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The Case for Open Access

By ROBERT DARNTON February 12, 2008



The motion before the FAS in support of open access to scholarly articles concerns openness in general. It is meant to promote the free communication of knowledge. By retaining rights for the widest possible dissemination of the faculty's work, it would make scholarship by members of the FAS freely accessible everywhere in the world, and it would reinforce a new effort by Harvard to share its intellectual wealth.

The University Library has taken a leading role in that endeavor. Far from reserving its resources for the privileged few, it is digitizing its special collections, opening them to everyone online, and cooperating with Google in the attempt to make books in the public domain actually available to the public, a worldwide public, which extends everywhere that people have access to the Internet. If the FAS votes in favor of the motion on February 12, Harvard will make the latest work of its scholars accessible, just as it is creating accessibility to the store of knowledge that it has accumulated in its libraries since 1638.

The motion also represents an opportunity to reshape the landscape of learning. A shift in the system for communicating knowledge has created a contradiction at the heart of academic life. We academics provide the content for scholarly journals. We evaluate articles as referees, we serve on editorial boards, we work as editors ourselves, yet the journals force us to buy back our work, in published form, at outrageous prices. Many journals now cost more than \$20,000 for a year's subscription.

The spiraling cost of journals has inflicted severe damage on research libraries, creating a ripple effect: in order to purchase the journals, libraries have had to reduce their acquisitions of monographs; the reduced demand among libraries for monographs has forced university presses to cut back on the publication of them; and the near impossibility of publishing their dissertations has jeopardized the careers of a whole generation of scholars in many fields. It would be naïve to assume that a positive vote by the FAS on February 12 would force publishers to slash their prices. But by passing the motion we can begin to resist the trends that have created so much damage.

Of course, we faculty members do not pay the high cost of journals ourselves. We expect our libraries to do it—with all the negative consequences that I have mentioned. The motion before the FAS provides a way to realign the means of communication in a way that will favor learning. It will be a first step toward freeing scholarship from the stranglehold of commercial publishers by making it freely available through our own university repository. Instead of being the passive victims of the system, we can seize the initiative and take charge of it.

Although this initiative is being submitted to the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, it concerns all the faculties of the University. All of them face the same problems. Harvard Medical School, for example, is working on ways to help its faculty members comply with the recent legislation by Congress mandating that all articles based on research funded by the National Institutes of Health be made openly accessible through PubMed Central, the database maintained by the National Library of Medicine.

The Harvard University Library will set up an Office for Scholarly Communication to make the open-access repository an instrument for access to research across all disciplines in the spirit of the “one-university” environment that the HOLLIS catalog now provides for holdings in all the libraries, more than 80 of them, throughout the University system. The Office for Scholarly Communication will also promote maximum cooperation by the faculty. Many repositories already exist in other universities, but they have failed to get a large proportion of faculty members to submit their articles. The deposit rate at the University of California is 14 percent, and it is much lower in most other places. By mandating copyright retention and by placing those rights in the hands of the institution running the repository, the motion will create the conditions for a high deposit rate.

What further sets Harvard’s proposal apart from the others is its opt-out provision. Whereas other repositories depend on faculty opting in by volunteering to provide digitized copies of their work, the Harvard system would have all faculty members grant a non-exclusive permission to the President and Fellows of Harvard to distribute



their articles. The system would be collective but not coercive. Anyone who wanted to retain exclusive rights to her- or himself could do so by obtaining a waiver. Of course, those who cooperate with the system will also retain full rights to the publication of their work. By sharing those rights with Harvard, they sacrifice nothing; and they will have the collective weight of Harvard behind them if they resist a journal's demand for exclusive rights. We have designed a legal memorandum called an author's addendum to reinforce them in negotiations with commercial publishers.

The implementation of the proposal would require an effort at consciousness-raising, but that, too, is a good cause, because few faculty members understand how badly current conditions impede the communication of knowledge. The motion gives Harvard the possibility of setting an example that could spread. In place of a closed, privileged, and costly system, it will help open up the world of learning to everyone who wants to learn—and also to contribute to learning, because the Office for Scholarly Communication could point the way toward a digital commonwealth, in which ideas would flow freely in all directions. Harvard's motion represents only one step toward this goal. But it shows how the new technology can make it possible to realize an old ideal, a republic of letters in which citizenship extends to everyone.

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