Open Access *now*

Campaigning for freedom of research information

November 17, 2003
Editor: Jonathan Weitzman

Editorial

Boycott highlights Open Access alternatives

October was quite a remarkable month for the Open Access movement. The Public Library of Science (PLoS) became a fully fledged publisher with the launch of its flagship journal *PLoS Biology*. The Wellcome Trust and the Max Planck Society expressed the increasingly firm commitment of European funding agencies to supporting Open Access publishing. And a group of US academics called for a boycott of Cell Press.

Two researchers from the University of California's San Francisco campus, Peter Walter and Keith Yamamoto, circulated a letter asking colleagues to boycott the prestigious Cell Press journals, to protest about the high prices Cell Press is charging for electronic site licenses. Although site licences initially offered university libraries a way to deal with offering campus-wide access, they represent a financial trap as the libraries are then locked into a system that can be milked by the publisher.

This is not the first time that scientists have circulated a boycott letter about publishing. Many will remember signing the PLoS petition that asked researchers to boycott any journal that did not provide rapid free access to research papers. The PLoS boycott didn't achieve its intended effect or drastically change publishers' minds, leading PLoS to decide to become an Open Access publisher itself.

While many researchers were happy to sign a letter supporting the PLoS boycott, they still needed to publish their work and to receive the 'career credit' that prestigious journals can bring. But the Open Access landscape is quite different now from how it was then and there are many more alternatives. Furthermore, there are now two 'top tier' Open Access journals, *Journal of Biology* (published by BioMed Central) and *PLoS Biology*, which are vying to provide Open Access to the very best work and both of which provide a real alternative to the Cell Press titles. And there is now a range of other Open Access journals for more specialized articles.

What is important is not how many people sign a boycott letter, or even how many refuse to serve as referees for Cell Press. The most decisive act of protest is to switch to publishing in Open Access journals.

Conversation with Beverlee French about the challenges facing university libraries
See inside...

News

European institutions support Open Access with the 'Berlin Declaration'

President of the Max Planck Society Professor Peter Gruss

German funding bodies gave a major boost to Open Access publishing by signing a document, 'The Berlin Declaration on Open Access to Knowledge in the Sciences and Humanities', that recognizes the importance of access to scholarly information and promises to support the transition to Open Access publishing models. The Berlin Declaration emerged from a meeting, held 20-22 October 2003, about access to electronic information hosted by Germany's Max Planck Society for the Advancement of Science. The declaration states that "establishing Open Access as a worthwhile procedure ideally requires the active commitment of each and every individual producer of scientific knowledge and holder of cultural heritage."

"The funding bodies realize that part of the research process includes dissemination of research results," says David Prosser, Director of SPARC Europe (see *Open Access Now*, August 25, 2003), "and they believe that their mission is only half fulfilled if research is not made widely and readily available to society at large." The declaration is along the same lines as the 'Bethesda Statement on Open Access Publishing' that was circulated following a meeting of academics and publishers earlier in the year at the headquarters of the Howard Hughes Medical Institute (see *Open Access Now*, July 14, 2003). The UK biomedical charity The Wellcome Trust also recently publicised its commitment to Open Access (see *Open Access Now*, November 3, 2003).

"We must build on these statements… by explaining to our researchers what this means for them and the impact on their research, and also by lobbying other funding bodies to persuade them to follow this lead," says Prosser.

The Berlin Declaration makes a clear commitment to encouraging European researchers to change their publishing habits: "Our organizations are interested in the further promotion of the new Open Access paradigm to gain the most benefit for science and society. Therefore, we intend to make progress by encouraging our researchers/grant recipients to publish their work according to the principles of the Open Access paradigm."

Prosser noted three important points to emerge from the meeting. First, the funding bodies expressed a desire to explore reward structures that take into account the method of dissemination, rather than just journal impact factors. Second, the funding bodies recognized the importance of self-archiving and intend to set up their own repositories or encourage researchers to deposit in institutional repositories. And third, there was an understanding that funding institutions would have to provide grant money to cover the author charges associated with Open Access.

