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## NOTES&THEORIES

DISPATCHES FROM THE SCIENCE DESK



# US petition could tip the scales in favour of open access publishing

A petition urges President Obama to implement open access for all federally funded research. This is our chance to demonstrate public support and goad the White House into action



You do not need to be a US citizen to sign the White House petition for open access publishing. Photograph: Jewel Samad/AFP/Getty Images

The problem of access to research has been well covered in the Guardian - by analysis, by excoriation and by parable. The situation again, in short: governments and charities fund research; academics do the work, write and illustrate the papers, peer-review and edit each others' manuscripts; then they sign copyright over to profiteering corporations who put it behind paywalls and sell research back to the public who funded it and the researchers who created it. In doing so, these corporations make grotesque profits of

32%-42% of revenue - far more than, say, Apple's 24% or Penguin Books' 10%.

So far, so depressing. But what makes this story different from hundreds of other cases of commercial exploitation is that it seems to be headed for a happy ending. That's taken some of us by surprise, because we thought the publishers held all the cards. Academics tend to be conservative, and often favour publishing their work in established paywalled journals rather than newer open access venues.

The missing factor in this equation is the funders. Governments and charitable trusts that pay academics to carry out research naturally want the results to have the greatest possible effect. That means publishing those results openly, free for anyone to use. Suddenly it seems that funding bodies are waking up to the importance of this. In recent weeks, we've seen the Wellcome Trust promising to get tough on grant recipients who don't make their work available; the astonishing pro-open access speech by science minister David Willetts to the Publishers Association AGM; and the European Union's intention to use open access for the results of its €80 billion Horizon 2020 programme.

Publishers' responses to all this have been tiresomely predictable. Commenting on the new draft open-access guidelines proposed by Research Councils UK, Graham Taylor of the Publishers Association said that publishers would not accept that authors could deposit their papers in open-access repositories six months after publication. This is pure bluster. It's none of publishers' business what conditions funders impose on authors. Publishers are only service providers, with no more right to dictate policy than suppliers of laboratory equipment. If funders choose to impose conditions, authors will have to abide by them. If that means depositing papers in open-access repositories, publishers who forbid that will simply be bypassed in favour of those that are not stuck in the 1990s.

So mandates from funders are the way to break through on open access, and it's great to see the UK and European Union leading the way. The surprise at the moment is that the US government - having introduced the important and influential NIH public access policy in 2005 - seems to have fumbled the ball. This is disappointing for the US, but also disturbing for Britain. As Willetts pointed out in his speech: "In future we could be giving our research articles to the world for free via open access. But will we still have to pay for foreign journals and research carried out abroad?" For any country to get the full benefit from its own government's open-access mandates, it needs other countries to do the same.

Happily, an opportunity has arisen in the US to fix this. The White House's Office of Science and Technology Policy has taken a strong interest in open access, sponsoring two requests for public information in as many years. The issue also has the attention of

President Obama's science adviser, who has met with both publishers and open access advocates. There is a feeling that the administration fully understands the value of open access, and that a strong demonstration of public concern could be all it takes now to goad it into action before the November election. To that end a Whitehouse.gov petition has been set up urging Obama to "act now to implement open access policies for all federal agencies that fund scientific research". Such policies would bring the US in line with the UK and Europe.

There is always a question of whether petitions really make a difference. But there are good reasons for optimism in this case. The White House has been looking at open access for some time and is known to be sympathetic. This is a chance to demonstrate public support for action, and the executive has the power to direct federal agencies to take that action. Also, there is already bipartisan legislation in both US houses to require public access to federally funded US research. Demonstrating public support will strengthen this legislation's chances. Change in politics comes when the opportunity for decision coincides with a clear statement of the community's view. You need both.

So please sign the White House petition. *You do not need to be a US citizen*. Anyone aged 13 or older is eligible. Signing requires very minimal registration (email address and password), and clicking a link in a confirmation email. Do it now. You can make a difference.

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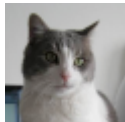
## Comments

16 comments, displaying  first

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 Staff

 Contributor



**oharar**

22 May 2012 1:24PM

Publishers' responses to all this have been tiresomely predictable. Commenting on the new draft open-access guidelines proposed by Research Councils UK, Graham Taylor of the Publishers Association said that publishers "would not accept" that authors could deposit their papers in open-access repositories six months after publication.

