OPEN ACCESS
What You Need to Know Now

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Researchers and scholars give away the results of their work, most commonly in the form of peer-reviewed journal articles, so that others can benefit from that work and build on it (and so their work will be recognized and have impact). We gain the most as a society and as individuals when that’s a symmetric process—when researchers and others can use those results without economic or other barriers.

That, in a nutshell, is what open access (OA) is all about. Open access literature is available online to be read for free by anyone, anytime, anywhere—as long as they have Internet access.

That’s a simple definition that surrounds a complex set of issues and definitions. This Special Report lays out some of those issues, shows areas where librarians can become effective advocates for OA and guides you to other resources for understanding, tracking and using OA.

First consider the question above: Who cares? More specifically, why should you and your library care about OA?

THE SHORT VERSION
Academic librarians and special librarians should care about OA for several reasons, including these:

- OA means that researchers and practitioners among your patrons can take advantage of the latest work in their field of interest without adding to your library’s resource burdens.
- Your library almost certainly cannot provide all the journal literature that might be useful to your patrons. OA gets past that limitation.
- Your library budget is being squeezed by online and print journal costs—particularly in the fields of science, technology, engineering, and medicine (STEM)—that grow much faster than inflation and leave little or no room for acquisitions in other areas. Widespread OA can ease that burden, allowing a more balanced set of expenditures in the future.
Public librarians should care about OA for more general reasons, including these:

- Effective open access speeds research and reduces wasted efforts by assuring that researchers can stay fully up to date on what’s already been done. That benefits us all.
- You have practitioners and other patrons who need to know more about special topics in health and other areas where the journal literature is important, and still more patrons who wish to explore specialized areas. OA means your patrons can explore and learn as freely and as deeply as they choose.
- Chances are, there are independent researchers and scholars within your community—research and scholarship isn’t limited to universities, colleges, and research labs. Those researchers and scholars need access to the journal literature just as much as institutional scholars. OA is the only plausible way to provide that access.

School librarians should care about OA for the same reasons all citizens should care about OA. Those reasons have to do with equity, access, fairness, and improved research productivity. They’re explored in more detail in “The Moral and Pragmatic Case for Open Access,” below.

**I Heard About an Article that Concerns Me . . .**

Consider a simple scenario. You or one of your patrons has read two newspaper articles describing research results you want to know more about. Maybe your patron has an obscure disease and the articles discuss promising research toward cures. Maybe you’re tracking a new technology and the articles discuss important developments. One of the newspaper articles cites an article in *PLoS Biology* or *PLoS One*—or an article from any of a number of high energy–physics journals. The second cites an article in a journal that’s either prestigious and very expensive or obscure and not readily available. (What does very expensive mean? Quite a few journals cost more than $10,000 per year for institutional subscriptions, and bundles of online journals can cost libraries hundreds of thousands or millions of dollars per year. Individual article charges can readily run $30 or more, when individual articles are even available.)

In the second case, you may not be able to read the journal article itself—a vitally important step, especially given the mixed quality of science and medical writing in most newspapers and online sources. If you or your patron can, it will be because your library is spending substantial sums of money to support that access, because somebody pays a significant sum for a copy of the particular article, or because you’re (eventually) able to acquire an ILL copy within the tight restrictions on article lending and borrowing. For an obscure journal, even finding ways to acquire the article may cause delays.

In the first case, neither delays nor cost are involved. As long as you or your patron has access to the Internet (and nearly all public libraries provide such access), the journal article is freely and immediately available to read and save for further use.

That’s OA in action: making research more useful and readers better informed.
THE MORAL AND PRAGMATIC CASE FOR OPEN ACCESS

Here’s how John Willinsky puts it in The Access Principle: “A commitment to the value and quality of research carries with it a responsibility to extend the circulation of this work as far as possible, and ideally to all who are interested in it and might profit by it.”

