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Open access in the plague year

Coronavirus has shown why open publishing is vital, but could make it unaffordable

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The global coronavirus pandemic has thrown many aspects of university research culture into acute relief. In the UK, the sudden economic threat to universities appeared just as the hopes of the world became vested in their vaccine research.

Universities appeared more necessary than ever just as the marketised economics that underpinned them nearly collapsed. Certainly this revealed one of the best arguments against subsidising an entire nation's health research ecosystem on overseas students' tuition fees.

In the world of scholarly communications, the contradictions in research culture exposed by Covid-19 are as sharp as anywhere. As the reality of the virus dawned and campuses worldwide went into lockdown, publishers scrambled to lower paywalls.

At first, this looked limited to biomedical research publications but soon nearly everyone wanted in on the action. Publishers in the humanities and elsewhere made both topical—on Black Lives Matter, for example—and more general works openly available, both through their own sites and platforms such as Project Muse and JSTOR.

Physical collections became inaccessible, and off-campus digital-only access highlighted the inadequacies of interlibrary loans. As a result, demand for openly accessible research skyrocketed. The Australian National University Press, for example, has seen [an average 44 per cent increase in monthly downloads of open access materials](#) since March 2020.

At the same time, there came a backlash. When the Internet Archive—a nonprofit digital library based in the United States—responded to pent-up digital demand by moving to provide a “national emergency library” service, publishers responded with scorn, saying they had not sanctioned such digital lending and claiming that the archive was not a library with lending rights. The publishers Hachette, HarperCollins, Wiley and Penguin Random House [moved to sue the Archive](#) for copyright violation.

Yet this year also saw the extension and continuation of policy mandates for open access to research materials. While the group of funders known as cOAlition S encountered some friction, with the European Research Council withdrawing in July, its Plan S rumbles on.

As national transformative agreements to flip journals to an open-access model and replace subscriptions with publishers' charges continue to be signed in the UK and elsewhere, Plan S's fingerprints could be detected on UK Research and Innovation's consultation into open access. While we still await the results of UKRI's consultation on open access rules for the third Research Excellence Framework—or, indeed, news of whether REF3 will even exist—proposals include requiring zero-embargo 'green' open access via institutional repositories, more liberal open licensing, and the long-vaunted requirement for funded monographs to be in scope.

On this last front, this year saw the launch of a project called Community-led Open Publication Infrastructures for Monographs, aiming to study and reform the economics and infrastructures of open access monographs. Co-funded by Research England and the charitable Arcadia Fund, this paves the way for the signalled monograph mandate in a future REF.

It might appear, then, that 2020 was quite the year for open access. But every silver lining has a cloud and there is, of course, a huge caveat: the economic impact of Covid-19 looks set to be very bad for the university library budgets that fund open access. Most commentators, for example, believe US institutions will make [real-term cuts to institutional spending on information resources](#) in the coming year.

It pays to remember, at all times, that open access is not free. It requires compensation for the labour of publishing. Yet libraries know that the big publishers are unlikely to let a good crisis go to waste. The content negotiation strategy group run by Universities UK and the higher education IT organisation Jisc is seeking a [25% reduction in fees paid to big publishers](#)—smaller than some publishers' profit margins— but it is not clear that this will be forthcoming.

Further, transformative agreements are coming at a hyper-inflationary cost. Early in lockdown, for example, one publisher was quoting a subscription rate 3 per cent up on last year's, while a transformative agreement to move to open access came with a 10 per cent price rise.

All of which drives home the contradiction at the heart of 2020 for open access. The pandemic has shown, more than ever, why we need open access to research. At the same time it has ripped the heart out of the economic systems that could and should support such transitions. Whether open access will sink or swim will be determined by the coming economic tide.