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**DrzBa**

so I assume you're referring to [this story in the Times](#)

22 May 2012 2:12PM

id. There are a couple of nuances that you miss. Here's

the fuller story:  
Well, this comes too late for the UK -

Graham Taylor, director of academic publishing at the Publishers Association, said the UK's relatively small proportion of global research output meant that any REF-related mandate would not be a "game changer" by itself in terms of driving publishers towards open access. Up until now, with Govt. in the UK paying at least some of the tuition fees, you could make the argument that as taxpayers pay (in part) for this research (tax payers tuition fee contributions via HM Treasury paid for academics' salaries) then the UK taxpayer had rights to see the fruits of the research they've (partially) paid for. author-pays open access (the "gold" model) -

provided that funding to pay the associated article fees was in place. Come Sept 2012 - this all screeches to a halt as students pay up to £9,000 each per year, and the taxpayer, theoretically, pays nothing (except loaning the money at competitive rates).

clear, was Research Councils UK's suggestion, in its draft new open-access policy, that authors could choose instead to deposit their papers in open-access repositories within an "overly short" embargo period of six months after publication. Ergo, all research done by salaried academics not under a specific research project is not Govt Funded hence, no open access - students, however, should get free access for their tuition fees.

The association's proposal to make digital journals



**StephenStewart**

ely available in public libraries was welcomed by

22 May 2012 2:41PM

Willetts.

What according to this, the publishers were \$0 payed for PPAH Barack Obama's long list of the deceit and paying lip service to his alleged Democratic ideals. We can expect the same deceit from him with respect to the Research Works Act. Since Obama is actually a closet Republican he will naturally proceed by stealth.

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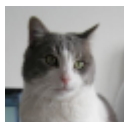
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**oharar**

22 May 2012 2:48PM

I'm not sure I'd expect anything from Obama on the RWA. It's dead in the water.

TBH, I suspect Obama thinks he hs more important things to

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**Frankcatnap** not to say the petition isn't a good idea, as it's brought to the attention of the right people, by the secretaries of state responsible for the NIH, NSF, USFWS, USGS, etc etc.

22 May 2012 2:51PM

Here is my suggestion to get more open-access science:

Whenever I come across a paper that I'd like to read, but which is behind a commercial paywall, I send a polite email to the lead author.

I mildly chide him or her for publishing "secret science" and suggest that in future he or she choose open-access publication. It's just my personal campaign. But friends if we all did that they may think it's a movement. And that's what it is, the Science Users' Anti-Secret-Science Movement, and all you got to do to join is send an email the next time you spot such a publishing error.

And of course I also email the authors of open-access papers to thank them for actually "publishing" their results by making them available to all.

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**Gareth100**

22 May 2012 3:20PM

Response to [Frankcatnap, 22 May 2012 2:51PM](#)

I will email a pdf copy to anyone who wants a paper that is not available as open access.

It is not "secret science", it is merely that I am obliged, if I want to keep my job, to publish in the highest impact factor journals possible, as this is how we are performance managed in UK academia. We'd all love to publish in open access journals but I'm afraid their impact factors do not remotely compare with pay for access journals. Until my university changes its policy on performance management then this situation is going to remain. David Willetts ought to be aware of this.

As the same situation applies in the US, I suspect this initiative will fizzle out, once the implications are realised.

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**MikeTaylor**

22 May 2012 3:26PM

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**Mike Taylor** 22 May 2012 1:24PM

On May 10, you wrote: "The link to the THE story from which I took the Graham Taylor quote. You were quite right to remove it." On Ohara's second comment: this petition is not about the Research Works Act, which as you rightly note is dead in the water. That said, I don't at all agree that I mis-represented anyone. The original text in the PHE is "What publishers would not accept, Mr Taylor made clear, was Research Councils UK's suggestion, in its draft new open-access policy, that authors could choose instead to deposit their papers in open-access repositories within an "overly short" embargo period of six months after publication." I redacted this to "Graham Taylor of the Publishers Association said that publishers would not accept that authors could deposit their papers in open-access repositories six months after publication." Seems accurate to me. It is true that Taylor also made some cautious concessions in the direction of Gold OA (i.e. the model in which the author pays the publisher, as with BMC, PLOS and Springer's Open Choice programme.) That's nice, but not really the point. The NIH mandate, and the likely broader US government mandate, are

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**Nonsek** in which authors deposit copies of their own without payment to publishers, after an embargo period (as captured). That is what Taylor said publishers "would not accept." Publish (idea of open access) is not a better alternative to pay to read. Frankly, ridiculous, not to mention offensive.

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As stated, the editors, reviewers and authors do the article stuff for free. Why not provide the editorial boards with the infrastructure needed to edit and put the articles available online to all readers also for free? Cut the middle man (publishers).



