

A conversation with Heather Joseph on May 23, 2013

Participants

- Heather Joseph – Executive Director, Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources Coalition (SPARC)
- Alexander Berger – Senior Research Analyst, GiveWell

Note: This set of notes was compiled by GiveWell and gives an overview of the major points made by Heather Joseph.

Summary

Heather Joseph is the Executive Director of the Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources Coalition (SPARC), which works with policymakers to expand public access to scientific research articles and data. GiveWell spoke with her as a part of our investigation of opportunities to improve scientific research. The main topics discussed were the history and status of the open access movement, policies currently in development to increase access to publicly funded research, and lobbying efforts to affect government policy on open access.

History and mission of the open access movement

The open access movement traces its start to a meeting convened by the Open Society Institute in Budapest 11 years ago. The goal of the movement is to make academic research available online for free, at the time of first publication, and with public rights to digitally reuse the material in full.

Infrastructure of the open access movement

The infrastructure to make open access the norm in publishing is now quite robust. Ms. Joseph discussed four components of this infrastructure:

1. **Publishers:** The Public Library of Science (PLOS) is the groundbreaking open access publisher. Open access journal publishers are now the fastest-growing segment of the journal market. There are now 9,000 open access journals.
2. **Policies:** The National Institutes of Health (NIH) has a policy that any researcher who receives NIH funding must make their research freely available to the public, through the NIH's database, PubMed Central, within 12 months of its publication in a journal.
3. **Copyright regimes:** Open licenses to allow use of copyrighted material is an important piece of open access. Creative Commons has created legally vetted tools to enable full reuse of articles online.
4. **Archives:** There are more than 3,000 open access research depositories, which are run by institutions such as funders or universities.

Holdren memo on open access

Earlier this year, the White House issued a memo instructing the 23 federal agencies and departments that spend more than \$100 million/year on research and development to create open access policies for both research articles and data. The agencies are required to submit their policies by August. The policies will be reviewed and, if approved, agencies will be required to implement them in the following months. This is a huge step forward for open access.

There is an inter-agency working group that is meeting every two weeks to discuss the development of these policies.

Lobbying by the publishing industry

Groups representing traditional publishers are pushing for more flexible policies that will allow them to protect their business model. The American Association of Publishers is the lead organization lobbying against changes to the current system. They have both internal and external lobbyists. Groups like Elsevier are members. The commercial publishing industry is a \$9 billion industry. It's a well-funded lobbying effort.

These groups are not opposing open access to data.

Lobbying by the open access movement

The open access constituency is a broad coalition that includes the library community, consumer groups, Internet freedom groups, researchers, and open access publishers. SPARC is the primary organization in DC that coordinates lobbying activities by administering two groups: the Open Access Working Group and Alliance for Taxpayer Access.

There is very little money in advocacy for open access to articles. Ms. Joseph estimates that total spending on policy advocacy by the open access community in the U.S. is much less than \$1 million/year. There is more money in open data, particularly from the Sloan Foundation, though that is not focused on advocacy.

Open access to research funded by public money is an issue that appeals to policy makers. The debate now is more around how to implement this, rather than whether to implement it.

There are currently identical bills in the house and senate on open access to journal articles and it has bipartisan support. The legislation is likely to move forward as part of an appropriations process, rather than on its own. SPARC is supporting the legislation through meetings with congressional staff, speaking at committee hearings, and working with think tanks to produce research and hold events on the

topic.

There are now state legislatures getting involved to make state-funded research openly accessible.

SPARC would prefer to see legislation that requires open access, because the policies developed by individual agencies may fall short of the goal of true open access, but whether legislation moves forward may depend on the outcome of the agency policy process.

Different opinions on open access to data

Different disciplines have different opinions on open data requirements. Genetics, for example, has a culture of open data, whereas social scientists often want to protect data that has taken years to collect and is likely to result in multiple papers.

There are details to work out on what form the data should be stored in. For example, whether all data collected for a research project be published, or only the cleaned data used in published articles.

The strongest voices on this issue so far are individual scientists across a range of disciplines. There is not yet a clear coalition or set of institutional voices with clear positions on the issue.

The White House has made open data a priority.

Funding opportunities in open data

Ideas for pushing open data forward:

1. Encouraging regular forums for different disciplines to discuss lessons learned in implementing different forms of open data. Each discipline handles this in a different way.
2. Working with research funders to set the terms and conditions of how the data generated with their funding is shared.
3. Encouraging scholarly societies to set norms on this issue. They have not embraced open data in any significant way.

If it had more funding, SPARC would hire contractors to do studies on the likely impact of proposed open access initiatives and use these studies to educate policymakers. SPARC has a list of experts and topics that it would be interested in funding.

All GiveWell conversations are available at <http://www.givewell.org/conversations>