

# Editorial Board Thoughts: Is Open Access the Answer?

Cynthia Porter

In the new LITA strategic plan, members have suggested an objective for open access (OA) in scholarly communications. Some people describe OA as articles the author has to pay someone to publish. That can be true, but that's not how I think of it. OA is definitely not vanity publishing. Most OA journals are peer-reviewed. I like the definition provided by EnablingOpenScholarship:

Open Access is the immediate (upon or before publication), online, free availability of research outputs without any of the restrictions on use commonly imposed by publisher copyright agreements.<sup>1</sup>

My focus on OA journals increased precipitously when the licensing for a popular American weekly medical journal changed. We could only access online articles from one on-campus computer unless we increased our annual subscription payment by 500 percent. We didn't have the funds, and now the students suffer the consequences. I think it was an unfortunate decision the journal's publishers made. I know from experience that if a student can't access the first article they want, they will find another one that is available. Interlibrary loan is simpler than ever, but I think only the patient and curious students will make the effort to contact us and request an article they cannot obtain.

In 2006 scientist Gary Ward wrote that faculty at many institutions experience problems accessing current research. When faculty teach "what is available to them rather than what their students most need to know, the education of these students and the future of science in the U.S. will suffer." He explains it is a false assumption that those who need access to scientific literature already have it.

Interlibrary loans or pay-per-view are often offered by publishers as the solution to the access problem, but this misses an essential fact of how we use the scientific literature: We browse. It is often impossible to tell from looking at an abstract whether a paper contains needed methodological detail or the perfect illustration to make a point to one's students. Apart from considerations of cost, time, and quality, interlibrary loans and pay-per-views simply do not meet the needs of those of us who often do not know what we're looking for until we find it.<sup>2</sup>

I want our medical students and tomorrow's doctors to have access to all of the most current medical research. We offer the service of providing *JAMA* articles to students, but

I'm guessing that we hear from a small percentage of the students who can't access the full text online.

Are people reading OA articles? Not only are scholars reading the articles, but they are citing those articles in their publications. Consider the Public Library of Science's *PLoSOne* (<http://www.plosone.org/home.action>), a peer-reviewed, open-access, online publication that features reports on primary research from all disciplines within science and medicine. In June 2010, *PLoS ONE* received its first impact factor of 4.351—an impressive number. That impact factor puts *PLoS ONE* in the top 25 percent of the Institute for Scientific Information's (ISI) biology category.<sup>3</sup> The impact factor is calculated annually by ISI and represents the average number of citations received per paper published in that journal during the two preceding years.<sup>4</sup> In other words, articles from *PLoS ONE* published in 2008 and 2009 were highly cited.

Is OA making an impact in my medical library? I believe it is, although I won't be happy until our students can access the online journals they want from off campus and the library won't have to pay outrageous licensing fees. We have more than one thousand online OA journal titles in our list of online journals. The more full text they can access, the less they'll have to settle for their second or third choice because their first choice is not available online.

I'm glad that LITA members included OA in their strategic plan. The number of OA journals is increasing, and I believe we will continue to see that the articles are reaching readers and making a difference. I don't think *ITAL* will be adopting the "author pays" model of OA, but the editorial board is dedicated to providing LITA members with the access they want.

## References

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