Robert Schlögl, of the Fritz Haber Institute, said that the Max Planck Society has put aside a substantial budget to help cover the costs of the transition from current practices, and he estimated that the transition period may be up to 5 years. Peter Gruss, President of the Max Planck Society, emphasized that the funding bodies see the Declaration as a beginning, not an end it itself.

The directors of the two major French funding agencies, Institut National de la Santé et de la Recherche Médicale (INSERM) and Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS), have since added their signatures to the Berlin Declaration. A second meeting is likely to follow shortly, to establish the practical details of how the European funding institutions will coordinate actively to support Open Access.

www.zim.mpg.de/openaccess-berlin

A crisis on campus

Librarians have been concerned for decades about the rising costs of academic publications, sometimes referred to as the 'serials pricing crisis'. Scholarly journal prices have been rising faster than inflation, and faster than library budgets, for more than thirty years. The transition to electronic access should have brought relief for librarians – but instead they are now embroiled in lengthy negotiations with publishers who are demanding high prices for electronic site licenses. *Open Access Now* talked to Beverlee French about her challenging job as the Director for Shared Digital Collections at the California Digital Library.

The California Digital Library (CDL) is a collaborative effort of the ten campuses of the University of California (UC). Drawing upon expertise from across the UC system, it selects, develops, and manages systems for the use and preservation of high-quality digital content. The CDL also works together with California's other libraries, archives, museums, and diverse 'memory organizations' to provide access to the cultural and historical resources of California.

"One of the basic goals when we started the CDL was enhancing resource sharing by system-wide licensing," says French. "We also set one of our goals to be influencing the market place. I think we have been successful in many ways." The library has handled the UC transition from print to electronic library services, and it has put pressure on publishers to replicate online all editorial material that was available in print. "We also insisted that we should have perpetual rights to online material so we don't purchase the same content over and over again," adds French.

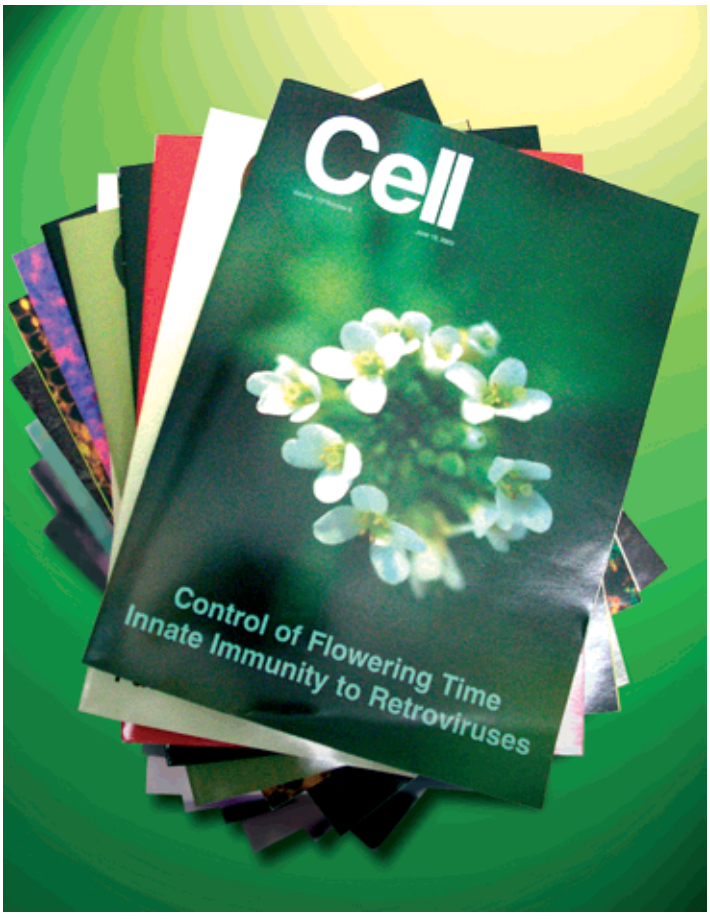
Librarians as negotiators

"As a representative of all the UC campuses, I have been involved in negotiating with publishers for system-wide access to titles for the entire UC system," says French, emphasizing that the problem of unsustainable journal price increases and growing bodies of knowledge is not new to university librarians. "The subscription costs have always exceeded budget increases. The old way of dealing with the problem was that each library trimmed around the edges and dropped titles where it felt it could."

