

Publications Committee Report, 2005.

It has been a quiet year for the publications committee. The new editor of American Journal of Botany seems to be off to a good start and Judy has not mentioned any concerns that the committee should address. Likewise, Plant Science Bulletin is going well and the editor did not have anything of concern for the committee.

Perhaps the topic of open access publication is appropriate for this report. Patrick Herendeen attended several events focused on open access this year and has written up a report for BSA and ASPT on a session sponsored by AIBS in May. That report is included here. Open access is a subject that society publishers like BSA and ASPT will need to monitor closely.

Open Access – AIBS Meeting 8-9 May 2005

Report written jointly for BSA and ASPT

AIBS organized a discussion on open access (“OA”) during the council meeting on Sunday afternoon, 8 May, and a full day session on Monday, 9 May, that included a broader audience and speaker panel.

The individual presentations will be made available on the AIBS web site in the near future.

The session was informative, although there was a certain amount of repetition from the AAAS sessions on open access and the Allen Press Emerging Trends symposium on open access. I already prepared a detailed report on the AAAS session. Rather than provide details on each talk in this program I provide an overall summary. One thing that is important to remember is that “open access” publishing does not mean “free” publishing. There are real costs involved in publication, even electronic publication, and someone must pay these costs. There is a wide variety of approaches being taken to OA. The concept behind some implementations of OA is that payment shifts from consumers (i.e., library subscribers) to producers (authors), the so-called “pure” open access. PLoS (Public Library of Science) is the most prominent example of this model of open access. But there are other approaches that are being explored. There is a great deal of experimentation going on, and a considerable amount of time in these sessions was devoted to exploring various options and examples. There is no one answer that will fit all fields and publishers.

The open access movement developed as a response to the problem of rapidly escalating journal prices, primarily due to a few commercial publishers, with the initial focus on medical literature and publicly funded research. While the goal of broader dissemination of scholarly literature is laudable, the “author pays” approach to financing publication will not work for all disciplines. One of the speakers noted that in most cases federal funding subsidizes research, it does not pay for it completely. Likewise federal funding subsidizes many other services, products, and

activities. The argument that scientific literature should be free to users because federal funding paid for the research is a flawed argument.

Mary Waltham (publishing consultant) provided good background information on Open Access, concepts, definitions, etc. Open Access (“OA”) today means a diversity of things to different groups so it is important to be clear on meaning. One of the more interesting talks was by Carl Bergstrom on the economics of publishing and open access. He presented very interesting graphics illustrating the differences in cost and quality in society published vs. corporate journals.

“Pure” Open Access. The core principal of open access is making the literature widely available on the internet and free to the user. Differences emerge in the timing of free access and how to cover the costs of publication. What has been described as “pure” open access is a system in which the literature is freely available immediately upon publication. PLoS is the most prominent example of pure OA. To pay the costs involved in publishing the author of a paper that is accepted for publication is expected to pay a fee for publication of the paper. These fees may be around \$1,000 – \$2,000. PLoS is just getting started and it will take some time before we know whether this business model will be viable. At present PLoS is subsidized by a major grant. Because the fee is paid when a manuscript is accepted, one concern is that financial constraints could influence manuscript acceptance decisions.

Open Access After Embargo Period. An alternative that some publishers have adopted is to make the publication freely available after some “embargo period” during which subscribers must pay for access. This model has been adopted by some publishers so that institutional subscriptions are not endangered and the cost of publication continues to be paid by the consumer. The idea is that the embargo period approach may provide moderation in journal prices because if the price is too high libraries will decide to wait out the embargo period. One significant concern is determining the appropriate embargo period because one that is too short may endanger subscriptions. Different fields of science have very different patterns of literature usage. The “citation half life” in taxonomy or plant anatomy is much longer than it is in evo-devo, for example, and this can influence how long readers may be willing to wait for free content. In the examples I have seen recently embargo periods seem to range from six months to two years.

Per Article OA. Some publishers are experimenting with “per article open access” through a fee paid by the author. Under this approach an author pays a fee to the publisher and in return the article is made freely available online to anyone. The fees that have been established for such a service range from quite modest (several hundred) to several thousand. An author may decide whether he/she wishes to make the article freely available. In this way individual articles are OA but the journal as a whole is not. The Entomological Society of America charges 75% of the price an author would pay for 100 reprints (currently 61% of authors participate). So long as not too many articles are OA this should not endanger subscriptions. Determining what is “too many” can be difficult. Some publishers have established a sliding scale for fees such that the price goes up as more authors elect to participate. Several of the commercial publishers have adopted per article OA arrangements.

Author Archiving. Another issue discussed by Mary and others was “author archiving” or “self archiving” of articles. In this case authors post e-copy of their papers on personal or institutional web sites, or in the case of the recent NIH initiative, archiving by a major institution. In the case of Systematic Botany authors have the right to use their publications as they wish, so they are free to participate in author archiving. Some publishers impose an embargo period on this form of OA (e.g., Entomological Society of America allows author archiving after 24 months). Most people do not seem to think that author archiving poses a significant challenge to subscriptions, in part because the individual articles are dispersed.

Economic Considerations

Professional societies are advised to diversify our income base so that we are not so dependant on library subscriptions. However, this is easier said than done! Income comes from memberships, institutional subscriptions, page charges, advertising, royalty fees, annual meeting, reprint sales, and several other minor categories. Some societies make significant income from their annual meeting, but these are usually much larger groups and registration fees are considerably higher than what the botanical community has supported. The annual botany meeting is priced as low as possible to encourage maximum attendance. Pricing higher to increase income is counter to the philosophy the participating societies have adopted. Advertising in a small niche market such as botany will never generate great amounts of income. Thus it seems to me that the only real scope we have for generating greater income to reduce the reliance on library subscriptions is society membership. Charging higher membership rates does not seem to be viable, so that leaves enlarging the membership.

How can we bring in more people to join BSA and ASPT? Some societies have created a “Members Only” section on their web site where restricted access materials are posted that are thought to have the potential to attract members to the society. For example, the members only area could include job announcements, the society’s newsletter, review articles, book reviews, opinion pieces, news & views, etc. In addition, some societies place “preprint” articles in the members only area. These are the author’s final revised manuscripts that have been accepted for publication (note- this is what NIH is requesting authors submit to PubMed Central to meet its open access goal). The preprints would be available to members only until they are published, at which time they would be removed from the members only area and would be subject to whatever access policy is adopted for the online journal (e.g., 12 month embargo for OA). The idea is that increasing the benefits of membership in this way would encourage people to join the society and therefore reduce the dependence on institutional subscriptions. However, posting author’s final manuscripts on a members only site would be counter to the goals of open access. The philosophy at present is that making these resources freely available rather than restricting access to them will attract people to the society. Although a members only area is counter to the way we have done things, perhaps it is worth thinking about. Other ideas to enhance membership and reduce reliance on institutional subscriptions need to be explored. When this problem is solved we will be in a better position to take a more aggressive approach to open access.

I believe we do not need to feel too much guilt and pressure to act on open access before a well thought out strategy is developed. Our journal prices are quite reasonable. I would favor efforts to enhance distribution of the journals to developing countries as having greater immediate priority than open access in general. It seems to be that some sort of embargo approach is the most sensible for us to explore. Clearly the PLoS “pure” model is not practical for BSA and ASPT in the foreseeable future.

Patrick Herendeen