

# OPEN ACCESS AND THE UK SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY SELECT COMMITTEE REPORT

## FREE FOR ALL?

CHARLES OPPENHEIM

This guest editorial considers the arguments for and against open access publishing, based around the UK House of Commons Select Committee for Science and Technology's recent report *Free for All?* and the UK Government's response to the Report. The advantages of open access and the two different types of open access (open access journals and repositories) are described. Some of the potential problems with open access, such as the lack of a clear business model for open access journals, are also outlined. The author concludes that whilst open access is not a panacea and will not replace traditional scholarly publishing business models, it is here to stay and that authors, publishers readers and librarians will have to get used to the concept.

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### INTRODUCTION

It's not often that there is a BBC Radio documentary on a topic of direct professional interest to library and information professionals, but that happened in the run up to Christmas 2004, when Radio 4 ran a 45 minute long programme entitled *Publish and be damned*. This was an examination of the pros and cons of open access, and was triggered by a UK parliamentary Select Committee report on the topic, which had been followed by an official UK Government response to the issues raised in that report.

Ever since the very first true scholarly journals were started in the mid-1600s, academic authors have striven to publish and thereby disseminate the results of their work, for two main reasons.

The first of these is a noble reason: to advance intellectual progress in their subject; the second is less noble, but is as strong if not stronger: to establish rights over any intellectual advances they may themselves have brought about – in other words, to establish priority and the association of their name with that advance. Neither of these two imperatives has changed in the past 350 years, but there is considerable argument these days about how well they are served by the present system of scholarly communication.

With well over 20,000 peer-reviewed scholarly journals in existence, no academic library can come anywhere near stocking all the titles appropriate to the needs of the research staff in its institution. Individual scholars cannot therefore get access to some of the literature that is pertinent to their work. To exacerbate this problem, over the last two decades, the so-called 'serials crisis' has become more and more acute. Journal prices have risen faster than both the rate of inflation and increases in library budgets, resulting in the cancellation of subscriptions to journals.

An important new development is the 'Big Deal', whereby a publisher's journal list is offered to a library at a package price that is a bit higher than the library had originally been paying but the deal includes journals that had not