"In the mid to late 1990s the publishers had experienced many cancellations, from our institution and others, and they were beginning to launch electronic versions of their journals." This required new methods for acquiring and providing access. "At UC we are lucky to have a single system with a long history of library cooperation," explains French. "We were successful in the short term to transition our methods of resource-sharing activities – from the old way which was making photocopies and sending them in the mail on request, to striking agreements with publishers under which we would share the titles we held amongst us all by taking electronic subscriptions."

In this way, university libraries were able to give the publishers stability for several years in exchange for some price-increase caps. "This gave us a deal that was better than the rate at which they were increasing subscription prices," notes French. But she points out that the increases were still two or three times the rises in the Consumer Price Index (CPI) and inflation.

"This has been a fairly mutually happy situation for several years," says French. "Publishers have had some stability and have been able to invest in their online systems. But we are coming to the end of some of these negotiated contracts at a bad time in terms of our budget." The CDL had hoped to partner with some commercial publishers to work together on developing print and digital archiving strategies. But instead it is finding that the deals that it struck with publishers have actually created greater inflexibility in the way tight budgets have to be managed.



"There is a pressing need to control costs, but you can't really cut costs the old way, which was that each campus dropped a few titles," notes French.

> Faculty are more engaged in the library issues and recognize the inter-relationship between them and their editorial and authorial activities

"The inflexibility that comes from having so much money tied up in some of these publisher packages means that the only way to stay within budget is to renegotiate the terms of the package. One has a lot more leverage before signing the online contract than after: once online, the convenience is so seductive that it's very difficult to turn something off – especially if it is high-use, important material."

Engaging the faculty

The UC library system prides itself on how it has managed to engage the UC faculty in the decision-making and review of library content. "Our faculty have started to ask questions – they want to know what's going on," says French. "They are very involved in the business and the administration of the University because it directly affects their research and teaching. They have been asking in San Francisco 'Why don't we have online access to Cell Press?' for a long time – and for a long time we have said that the cost is several times what we are paying in print and we don't have the funds to pay for that."

French is referring to failed negotiations between the UC libraries and Cell Press, an imprint of the global publishing giant Elsevier (see Box). "We started talking to Cell Press in

1998," she recalls. "We were given quotes for the price of our online access that were based on the numbers of individual subscriptions expected to be lost within the entire region if we had system-wide online access." The librarians were disturbed by the lack of an objective pricing structure and felt that the quotes they were given were too high and without sufficient openness and explanation.

French is keen to emphasize that the UC libraries have maintained their print subscriptions to Cell Press titles, with multiple copies on some campuses if required. The UC campuses currently spend some US$30,000 on print subscriptions to Cell Press journals. "We used to feel that institutional pricing was quite reasonable. And individual pricing was quite reasonable too, such that there were a lot of individual subscriptions."

French is unclear how the deadlock in the negotiations will end. "We take our lead from the faculty," she says. "And I think that it's very interesting that our faculty have become more engaged in the library issues and recognize the interrelationship between them and their editorial and authorial activities. I have heard people saying 'We can edit and publish our papers in other top journals.' This is the first time that I have seen faculty become so engaged in the overall issue of scholarly communication."

French thinks university faculty are tired of the way things work and tired of constantly telling the librarians which titles to cut. "I have done many serials cancellation projects in my career, where you show each title with its list price. But we are no longer dealing with list prices of individual journals but with publishers' packages. When faculty hear the total amount that we pay to some of these publishers there is shock and awe."

