

WHAT IS OPEN ACCESS?

By Sanford G. Thatcher

The simplest answer is that open access (OA) is a method of electronic publishing that allows anyone with an internet connection to gain access to an entire published work online at no cost to the user.

While this access may cost nothing, it does not necessarily come entirely free of all encumbrances. If the published work is protected by copyright, what the user may do with it—besides reading it—may be restricted in a number of ways corresponding to the exclusive rights that copyright provides to the owner. For example, the user may not prepare a derivative work or include substantial portions in a work the user creates if doing so cannot be justified as “fair use.” OA thus restricted is termed “gratis,” signaling that no financial cost to the user is involved but that various reuses require permission from the copyright owner.

OA that removes one or more of these additional legal impediments beyond the economic cost to the user is called “libre.” OA is libre if some reuse can be made that cannot be justified as fair use alone and would otherwise require getting permission from the copyright owner. (For more on the gratis/libre distinction, see www.earlham.edu/~peters/fos/newsletter/08-02-08.htm#gratis-libre).

Green and Gold OA

OA comes in two main varieties known as Green and Gold. Green OA refers to authors making their works available through either institutional or personal websites. An institutional site may be a university’s general or library-run website or a professional society’s disciplinary-specific website.

Authors using such sites may post their works in any number of different forms, from early drafts to the final versions as published. Early drafts are often called “pre-prints.” Versions that have been peer reviewed and revised, but not yet subjected to a publisher’s processing involving formatting and copyediting, are sometimes called “post-prints.” The versions as published are termed variously as “versions of record” or “archival versions.” These versions and “post-prints” are both frequently described as “final” versions, which can lead to confusion.

In an effort to bring more clarity to this terminology, the National Information Standards Organization (NISO) in cooperation with the Association of Learned and Professional Society Publishers (ALPSP) recently issued a white paper titled “Journal Article Versions” recommending standardized language according to the following categories: Author’s Original; Submitted Manuscript Under Review; Accepted Manuscript; Proof; Version of Record; Corrected Version of Record; Enhanced Version of Record. The white paper is at www.niso.org/publications/rp.

Gold OA

Gold OA refers to publisher-provided OA, regardless of whatever business model a publisher may use to support OA. By arrangement with the author, sometimes requiring payment of a fee either directly or indirectly by the author to the publisher, a publisher makes a work available online at no cost to any user. If it is an article in a journal, the entire journal may be OA or else just the individual article. The latter is known as “hybrid” Gold OA publishing where only certain articles are made freely accessible in this fashion.

For Gold OA, of course, only versions of record are provided. In contrast, Green OA encompasses the full range of versions identified by the NISO standards. Most often Green OA takes the form of the “Accepted Manuscript” because most publishers not using a Gold OA approach are wary of having the “Version of Record” posted by the author as this, if practiced by too many authors, might interfere with the market for subscriptions, which is known as “toll access” (TA) to contrast this model with OA. Many publishers’ policies on what authors may post are described in a database named SHERPA/RoMEO at www.sherpa.ac.uk/romeo.

Among the leading Gold OA publishers are the Public Library of Science (PLoS), BioMed Central, BioOne, and Hindawi. Oxford University Press has experimented with both full Gold OA and hybrid Gold OA. Not all publisher-provided OA is dependent on external funding, however, whether from authors, foundations, government, or other sources. Over the past decade many new journals have been founded to do OA publishing, and some of them are funded in such a way as to require no payments outside the institution sponsoring the journal at all. The Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ) listed 5,452 OA journals as of September 2010 and reportedly is adding new journals at the rate of three per day. See www.doaj.org. In addition to these OA journals, much publishing is now done more informally through OA institutional repositories (IRs). The Registry of Open Access Repositories (ROAR) provides up-to-date information about the growth of IRs that support OA. For a summary of business models currently in use in OA publishing, see http://oad.simmons.edu/oadwiki/OA_journal_business_models.

Green OA

Green OA publishing may be either gratis or libre. Because many authors are mainly concerned about maximizing distribution of their published research and do not think much about how it might be used by others, few bother to grant libre access. Even if they gave more thought to it, they would likely have trouble getting the permission from publishers necessary to have their works provided OA by an institutional repository. The success of Creative Commons (CC) in promoting the use of licenses that decrease the necessity for direct permissions is gradually moving more OA away from gratis toward libre, though full libre OA (which would be equivalent to dedicating a work to the public domain) is still rare.

Many CC licenses insist on attribution, and one of the popular CC licenses used by academics reserves to authors the right for “commercial” uses—though the definition of what constitutes “commercial” is subject to ambiguity.

