Improving Access to Research

UNLESS YOU SIT ON YOUR INSTITUTION’S LIBRARY ADVISORY COMMITTEE, A PROFESSIONAL SOCIETY’S publications committee, or a journal editorial board, you may have paid only passing attention to the debate over public access to scientific research, which has been swirling through these communities ever since science journals started publishing online 15 years ago. That is about to change. Last week, the U.S. House Science and Technology Committee’s Roundtable on Scholarly Publishing (on which we served along with 10 others) released a report* arguing that journal articles derived from federal research funding should be made publicly available as quickly as practicable—generally in a year or less after publication—and in ways that will improve scholarship by maximizing the scope for interoperability across articles, among disciplines, and internationally.

Currently, there is no consistency regarding which version of an article is freely available. In contrast, the roundtable’s report recommends that access policies aim toward making the “Version of Record” (the final version of an article in its published form) publicly available. And the report also asserts that any successful scheme for public access must provide methods for permanent public access.

The scholarly communications enterprise resembles a global ecosystem, comprising a complex interdependent web of relationships. This enterprise is subject to a remarkable pace of change in its underpinning technologies, so that the notion of what constitutes an article, how it is structured, and where and how it is read continues to evolve very rapidly, in the same sort of way as your 2-year-old cell phone no longer quite meets your needs. The report therefore eschews prescriptive solutions to achieve public access, and it favors no particular business model. Instead, it focuses on principles to guide federal policy and practice going forward, in particular the critical role of peer review, the need for continued engagement among stakeholders, and the importance of fostering innovation.

Most notably, to replace the recent heated discourse marked by anger and ideological hard lines, the report recommends a collaborative, nuanced, and flexible approach, believing that this will effectively and quickly achieve the goals of still broader access to a greater scope of scholarly literature. This is a centrist perspective, perhaps, but one that is progressive and reflective of what we see as an increasing convergence among the range of views regarding public access.

So how will the goals of broader access and richer scholarship actually be achieved? The report calls for each U.S. funding agency to develop public access policies that make the best sense in each particular academic niche. Thus, for instance, an agency might choose to work with its stakeholder communities to provide robust public access to journal articles on publisher Web sites, rather than constructing and paying for a centrally operated repository. The report envisions a coordinating and guiding role for the U.S. Office of Science and Technology Policy, through the establishment of an advisory group including researchers, publishers, librarians, university administrators, and the public. It also calls for the development of technological standards that would allow researchers and others to search across distributed networks of information sources, thereby facilitating discovery and the generation of new knowledge.

What next? Clearly the progress of scholarship and electronic publishing and their extraordinary scientific and social benefits will require continuing adaptations by professional societies, libraries, funding agencies, governmental entities representing the public interest, and others. Despite the fact that 2 of our 14 committee members were unable to endorse the report in its entirety,* we are optimistic that broad middle grounds in the respective stakeholder communities will recognize the wisdom of the roundtable’s recommendations, and that the process of engagement through which they were developed represents a sensible and workable path toward an increasingly unfettered and useful body of knowledge.


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