

## **Focus: Open Access**

# **Focus: Scholarly Publishing and Open Access**

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### **Introduction**

In the last two decades information technology has radically changed social communication patterns and information behaviour. A new generation is growing up in a new information landscape with no experience of life without the world wide web. The digital transition is also changing scholarly communication, but it is not yet clear how fundamental these changes are or will be in the future. Players in the scholarly publishing cycle are rethinking their role because they are aware of the challenges and threats that are involved in the digital transition. For this Focus, representatives of four main players have been invited to present their views on current and future developments: Michael Mabe (publishers), Dieter Imboden (research funding organisations), Robert Aymar (community of researchers) and Paul Ayris (libraries).

The most recent and radical change in scholarly publishing is the Open Access approach: making (scholarly) information available through the internet to everybody free of charge. Open Access stands for a philosophy, with often passionate advocates, as well as for a set of business models. The introduction and development of the Open Access model cannot be understood properly without knowledge of the history and development of scholarly communication from the introduction of the first scientific journal in 1665. At the end of the 20th century the system began to show a few cracks. The amount of information increased dramatically. The creation of new disciplines gave rise to more journals and more articles, the number of researchers was growing, and researchers had to publish more and more information to maintain their carrier prospects ('publish or perish'). The costs of journals rose beyond the growth of library budgets. As a

consequence, libraries had to cancel subscriptions, which made journals even more expensive. Librarians faced a 'serials crisis'.

The amount of digital content is still increasing. Publishers offer new information products: digitised text material and images, back-files of their journals and e-books. These products offer new opportunities for study and research, but they are not for free. Libraries have concluded consortia deals with a few very large publishers (mostly five-year contracts for comprehensive information packages with an annual price cap of 5%), which increased the availability of journals to the users for a reduced price, but also made library budgets less flexible.

The digital transition has already had a major impact on scholarly publishing. New instruments and tools are available and also the form of communication has changed with the provision of e-journals, e-books, e-theses etc. The supporters of the Open Access model promise even more improvements: not only wider and faster access, but also less cost.

In this Focus, the authors analyse the current situation from their own perspective, give successful examples of Open Access, but also consider the problems and barriers. Whether and how Open Access will affect the fundamentals of scholarly publishing will depend on how the main players are willing and able to accept a change of their role in the publishing process and on the strategic commitment of the wider research community.

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