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She notes a number of factors that have contributed to the heightened cooperation between librarians and faculty. "First, e-mail and the internet make it easier to communicate with faculty nowadays. Our libraries are trying to put some of our human resources into promoting alternatives for the faculty – we think we have to play every game there is. The CDL has established an electronic repository for working papers and preprints, as well as an eScholarship platform and software. We have also launched our own Open Access journals."

"The UC libraries have funded institutional membership to BioMed Central and we have tried to advertise and promote it as an alternative publishing outlet, and we will also try to promote the Public Library of Science," says French. "We are developing shared cataloguing of all the Open Access journals, and journal-article index linking mechanisms. And we are also planning more discussions with faculty – such as a future forum focusing on scholarly communication – to try to get more ideas from academics about what sort of support they need." She adds that the library is keen to help departments that wish to incorporate Open Access publishing as a criterion in the evaluation of candidates for recruitment and tenure. She says that faculty have asked for information – such as costs and usage statistics – from the library that will help modify faculty behavior.

Finding solutions for the 'scholarly communication crisis' is clearly top of the agenda for French and her colleagues at the CDL. They have shown how librarians and faculty can work together to develop the most useful resources for sharing and accessing information. "We are really trying to help faculty in their teaching and research. But I think that we could still do more."

www.cdlib.org

UCSF faculty call for a boycott of Cell Press

Two senior scientists at the University of California San Francisco (UCSF) have appealed to colleagues to boycott all journals published by Cell Press, to protest against the prices of electronic access. Peter Walter and Keith Yamamoto wrote a letter to UC faculty explaining that Elsevier, which owns Cell Press, asked the University for an additional $90,000 annually to provide electronic access to the six Cell Press titles, including the prestigious journals *Cell*, *Molecular Cell*, *Immunity and Neuron*. The University, which has already paid Elsevier $8 million for online access to its other journals, has refused, saying the price is too high.

"By denying institutional electronic access for the last five years, Cell Press has enjoyed a bonanza of personal subscriptions," states the letter. "They now cite the potential loss of personal subscriptions as the basis for setting a high institutional price."

"It is untenable that a publisher would *de facto* block access of our published work even to our immediate colleagues," write Walter and Yamamoto. "Cell Press is breaking an unwritten contract with the scientific community: being a publisher of our research carries the responsibility to make our contributions publicly available at reasonable rates."

Walter and Yamamoto urge colleagues to refuse to review manuscripts for Cell Press journals, stop submitting their papers to these journals and to resign from their editorial boards. "It is time that we reassert our values," write the outraged researchers. "We can all think of better ways to spend our time than providing free services to support a publisher that values profit above its academic mission."

A response from Lynne Herndon, President and CEO of Cell Press offered free electronic access to Cell Press titles to all UC researchers who registered a username and password via e-mail. Walter and Yamamoto rejected this temporary offer and reminded colleagues that Cell Press have offered trial electronic access in the past, and then withdrawn access when negotiations with the University broke down.

Walter and Yamamoto are keen to publicise the pricing tactics used by Elsevier and Cell Press. "The public and private agencies that support us should learn about the greed that is threatening the dissemination of new knowledge and important discoveries." It remains to be seen how the research community and funding agencies will respond to the boycott call.

Tell us what *you* think.
Do you agree?

Academic boycotts can make publishers change their policies.

We want to hear from you.
Send us your views.
We will we publish selected letters in the print edition and on our website.

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www.biomedcentral.com/openaccess

Research news from BioMed Central journals

Are walruses right-handed?

Walruses are 'right-flippered', according to research published in *BMC Ecology*. The first study of walrus feeding behavior in the wild shows that the animals preferentially use their right flipper to brush sediment from buried clams. The finding implies that tool use is not a necessary precursor of handedness.

