

EASE-Forum Digest: March to June 2009

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Over the spring months participants on the forum valiantly tackled some old and not quite so old chestnuts: open access, the merits of name and numbering citation systems, and a suitable metric for scientific writing courses.

Do we know what open access is?

Marcin Kozak started a lively debate on open access (OA) by asking what "open access" includes. Many discussions assume that OA journals charge for publication, but some do not. What they all have in common is that they do not charge readers for access. Pippa Smart pointed out that OA journals also have in common that they allow republication of their content without permission so long as credit is given to the original authors. She provided a useful list of the usual publication funding models – an OA journal could be:

- run by scientists in their spare time, charging no-one, and covering any costs (eg web hosting) personally;
- supported by organisations, where the organisation funds the costs of employment of staff, editors, design, web-hosting, etc;
- supported by grant funding, eg *PLoS Medicine* is supported by funding from the Rockefeller Foundation and others;
- supported by publication fees (paid by the submitting authors, or their institutes), which is the funding model used by the publisher BioMed Central. Many publishers who use this model offer libraries/institutions a subscription, whereby if the institution pays the publisher an agreed annual fee; then any author from that institution will not be charged a publication fee.

Journals are often supported through a combination of the models.

Karen Shashok emphasized that it is important not to confuse a model of information dissemination (OA) with the funding model used to support it (manuscript fees, sponsorship, etc). However, Andrew Davis argued that because OA explicitly outlaws one funding model (payment by readers), OA and funding models have to be discussed together because how information is disseminated is inextricably tangled with how dissemination is funded.

Experts at his own institute, the Max Planck Society, believed that most scientific publication in the future will be paid for by the authors or their institutes and alternative funding models will not be important. His concern was that this funding model puts yet another obstacle in the way of poor authors, a point taken up by Marge Berer, who feared that OA will exacerbate the inequity between authors in the developing and developed world, although she agreed costs are less if a journal is web-only.

Reme Melero pointed out that OA not only relates to journals but includes access to other scientific outputs such as theses, data sets, lectures, etc. She recommended that anyone who is confused by OA should read "A field guide to misunderstandings about open access" by Peter Suber (<http://www.earlham.edu/~peters/fos/newsletter/04-02-09.htm>).

Organisations supporting OA would not necessarily recommend publishing in "pay to publish" OA journals. Indeed Reme noted that the MPS homepage of the Max Planck Society strongly encouraged institutional or discipline-specific self-archiving (green OA) of research publications – meaning uploading the peer-reviewed version of the manuscript on a publicly accessible server, such as eDoc (institutional) or arXiv.org (specific for physics and partly computer science and mathematics). The RoMEO Study had found that half of journal publishers are allowing self-archiving of either a preprint (article before it is refereed) or postprint version (article after review and publication in the journal).¹

Reme explained that self-archiving should not be misconceived as self-publishing. Self-archiving is about making available, online, research output that has undergone (or will undergo) the necessary peer-review and editorial quality control process by journals. Nevertheless, eDoc also provides a quality control mechanism on the institute level.

Andrew argued, however, that even self-archiving of quality assured "published" items required authors, or their organisations, to be wealthy enough to pay for the service and to keep it stable and accessible. Some of his Central American and Ukrainian colleagues could not rely on stable local area networks, and downloading a pdf from a remote repository could take 30 minutes – provided the electricity connection stayed that long. Reme agreed, but some experiences in Africa and Asia revealed that the green route of repositories is a way for these researchers to increase visibility of their own works.

Sylwia Ufnalska's solution for developing countries was for the costs to be covered by some grants from the state or charitable foundations. She accepted that many authors from these countries lack computer skills and can't understand English but this didn't mean that OA is a bad idea. Charitable foundations can also be powerful, she added. Hardly anybody imagined a few years ago that Wikipedia would be possible. Françoise Salager-Meyer suggested that, as an alternative to an institutional repository, papers could be posted on a personal website,

which required no special skills. Françoise drew attention to a recently released student statement on the Right to Research which calls for universities to adopt OA, adding students' voices to those of faculty and librarians in support of OA mandates: www.righttoresearch.org. She also provided a statement from Stevan Harnard about the green OA self-archiving mandates that have been adopted and proposed – for example, one has been proposed for the European University Association (791 universities in 46 countries).

