

Roger M Pinder¹Allan Young²

¹York, UK; ²Institute of Mental Health,
Department of Psychiatry, University
of British Columbia, Vancouver,
Canada

NDT goes Open Access

Neuropsychiatric Disease and Treatment (NDT) began life 2 years ago like a typical academic journal, as the official journal of the International Neuropsychiatric Association and distributed through individual and institutional subscriptions. Now into its 3rd annual volume and already moving from quarterly publication to 6 times per year. All editorials in NDT are now an Open Access as a first step in a migration to full Open Access. In this Editorial, the Editors and a distinguished member of the Editorial Board give their collective views on what Open Access means for academic publishing.

Reflections on Open Access

Mike Briley

NeuroBiz Consulting & Communication, 27 Impasse des Grèses, 81100 Castres, France
Email mike.briley@neurobiz.com

Initially when scientific progress was slower and the number of scientists was small, dissemination of scientific knowledge was achieved by the publication of monographs and books. As the scientific community expanded and the pace of research accelerated, scientific journals appeared with regular issues appearing with increasing frequency. Both books and journals have, in general, been traditionally distributed on a “pay to read” basis. Through individual or institutional subscriptions the potential reader has paid for the privilege of reading scientific papers written free of charge by his peers. The advent of the Internet has provided an additional medium for dissemination of scientific data. Increasingly certain journals are providing “Open Access” to parts or all of their journals on the Internet. While a minority of journals provide open access from the moment of publication others reserve access to subscribers for a certain time (often a year) and then provide open access.

Over the last few years there has been increasing pressure on journals to provide open access with the appearance of a number of pressure groups such as the Budapest Open Access Initiative (see <http://www.soros.org/openaccess/>). Since the principal objective of academic publishing is the dissemination of information, open access would seem to a logical and welcome ... and possibly, inevitable, evolution.

Many of the advantages of open access are obvious. In a world where the number of scientific journals is constantly expanding but library budgets remain constant or are contracting, open access is one way of “leveling the playing field” especially for smaller institutions, the developing nations, and other low budget situations. For the scientific author, open access is likely to increase the number of readers of his papers, but many of the probable consequences (see below) will require him to rethink the publishing process. The radical change from several centuries of “pay to read” to open access will have profound changes on academic publishing and possibly even upon the way research is done and reported.

Although providing open access costs considerably less than the classical production and distribution of “paper” journals, the organization of peer review and web hosting of virtual journals still costs money and the publisher needs to find a source of income. Certain journals, especially clinical journals, can rely on advertising for their income. The advertising potential for most academic journals is, however, negligible. This leaves only the “pay to publish” model where the onus of payment is on the author (or

his institution) rather than the reader. A number of journals have requested “page charges” (sometimes as high as \$100 per printed page) to offset production costs for a number of years so the concept of “pay to publish” is not new.

What are the potential consequences of a widespread change to open access and “pay to publish”?

Will it change the quality of scientific papers?

Assuming the concept of “no publication – no payment” the income of a journal will be directly related to the number of publications that are “accepted”. Since the physical constraints of space in the paper journal will no longer exist there could be a tendency for editors to become more “lenient” and scientific quality to decrease.

If a “payment on submission” system was used authors would be attracted toward journals with a high rate of acceptance thus avoiding paying repeatedly with each submission of the same article to a new journal. Again there might be a tendency for quality to decrease as the journals with a high acceptance rate flourish.

What will be the role of the journal?

Since most people will be accessing articles following a search on the Internet there will be little, if any, interest in conserving the classical journal format. The monthly appearance of an issue would be obsolete and articles would be published “as soon as ready”. This tendency is already seen with “on-line publication ahead of print” that many journals are already proposing. It is very likely that publishers would tend to merge or combine journals to reduce costs. Will the important entity become the publisher rather than the journal?

Will download frequency replace citation index as a measure of impact?

With widespread open access it will be possible for the first time to gauge the readership of a paper by determining the

number of times the article was downloaded. As with citation index this system would have many imperfections but it is certainly likely to be exploited by many seeking to justify their existence and that of their research and by others seeking an “objective” way of distributing funding.

Who will ensure the perennity of online papers?

With the widespread use of open access most publications would exist only in electronic format. They would be hosted on tens of thousands of servers throughout the world. A simple change in the URL would mean that the article would be lost temporarily or for ever. In addition with the probable explosion of “minor publishers” the number of sites that simply “disappear” would also increase with the potential loss of publications. It is therefore essential that a centralized perennial archive be created. It would be the author’s responsibility to deposit his paper in this central archive. UNESCO would appear to be well placed to undertake this function.

Will scientific publishers disappear?

Since the role of publishers will be to organize peer review and to host the papers on a website it is likely that many “nonpublishers” will enter the field. Scientific societies, major institutions, government agencies, pressure groups, and individual entrepreneurs are all likely to take on this role. What will be the guarantees of serious peer review? How this would influence the prestige hierarchy of current journals is anyone’s guess.

Generalized Open Access is an exciting prospect which will occur over the next few years. It is likely to have widespread repercussions not only in the academic publishing industry but also in the way that authors publish their work and possibly also that way their work is judged by their peers and by a wider public than previously. Those who take the time to think about these changes will be the best armed to deal with them. You have been warned!