

# Open-Access Panelists: Can't We All Just Get Along?

**Brian Vastag**

Yet another session on open access?

"Bah, humbug", said Robert Harrington, vice president for global science publishing at Blackwell Publishing Inc, as he began his presentation at the 2005 annual conference of the Professional and Scholarly Publishing Division of the Association of American Publishers. His opening slide featured a gray, hook-nosed caricature of a dour editor.

It seems that everyone in academic publishing is grumpy about the debate over freer access to scholarly publications. "Passions have risen really high", said Harrington. "Aggressive pricing by a few publishers has triggered polarized debate and extreme reactions."

At one end, high-profile scientists, such as former National Institutes of Health (NIH) director Harold Varmus, want full open access. That is, they want scholarly publications made available to anyone anywhere at the moment of publication. At the other end, publishers predict a painful dismantling of academic publishing as a whole.

But there is plenty of middle ground, said Harrington and colleagues at the 8 February plenary session titled "Defining Open Access: What Does the Demand for Required Open Access Demand from You?"

"Let's get away from this polarized debate and stop focusing on the extremes", Blackwell said. "We all want universal access, it's just a matter of how."

Ann Okerson, a panelist and associate director of the Yale University Library, agreed. "We don't need to keep the open-access debate at the center of our universe."

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We can experiment with different publishing models."

The model garnering the most debate was handed down by NIH just days before the meeting. On 3 February, the agency announced that it wanted all research articles describing NIH-funded projects to be deposited in the PubMed Central public archive. Although authors can tell NIH when to make each article publicly available, the agency is encouraging swift release. Norka Ruiz Bravo, NIH deputy director for extramural research, indicated that she expects authors to negotiate PubMed Central release dates with the original publishers. The agency is asking authors to submit articles beginning 2 May.

Speakers at the session slammed the proposal. Martin Frank, executive director of the American Physiological Society (APS), argued that the policy will undermine existing open-access efforts and confuse readers with two versions of the same article. The NIH policy does allow authors to submit last-minute editorial changes or the entire final version of each paper, but the burden of tracking such changes will waste funds and time, he said. NIH estimates that it will cost \$2 million to \$4 million to upload the tens of thousands of articles that the agency's \$30-billion annual budget buys.

"It's a waste, a redundant system", said Frank, because many publishers allow free access to their articles either immediately or within a year. Already, some 62 publishers of 150 academic journals allow free access to 500,000 of their 800,000 collective articles. Under a 2003 arrangement devised by a group that Frank helped to organize, the Washington DC Principles for Free Access to Science (the DC Principles Coalition), these publishers allow immediate access to selected "high-profile" articles. Researchers

in poor countries receive immediate access to everything. "We formed because we thought the open-access debate robbed us of our voice", said Frank.

Librarians are another group raising their collective voice. Sarah How, a librarian at Cornell University, said open access could eventually end up costing universities more than their entire log of journal subscriptions. The two best-known open-access efforts, the Public Library of Science and BioMed Central, charge authors fees of up to \$1500 per article. If every publisher flipped to this plan, large research universities would end up shouldering an extra burden, concluded a 6-month study led by How. "Digital publishing has costs too", she said. "Until now, librarians have done a good job of shielding users from [publishing] costs. Authors are shocked to find out an article costs \$1500 to publish."

Most authors simply aren't willing to pony up that much, said Frank. A survey of APS authors found that only 13% would pay \$1500 for open-access publication in a new APS journal. (Some traditional academic publishers make authors pay "page charges", especially for color figures.)

The speakers noted a number of open-access experiments besides the model advocated by the DC Principles Coalition. Academic societies in particular are worried that open access will bankrupt them. In response, Blackwell, with 600 academic-society journals under its roof, is adding "high-quality content", such as news articles. "We need to respond to the needs of our users."

He concluded with aplomb. "The subscription model works; it gives us room to play with new ideas. We don't need to start throwing subscriptions into the air and shooting them down just for the sake of it. Nothing is ever as bad as it seems." 