

Free access to scientific publications – at whose cost?

Open access results in widespread benefits - not just for science. However, those who call for free access to research findings must also be prepared to ask themselves some awkward questions, as a panel discussion held at ETH Library last week demonstrated.

The panel discussion held at ETH Library last Thursday in cooperation with PLOS and the Royal Society of Chemistry (RSC) can be summed up in just three words: numerous unanswered questions.

Researchers and representatives from publishing houses and industry had been discussing the consequences of open access, i.e. the free access to research findings. At the debate's conclusion, Rafael Ball, Director of ETH Library, stated: "We are in the midst of a transformation process and have the opportunity to try out different models and test them for their long-term viability."

In any case, the first task was to bring the relevant issues to the table, and the seven-person ensemble, led by Sven Fund from the open-access provider Knowledge Unlatched, certainly succeeded in doing just that.

But, you could ask, what's so problematic about making research findings freely available to everyone? At first glance, everyone benefits. Researchers around the world can access their peers' outcomes, and their own work receives increased exposure. Both processes promote innovation and advance society as a whole.

The consequences of a new type of financing

However, there's just one catch: while, in the past, readers or institutions of which they were members usually financed the scientific publications via subscription fees, these days, the authors themselves, their research institutions or organisations funding research projects are increasingly bearing the costs. This puts researchers just starting their careers, or those in developing countries, at a disadvantage. At best, the search for funding is extremely time-consuming, while, at worst, publication is thwarted entirely. Sybille Geisenheyner of RSC Publishing demonstrated the reality of this development with the aid of concrete figures. She explained that, while authors and institutions in Europe are able to cover 96 per cent of their share of publication costs, those seeking to publish in India find only 83 per cent of the requisite funds.

The change to a new method of financing scientific publications via Article Processing Charges (APC) has a further unintended consequence: industry is a "co-reader", but no longer pays for the material. To date, it is estimated that private companies cover approximately 30 per cent of the publication costs via subscription fees. The panellists agreed that, if the shift towards complete open access should become a reality in future, these funds would naturally be lacking. As Tobias Philipp, Head of Open Access at the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNF),

emphasised, the fact that the state is funding science to the tune of millions does not change this in the slightest.

Getting industry to foot the bill

This aspect has hardly been considered in the open-access debate so far. The fact that it was addressed here together with industry representatives is a good start. Since the representatives from the pharmaceutical industry discreetly reaffirmed their commitment to making a contribution within the new system. However, both Valerie Philippon of Takeda Pharmaceuticals and Santosh Mysore of GlaxoSmithKline pointed out that their companies were already involved in the open-access enterprise. As Mysore explained, over 80 per cent of research performed by GSK is now freely accessible. “Open access is so important to us because transparency and accessibility are some of our company’s core values.”

Private-sector research funding also harbours the risk of dependencies. “How can a healthy relationship between industry and research be guaranteed?”, asked one audience member. “With complete transparency”, replied Mysore. In the eyes of Robert Finger, Professor of Agricultural Economics and Policy at ETH Zurich and the panel’s research representative, this response was inadequate. “A hint of scepticism remains.” The open peer review procedure for the assessment of scientific work is one part of the answer, although not the entire solution. “There is a danger that research fields important to us but irrelevant to industry are neglected.”

While the panellists agreed that industry should be asked to pay up more frequently, the logistics of this type of involvement remained unclear. Although no concrete responses were presented, the relevant unanswered questions were at least on the table by the time the two-hour discussion came to a close: how would a “mixed economy” model look, in which research was funded by both the state and private sector companies? Is the independence of research endangered if funded by industry? How can companies provide science with financial support without being suspected of placing their own economic interests above those of society? In addition, which role should libraries and publishers play in the new system?

As Niamh O’Connor, Journals Publishing Director at the publisher PLOS, summed up with pragmatic optimism: “although the current system can’t provide the answers to all our questions, it’s at least a step in the right direction.”

Programme and video recording: www.library.ethz.ch/oa-full-fledged

Contact: marketing@library.ethz.ch

Text: Andres Eberhard, Journalist