Given the current state of technology, “as far as possible” appears to be open access. That doesn’t reach the ideal, as only about 25 percent of the world’s population has Internet access in 2010, but it’s a huge improvement over known alternatives. Articles available through some version of OA are immediately available to anybody who’s interested and might benefit, as long as they have Internet access—with no delay and no price or permission barriers.

That’s a phenomenal change, a situation nearly unimaginable a few decades ago and nowhere near universality now. Peter Suber calls this the last-mile problem for knowledge, comparable to the last-mile problem faced by telecommunications providers (that is, getting the signal that last mile to each individual house or business):

We’re facing a last-mile problem for knowledge. We’re pretty good at doing research, writing it up, vetting it, publishing it, and getting it to locations (physical libraries and web sites) close to users. We could be better at all those things, but any problems we encounter along the way are early- or mid-course problems. The last-mile problem is the one at the end of the process: making individualized connections to all the individual users who need to read that research.

The last-mile problem for knowledge is not new. Indeed, for all of human history until recently it has been inseparable from knowledge itself and all our technologies for sharing it. It’s only of interest today because the internet and OA give us unprecedented means for solving it, or at least for closing the gap significantly.

The breakdown of OA arguments into moral and pragmatic issues that follows is Peter Suber’s. (Some of these points are paraphrased and expanded from a list in Peter Suber’s “Open access and the self-correction of knowledge.”)

Moral Arguments for Open Access

First and foremost, OA reduces access barriers for readers and authors alike. Discovery may still be an issue, but again—if you can get to the Internet and if the article’s OA (and if you understand the language or trust Internet translation tools), you can read it.

The Budapest Open Access Initiative—the document that, more than any other, established open access as a term—includes this straightforward argument: “Removing access barriers to this literature will accelerate research, enrich education, share the learning of the rich with the poor and the poor with the rich, make this literature as useful as it can be, and lay the foundation for uniting humanity in a common intellectual conversation and quest for knowledge.”

Libraries serve as the intellectual commons for many communities. Open access expands that commons by returning the results of research and scholarship to the commons. It also serves the community by eliminating wealth as a precursor for access.
Open access specifically serves the underserved, those least able to acquire scholarship either through library support or through direct contact with the authors. Open access also substitutes an abundance of access for the artificial scarcity created through traditional subscription mechanisms—and serves to counter inappropriate distribution of knowledge by making it universally available.

Scholars and researchers write journal articles for impact and communication rather than to make money. Open access fulfills this motivation by making those articles as widely available as is currently possible—and, in so doing, returns the control of scholarship to the scholars themselves.

Finally, for that very large subset of research supported by public funds (e.g., the many billions of dollars of NIH-funded research), open access is an issue of fundamental fairness to the taxpayers, those who paid for the research in the first place.

**Pragmatic Arguments for Open Access**

By making all existing research available to anyone wishing to use it, OA accelerates the research process and makes researchers and practitioners more productive. It also makes research more useful by making outcomes directly available to a wider audience, thus increasing the research funder’s return on investment. In other words, OA is simply good business for the research community.

Open access also helps authors find readers—and readers find authors. It means that articles can reach a wider audience at a lower cost than is feasible through subscriptions and licensing. Open access unquestionably saves money for readers. It should also save money for researchers and for libraries.

Journals benefit from OA because published articles are more discoverable and useful. Gold OA journals can attract more readers, authors, and related funding sources. Traditional journals supporting full green OA (with fully edited articles deposited immediately into repositories) gain similar benefits. Agencies funding research also benefit from OA because the results of their funding can reach much wider audiences and be used more effectively in future research and practice.

Enlarging the intellectual commons sounds nice and is an excellent moral argument. The pragmatic equivalent is that open access builds stronger communities of researchers and users alike, widens dialogue within and among these communities, and can support better cooperation within and among the communities.

Libraries are also about long-term access. Open access can improve preservation prospects by making it feasible to copy articles and sets of articles and to migrate materials to new platforms as needed.

Some varieties of open access aren’t just about reading. To the extent that OA becomes full open access, it can help create new knowledge by allowing text mining, data crunching, automated summarizing, and other computer-assisted techniques.