Gold OA is largely gratis, not libre, as publishers desire to maintain control over subsidiary rights.

OA Advocates

Historically, OA has become an attractive alternative primarily in the arena of scientific, technical, and medical (STM) journal publishing. In STM publishing, the costs of the TA subscription model have had the greatest impact upon library budgets. It has forced them to allocate an ever larger percentage of their funds for materials acquisitions to STM journals with consequent negative results for purchases of other types of materials—scholarly monographs being among the most seriously affected. Not surprisingly, academic librarians and their associations in the U.S. and throughout the world have been leaders in the movement for change, with OA coming to the fore as the most prominent alternative.

The Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources Consortium (SPARC), which has branches both in the U.S. and Europe, was established specifically to encourage the development of nonprofit journals as an alternative to commercially published TA journals, and it has been a leading advocate of OA. It sponsors what is probably the single most useful source of ongoing information about OA developments, the monthly newsletter prepared by Peter Suber. For information about SPARC and this newsletter, see www.arl.org/sparc.

Outside the U.S.

Politically, the forces advocating OA have had more success in foreign countries than in the U.S., but a major breakthrough came with the legislation in 2007 mandating deposit of every “Accepted Manuscript” reporting research funded by the National Institutes of Health in its PubMed Central website within twelve months after publication: www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/about/intro.html. A new bill known as the Federal Research Public Access Act (FRPAA) is now under consideration in the U.S. Congress to extend mandatory deposit to every federal government agency with a research budget exceeding \$100 million (which would include the National Science Foundation (NSF) but not the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH)) and limit the embargo period to six months.

Various public statements have been made about OA beginning with the Budapest Open Access Initiative in February 2002, followed by the Bethesda Statement on Open Access Publishing in June 2003 and the Berlin Declaration on Open Access to Knowledge in the Sciences and the Humanities in October 2003. Corresponding to the historical origins of the OA movement, these have focused on journal publishing and mainly on STM publishing.

Monograph Publishing

Only recently has attention begun to be paid to OA for monograph publishing. One early advocate of this expanded focus was the Association of American University Presses, which addressed the issue of monographs in its Statement on Open Access in February 2007: www.aaupnet.org/aboutup/issues/oa/statement.pdf. It has been university presses that have been at the forefront of OA monograph publishing ever since the National Academies Press took the pioneering step of posting all of its books online beginning in the mid-1990s. Other American university presses including California, Michigan, Penn State, and the now defunct Rice have experimented with different models; in Canada the way has been led by the University of Athabasca Press; and in Europe a consortium of university presses under the umbrella of Open Access Publishing in European Networks (OAPEN) has been making significant strides. Even some commercial publishers are beginning to experiment, notably Frances Pinter at Bloomsbury Academic in England.

Funding Models

Key to the success of Gold OA publishing long term is finding a funding model that will be sustainable. Various approaches are being tried. The magnificent Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, supported initially by foundation grants, is aiming to create a permanent endowment. Many publishers ask authors of accepted articles to pay fees, which can range from a few hundred dollars to several thousand. (Many will also grant hardship waivers to authors, especially from underdeveloped countries.)

Some publishers of hybrid journals grant authors at universities whose libraries subscribe to these journals the privilege of publishing their articles OA, with some restricting how many authors can avail themselves of this privilege in any given year. Foundations like the Wellcome Trust in medicine include coverage of OA fees in their grants to authors for research. A number of universities have begun creating funds for their faculty to draw upon in paying OA fees, and a coalition of several have formed as the Compact for Open-Access Publishing Equity.

Some leading advocates of Green OA such as Stevan Harnad believe these efforts to be misguided, viewing them as an impediment to the rapid spread of OA that they think can best be achieved through author self-archiving. Others worry about the proliferation of the “Accepted Manuscript” rather than the “Version of Record” and the damage this may do to the integrity and authority of scholarly publishing. So far, most of the experiments in funding have focused on STM journal publishing, though there are experiments under way in most every field now. (The American Folklore Society has one of the most comprehensive experiments under way now in cooperation with Indiana University’s library: www.afsnet.org/?page=OpenFolklore&hhSearchTerms=open+and+access.)

OA monograph publishing has relied mainly on the revenues generated by the sale of print-on-demand or PDF versions. Thus it is still exposed to the vagaries of the marketplace, whereas OA journal publishing is held hostage to the vagaries of university and foundation funding. The reliance on an endowment seems the safest approach of all, but the effort to create an endowment is also probably the most challenging among the alternatives so far tried.

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