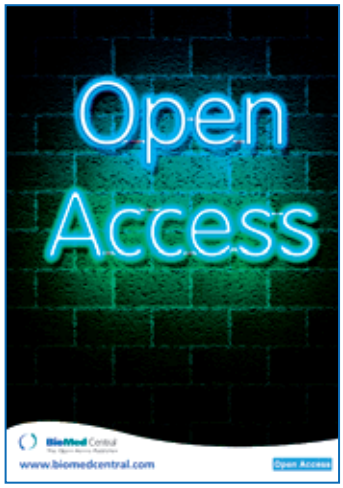
A team of scuba-diving researchers went to Northeast Greenland to film feeding walruses. Their videos show that the animals use their right flipper about nine times more than their left flipper when foraging for food. Anatomical studies revealed that walruses have longer bones in their right flipper than their left; notably, right-handed people also have longer bones in their right arm.

BMC Ecology 2003, **3:**9.

Poor prognosis linked to *BRCA1* mutation

Breast cancer patients have a lower chance of long-term survival if they carry an inherited mutation in the *BRCA1* gene, according to research published in *Breast Cancer Research*, but the poor prognosis associated with the mutated gene is mitigated by chemotherapy. Other factors also contributed to a poor prognosis in the 496 women studied, for example if the women were under 50 or the tumor was larger than 2 cm in diameter when breast cancer was first diagnosed. But mutations in *BRCA1* predicted an increase in mortality even when these factors were taken into account, if chemotherapy was not given.

Breast Cancer Research 2003, **6:**R8-R17.



Letters

Open Access Now **recently featured an article about DSpace and have since received several letters about self-archiving (www.biomedcentral.com/openaccess/forum). We reproduce here this one from Richard Durbin, which makes the point that Open Access is about more than just the ability to read articles online.**

We welcome your thoughts: openaccess@biomedcentral.com.

Dear Sir,

Although I applaud open archiving, from my point of view open access publishing is what is needed in the long run. This is now possible.

I come from the community that led open release of data in genomics: the *C. elegans* genome mapping, then sequencing, project followed by the Human Genome Project. The real value of the way that genome data, such as the human genome sequence, is available is that people can use it and build on it. Building on publications used to be open, because the only way to do it was to read and then write something else (such as a review or a new paper with a new idea). And a subscription cost was reasonable historically because most of the costs of producing journals were in printing and distribution. Now, at least in biological science, a lot of valuable data are published in papers in tables and figures, and people are developing computational tools that can use this information, and even the free text (see www.textpresso.org for an example of the latter). So, there are ways to use the information in papers for new science, but to do this we need much more open access to the literature.

Research funding is provided to generate outputs that others can build on. Funders, and the rest of the system, want publication to be as unconstrained as possible, and the only reasons that we haven't yet taken advantage of electronic publishing to make things less constrained are historical inertia and the commercial interests of some publishers. So, for me, open archiving is just a tactical move to keep the publishers moving towards the larger goal of changing scientific publishing to a better and more natural model, which is possible now with the internet and electronic publishing.

Richard Durbin

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Send your letters to:
openaccess@biomedcentral.com

An Open Access Author speaks

David Levitt,
University of Minnesota

David Levitt is Professor of Physiology at the University of Minnesota. He has worked in many areas of biophysics, including membrane ion channels and X-ray crystallography. His current research focus is pharmacokinetics.

What prompted you to submit your first article to BioMed Central?

A few years ago I developed a new physiologically based pharmacokinetic software program (PKQuest). The publications based on this program served as a form of tutorial in the use of the software. I initially chose BioMed Central journals because I wanted to ensure that anyone interested in the program would have free access to these publications and the application examples that they represented.

How would you describe your experiences of publishing with BioMed Central?

I have now published six articles in *BMC Clinical Pharmacology* and *BMC Anesthesiology* in the last two years. This has been an overwhelmingly affirmative experience. One of my biggest, and most pleasant surprises, has been the BioMed Central reviewing process. The reviews of these manuscripts have ranked among the most thorough and careful of any that I have received for the more than 100 papers I have published.

What is your view of Open Access publishing?

Philosophically, I am committed to the idea of the free distribution of scientific publications. Open Access to research for everyone with access to the internet, including the developing world, has to rank as one of the most important advances in the history of science.

Open Access Now

Open Access Now is a newsletter informing researchers in the life sciences about the issues involved in Open Access publishing.

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