I noted that institutions hold copyright to documents that researchers produce in the course of their employment. Institutions traditionally relinquish copyright but in future they could use this potential. A recent article contends that current institutional repository solutions have failed to deliver and proposes a more robust repository infrastructure based on macroscopic academic settings. The proposal would better support the funders' mandates (<http://ssrn.com/abstract=1425692>). Another recent report that compared the costs and benefits of subscription publishing, OA publishing, and self-archiving in the UK, the Netherlands, and Denmark showed that generally applied OA would be the most cost-effective mechanism of scholarly publishing. OA applied globally would also allow increased access to research results for researchers and the general public. The report found that the best model for financing OA would be for the party financing the study to pay for publication, which would lead to savings (in millions of euro) of 70 in Denmark, 133 in the Netherlands, and 480 in the UK (<http://www.knowledge-exchange.info/Default.aspx?ID=316>).

Finally, James Hartley thought forum colleagues might be interested in a recent case (<http://www.the-scientist.com/blog/display/55759/>) in which a fake paper was accepted for publication by an OA journal, after it had supposedly been peer reviewed, pending receipt of \$800 author fees (see p 67 in this issue). What should not be overlooked in this story is that one of the authors of the fake paper was the executive director of international business and product development at the *New England Journal of Medicine*.

References: names vs numbers

A request by Mary Ellen Kerans for an example of a journal that listed authors alphabetically in the reference list but used numbers in the text (so that the first reference in the Introduction is unlikely to be 1 unless the first author's name began with A) led to a discussion about the merits of citing references by number versus citing the author's name, and possibly date of the publication, in the text. Mary Ellen commented that as an applied linguist she knew that readers get used to whatever they handle every day. This means that if people do not like a particular style it could well be that this was because they were not used to it.

The pro-number argument was that it's easier for readers to skim past numbers in the text than a string of names in parentheses, especially if many citations are given together. The disadvantages, as pointed out by James Hartley, are that numbers do not convey the date of the publication and therefore how recent it is, and by Norman Grossblatt, that

readers immediately know who did the work. Adding to this, Will Hughes' preference for names was that he could recognise immediately if he knew the work, and an author-year combination becomes part of the fabric of the text and familiar when repeated in the text. Will was keen to impress on authors that they should explain what the cited researchers had done to reach their conclusions, rather than peppering the text with arbitrary citations without making a specific connection to the construction of their own argument.

From the author's viewpoint, getting the numbers in the correct sequence in the text and list when adding or deleting one, especially in a proof, is arduous and easily results in errors. To overcome this Norman suggested leaving the name-date in the text until the final draft and only then numbering the references and replacing the name-date with the number in the text.

It seems from James' comments that the name-date system is common in the social sciences, whereas Norman pointed out that numbers are more common in life sciences, possibly because they save space. Diana Epstein found listing references alphabetically outdated. She manages a European-based journal in ophthalmology that had used the system for 175 years before, following a three-year debate by the editorial board, it changed to the number system in 2006.

Norman gave the URL of a site that contains instructions to authors for about 3500 journals in the health sciences: <http://mulford.meduohio.edu/instr/index.html>.

How effective are courses in scientific writing?

This million dollar question was posed by Ed Hull, eager to know how he should formulate a questionnaire to establish if the courses he gave helped participants write more efficiently and resulted in more publications and citations. Andrew Davis tussled with the enormity of such a task: comparison of un-self-selected matched groups who had and had not followed the course, defining "publication", and attributing a value to different publications. He also considered that even if immediate positive effects could be assessed, courses should be seen as reaping benefits over a lifetime. In his experience only about 10% of students followed up with thanks. These would likely be the successful ones, and they might have been successful anyway. Andrew concluded that a questionnaire a year or so after the course would be interesting but not much more informative than simply asking "did you find my course useful?"

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¹ <http://www.lboro.ac.uk/departments/dils/disresearch/romeo/index.html>. Up to date information on publishers' policies is available at <http://www.sherpa.ac.uk/romeo.php>.