is to make that information available free to everyone on the Internet. And in doing so, they threaten established journal publishers. Critical to making open access succeed is instilling it with the same kind of quality peer review found in hard-copy journals.

--Mark Ingelbrecht, "The Daily Scan," *Wall Street Journal*, December 30, 2003. (Online access only for subscribers.)

1. The Bethesda Statement is available on the Web <<http://www.earlham.edu/~peters/fos/bethesda.htm>>. [back to text](#)
2. Wellcome Trust, "Scientific Publishing: A Position Statement by the Wellcome Trust in Support of Open Access Publishing," <<http://www.wellcome.ac.uk/en/1/awtvispolpub.html>>. [back to text](#)
3. "Berlin Declaration on Open Access to Knowledge in the Sciences and Humanities," <<http://www.zim.mpg.de/openaccess-berlin/berlindeclaration.html>>. [back to text](#)
4. ALPSP position statement on open access, August 27, 2003, <<http://www.alpssp.org/news/openaccpositionstatementoct03.pdf>>. [back to text](#)
5. <<http://www.doaj.org/>>. [back to text](#)
6. See the U.K. House of Commons Science and Technology Committee's press release on its inquiry <[http://www.parliament.uk/parliamentary\\_committees/science\\_and\\_technology\\_committee/scitech111203a.cfm](http://www.parliament.uk/parliamentary_committees/science_and_technology_committee/scitech111203a.cfm)>. For press coverage of the inquiry, see the "New Bibliography" section of the *SPARC Open Access Newsletter*, no. 69 <<http://www.earlham.edu/~peters/fos/newsletter/01-02-04.htm#bibliography>>. [back to text](#)
7. For more information on the WSIS, see their Web site <<http://www.itu.int/wsisp/>> and past coverage of WSIS in the *SPARC Open Access Newsletter* and the Open Access News blog <<http://search.atomz.com/search/?sp-a=sp10021077&sp-f=ISO-8859-1&sp-q=wsisp>>. [back to text](#)
8. World Summit on the Information Society, "Declaration of Principles," December 12, 2003, paragraph 28, <[http://www.itu.int/wsisp/documents/doc\\_single-en-1161.asp](http://www.itu.int/wsisp/documents/doc_single-en-1161.asp)>. [back to text](#)
9. ---, "Plan of Action," December 12, 2003, paragraph C3.10.i, <[http://www.itu.int/wsisp/documents/doc\\_single-en-1160.asp](http://www.itu.int/wsisp/documents/doc_single-en-1160.asp)>. [back to text](#)
10. Ibid., paragraph C7.22.b. [back to text](#)
11. For more information on the working group, see <<http://www.wsis-si.org/si-frame.html>>. For some background on why open access may be mentioned in the final documents less prominently than hoped, and less prominently than it was in earlier drafts, see Francis Muguet's "Activity Report" of October 24, 2003, <<http://www.wsis-si.org/si>>

[prepcom3-report.html](#)>. [back to text](#)

12. <<http://www.earlham.edu/~peters/fos/newsletter/01-02-04.htm#bibliography>> [back to text](#)
13. For background on these cancellations, see Paula J. Hane, "The Latest Developments in Open Access, E-Books, and More," *Information Today* 21, no. 1 (January 2004), <<http://www.infotoday.com/IT/jan04/hane1.shtml>>. [back to text](#)
14. See Peter Suber, "Another Financial Analyst Acknowledges Promise of Open Access," *Open Access News*, December 20, 2003, <[http://www.earlham.edu/~peters/fos/2003\\_12\\_14\\_fosblogarchive.html#a107193671474221853](http://www.earlham.edu/~peters/fos/2003_12_14_fosblogarchive.html#a107193671474221853)>. [back to text](#)

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