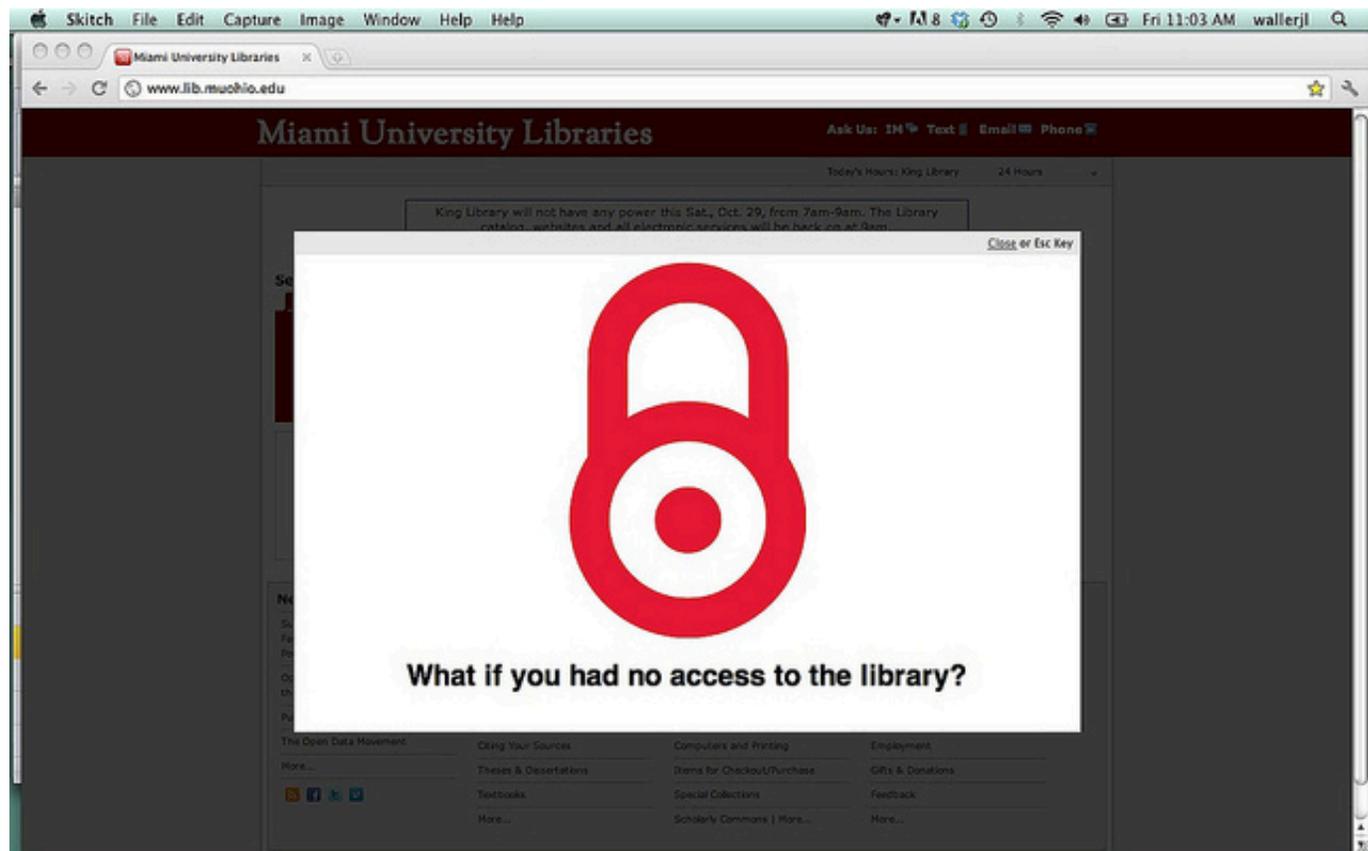


Open access academic journals: go for gold?

The world of academic publishing stands at a crossroads with public institutions demanding open access to publicly funded research. Dominic Burbidge explores the difficulties that stand in the way.



The freedom to view research findings online is usually restricted by paywalls that require users to purchase subscriptions or pay for individual articles. Publishers justify this barrier by citing the cost of editing, reviewing and publishing submissions. But many academics believe top journals are using their reputations as must-reads for particular disciplines or industries to charge exorbitant fees. Prices have also been driven up by the bundling of periodicals, which university libraries must subscribe to as a block. So costly is this bottleneck that a [memo](#) to Harvard University's 2,100 teaching and research staff declared the arrangement “fiscally unsustainable” and encouraged them to submit research to free, open access journals instead.

In 2011, the UK government [set up](#) a working group to discuss open access research solutions. In the UK, there has been [particular agitation](#) for change because research—especially in the sciences—is often publicly funded yet unavailable to the public. The working group's 2012 report [advised](#) against forcing journals to open up. After all, how can journals be funded if not by their readership?

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There are two options for guaranteeing open access to research: going green or going gold. Green access is where researchers deposit their papers and articles in online databases usually run by university libraries that offer free access to the public. Although this is a swift and transparent service, it does not cover the costs of editing or peer reviewing papers. It therefore opens access only to research papers that are works in progress or that have been previously published in peer-reviewed journals and then embargoed before being released to depositories.

The UK working group's report pushed for the gold access model instead, whereby existing journals make their published material publicly available through open access online. Who foots the bill for the editorial process? Gold access requires authors who want their articles reviewed to pay a fee to the journal. David Willets, UK minister for universities and science, [endorsed the proposal](#), arguing that removing paywalls will "allow academics and businesses to develop and commercialise their research more easily and herald a new era of academic discovery".

The problem with switching to a gold access model is that it would benefit publicly funded research in the sciences at the expense of academia's other disciplines. Whereas the cost of submitting to journals can be [incorporated into](#) a project's initial budget for most scientific research, there is no clear procedure for self-funded or partially funded researchers in the arts, humanities and social sciences.

Another troubling scenario with the gold access model would be journals charging researchers exorbitant prices to submit articles for peer review, meaning only the work of well-funded researchers and institutions would be taken seriously at the highest levels. As Paul Ayris, director of library services at University College London, [commented](#), university departments will be required to pay "whatever amount key publishers choose to charge". Under the gold access proposal, the right to read will be won at the expense of journals no longer taking submissions from poorer universities or poorer researchers.

In supporting the move to open access, other options that would not create dependence on governments or external funders should be considered. Governments should stop allowing publishing companies to group their subscription deals monopolistically. Splitting up the subscription monoliths would inject competition back into the publishing world and reward those journals using the internet to reduce their costs or gain greater non-academic audiences. One of the most important trailblazers using the internet has been [eLife](#), a journal created by the Wellcome Trust and other supporters to "look beyond the status quo" in terms of how scientific research is communicated. eLife came from the academic community itself and provides complete open access alongside top-tier expertise. This kind of model would be more likely to set in motion an open access trend if existing publishers were not allowed such an anti-competitive grip on the industry.

Academic journals play such a fundamental role for society's success that any changes must be carefully considered. Although there are clear benefits to making research publications open

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access, proposed changes the UK government supports would benefit only the scientific community. This reflects the government's trend of supporting higher education only insofar as it provides direct, material results that benefit a political agenda. Since the time of Socrates, academic inquiry has made space for dissenting views regardless of wealth or status. Indeed, academic journals only began in the 17th century when the Royal Society's proceedings were published in journal form out of a firm conviction that research could only progress through the open exchange of ideas. The freedom to submit to a journal without paying for the privilege is central to this belief. But perhaps that is just history and not a discipline worth supporting.

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