**Gareth100** 22 May 2012 4:33PM

What the article omits to mention but hinted at by Nonsek is that there is a large fee charged (quite often \$2k or more) by open access journals. Whilst this may be waived in some

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**ucfagls** everyone pleaded poverty then these journals  
ld. They are businesses just like the pay for access  
22 May 2012 4:55PM

[Recommend? \(0\)](#)

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Also, from w  
Response to **Gareth100**, 22 May 2012 3:20PM mechanism in open  
access journals leaves a lot to be desired. There's a lot of good  
It is this attitude that has allowed the current ridiculous situation  
stuff but a significant amount of poor science which would not  
to persist for so long. Whilst young researchers and academics  
make the cut in established journals.  
might really have to choose to publish in the best journals (we  
can argue about whether high impact == best), more established  
or senior academics and management within universities should  
be relishing changing the playing field. After all, think of all the  
money they'd save by not subscribing to those "high-impact"  
journals if people chose not to publish there! And no-one except  
the bean-counters really thinks impact factors are a good  
measure of the quality of research (except for poor quality  
research and retractions)

In addition, there is *nothing* stopping you publishing in most  
high-impact journals \*and\* making them open access as you can  
pay the publisher to do so. Not all publishers offer the same  
forms of OA, but all the big ones allow some form of OA where  
the author pays the publishing costs. And there are journals like  
PLoS One where if you don't have the money to pay they will  
usually waive their publishing costs and PLoS One has a pretty  
high impact factor if that is what you think is an indicator of  
good science.

You are focussing on the wrong issue; you should be free to  
publish where you want and make your paper OA. Willets and  
research councils need to find a way to fund such publication,  
say by contributing to a paper fund within individual institutions  
and allowing institutions to charge extra over heads on grants to  
allow OA publishing. Sort the funding issue out rather than  
worry yourself and Willets over the impact this will have on  
young academics. (And I am a young academic.)



**MikeTaylor**  
22 May 2012 5:02PM

[Recommend? \(0\)](#)

[Respond \(2\)](#)

[Report](#)

Gareth100's depressing claim that "I am obliged, if I want to



**Gareth100** sh in the highest impact factor journals

'will be put to the test when UK funding agencies

22 May 2012 5:43PM

that he is obliged, if he wants to get a grant to publish in

Response to ucfagls, 22 May 2012 4:55PM

are so necessary: to break the stupid impact-factor religion that

And no-one except the bean-counters really thinks

has infected academic administrators (and too many

impact factors are a good measure of the quality of

researchers), and prevents people from doing what they know is

the right thing. (except for poor quality research and

retractions)

No-one has come up with a better one, though I am a fan of the Hirsch citation index too but it remains the case that you're more likely to be cited if you publish in a higher impact journal. The quality of refereeing tends to be higher too in my experience. As for saving money, I wouldn't save any, my institution might but the savings would be spent on HR etc not trickling back to me so I can publish in open access. I addressed the problem with fee waivers above.

PLoS One has I'm afraid a pretty low impact factor compared to many of the journals I publish in.

Believe me, as a young academic you will be judged on where you publish and your idealism will be rapidly extinguished.

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**Gareth100**

22 May 2012 5:47PM

Response to MikeTaylor, 22 May 2012 5:02PM

As the likelihood of getting grants in these straitened times is much akin to winning the lottery, (Wellcome no longer fund project grants to give but one example) I get my money predominantly from other sources, as many others now have to do. So I will continue to publish in the highest impact journal possible and stick 2 fingers up to the ill-thought out dictats of the funding agencies and yourself.

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**Gareth100**

22 May 2012 5:53PM

Response to MikeTaylor, 22 May 2012 5:02PM

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**Mike Taylor** and please forgive own trumpet solo), we  
d a paper in *Nature* (high impact pay for access) cost us  
22 May 2012 8:39PM  
a while back, even got us plenty of media coverage. This

has now been  
Response to Gareth100, 22 May 2012 5:53PM  
much doubt any of  
this would be the case if it had been published in PLoS One etc  
So much to say, so little time ...

[Recommend? \(o\)](#)

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It's great that Gareth100 got a paper in *Nature*. For all my right-on open-access credentials, I couldn't swear that if that opportunity came up for me I'd reject it. But very counter-intuitively, high-impact journals *do not* generate more citations -- the correlation is almost zero. On the other hand, impact factor *does* correlate strongly with retraction rate -- see [Do you really want to publish in a high-retraction journal?](#) Of course none of this means that there's no value to publishing in *Nature*. There is great value -- the prestige. But it seems that this is almost entirely based on arbitrary agreed standards of what's trendy and what's not. In other words, the same criteria that high-school kids use to decide who's cool.

On whether PLoS can cope with people taking fee waivers: it can. This year, for the first time, it turned an operating profit of about 7% of revenue (which of course will be reinvested, since it's a non-profit). At any rate, my worries about their finances are certainly no reason why *I* shouldn't take a waiver if I need one. They are big enough and canny enough to look after themselves. Or you could publish in PeerJ when that kicks off later this year -- \$99.

Still on PLoS -- if you don't like PLoS ONE's impact factor of 4.411, then publish in PLoS Biology, whose IF of 13-point-something ranked it *first* in Biology in the most recent JCR.

Finally: if your plan is to stick two fingers up at funders, good luck with that strategy. When Wellcome, UKRC and the UK Government are all mandating open access, you may have some trouble finding a funder to stick your fingers up at, but I'm sure you'll manage.



**Mike Taylor**



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