

# Green-eyed, no monster

Gabriel Egan argues that the move to open access is desirable and inevitable for the arts as well as the sciences

We continue to witness a lot of back and forth between publishers and open-access advocates about the merits of Research Councils UK's open-access policy – but where does it leave journal editors?

Some have echoed the publishers' fears that open access will ruin their business models or undermine journal quality by scaring off top international authors. But not all editors share this view.

I co-edit two humanities journals: one, *Shakespeare*, for the large commercial publisher Taylor and Francis; the other, *Theatre Notebook*, for a small learned society (the Society for Theatre Research). I believe that open access is both desirable and inevitable since, as we move towards virtually cost-free digital dissemination, charging readers seems increasingly unjustifiable.

Much throwing about of brains over the past decade still hasn't revealed how publishers might make technology their saviour rather than their nemesis. For

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a while the popularity of PDFs buoyed their spirits because academics believed that only specialists could create them. Microsoft killed that goose by adding "save file as PDF" options to its software.

Publishers also argued that registering digital object identifiers (a sequence of characters used to uniquely identify electronic documents) would relieve authors and librarians of the pain of ensuring long-term digital preservation. But DOIs can be registered by anyone and having one no more guarantees the availability of an article on the web than registering an ISBN number keeps a book in print.

Now publishers pin their hopes on "adding value", by, for example, linking footnoted references to the full texts. But by automatically labelling all their articles with DOIs, they have made it easy for anyone to create such links.

A further lifeline was thrown by the support offered by last year's Finch report for "gold" open access, whereby the journal's official version of an article is made free to the reader in exchange

for a fee paid by the author. The problem is that while scientists supported by large external grants may find a figure of upwards of £1,500 insignificant, such fees present an insurmountable barrier to publication for lone scholars in the arts and humanities.

Since its open-access policy was published last summer, RCUK has diluted its original Finch-inspired enthusiasm for gold, making clear that researchers will also be free to choose the repository-based "green" route. But the publishers are still pushing gold: Taylor and Francis' Open Select programme, for instance, doesn't even mention that many of its journals are also RCUK-compliant if they follow the green model.

After some of the editors threatened to resign over the publisher's plans to charge £1,750 for *Shakespeare's* gold option, the journal was permitted to opt out of Open Select. So now we don't explicitly offer contributors an open-access option – but they can make their articles available via the green route.

*Theatre Notebook* explicitly invites authors to go green, trusting them (since we don't have the resources to police it) to respect our one-year embargo.

Some will say that by promoting the green route we will ultimately put ourselves out of business by undermining readers' incentive to subscribe. But what do we need an income for when the editors and peer reviewers of the journal receive no payment for their labours and when online dissemination costs nothing? We could run the journal as an online-only open-access offering – and that, indeed, is my long-term plan once we have ridden out this awkward transition period.

The old economics of print publication gave publishers and authors a false sense of ownership. Publishers felt entitled to make a profit from academic writing because they invested in the technology necessary for dissemination: paper, presses and warehouses. Academic authors felt they owned their writing because publishers returned to them a fraction of the sales revenue.

But scholarship ultimately belongs to the citizens who paid for its creation. Even badly implemented by a reactionary government, open access has the merit of making us confront that truth.

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