Finally, open access improves the reliability of inquiry. It invites the whole world to find faults with claims made by scientists and scholars. As Peter Suber says:

OA facilitates the testing and validation of knowledge claims. OA enhances the process by which science is self-correcting. OA improves
the reliability of inquiry. . . . [W]e must issue “a standing invitation to the whole world” to find fault with our knowledge claims. This requires disseminating our claims as widely as possible. We don’t have to com-pel everyone to read our work and comment on it. . . . But we do have to make our claims available to everyone who might care to read and comment on them.4

THE SPECIAL CASE OF ACADEMIC AND SPECIAL LIBRARIES
The case for open access applies to all libraries and librarians, and should be strong enough to convince forward-thinking librarians to support OA and help move it forward. For academic libraries and many special libraries (specifically those that support researchers), there’s another set of arguments, having to do with the roles of libraries and financial realities.5

Libraries need to provide both strong physical collections and access to resources beyond those physical collections. Academic libraries should do their best to assure long-term access to resources in all disciplines, including those disciplines where the primary publication method is the monograph. Libraries should acquire, organize, and secure long-term access to the things that make us a civilization, the thinking, knowledge and wisdom set down in articles, books, and other media.

Effective long-term access involves several interrelated issues, including:

- The money to acquire physical resources and provide access to other resources, and to pay the professional staff to determine what to acquire
- The means—money and procedures—to assure effective access, through cataloging and other organization and discovery techniques
- The wherewithal—determination, money, and procedures—to preserve physical works and digital resources and assure that future generations can use those resources

Science, technology, engineering, and medicine (STEM) consume most of the serial budgets of most academic libraries. Indeed, STEM journals consume most of the total acquisitions and access budgets of most academic libraries. But refereed STEM journal articles aren’t all there is to science, technology, engineering, and medicine, and certainly not all there is to scholarly and human creativity.

Even in STEM, monographs play a role, as do working papers, datasets, and other “gray” materials that don’t fit into the refereed-journal-article mold. Outside—in the humanities and social sciences—monographs and other books may be the primary means of communicating progress. For that matter, serial publications other than refereed scholarly journals play significant roles in the record of human creativity that should be the stuff of libraries.

The Current Journal Model Is Broken and Getting Worse
Too many STEM journals cost too much money, and increase in price at too rapid a rate, for libraries to sustain the level of access they need. The cost of STEM journal access distorts library budgets, driving out the less expensive journals and monographs
and other resources. The current model, with several large commercial publishers dominating the field of STEM publishing and charging what they believe the market will bear, is unsustainable. It is already breaking down, with even the wealthiest libraries canceling large numbers of journals.

It’s also getting worse because more research leads to even more specialized, journals, most of them from commercial publishers—and if researchers need those journals, that places even more pressure on existing resources. For example (as reported at Ars Technica in an item most recently updated on August 18, 2010), one recent study found that 23 new journals for stem cell research have been established since 2004—going from three journals entirely focused on stem cells in 2004 to 18 at this point, and from eight with relevant overlaps to stem cell research to 16.

It is apparent that some major commercial publishers fully intend to charge what the market will bear. They have succeeded in acquiring most of the highest-profile journals, including many that were originally modestly priced society-published journals, and in raising prices so as to assure profit margins far in excess of those enjoyed by most book publishers and companies in other industries.

I am not arguing that these publishers don’t add value. Clearly they do. I am arguing that the subscription model simply will not stand: it is already breaking down and will continue to break down, probably at an accelerating rate.

The current model is also broken from a philosophical perspective: it makes it more difficult for scholars, researchers, and practitioners, especially independents and those at smaller institutions, to keep up with work in their field.

Open access strives to correct the philosophical breakage. When OA becomes nearly complete, and to the extent that OA is provided through OA journals (see chapter 2), it can also help correct the financial breakage.

Open access journals can relieve cost pressures on libraries. Open access journals can reduce the cost structure of the entire scholarly publishing enterprise. Libraries may even be sensible candidates to carry out the organizational tasks involved in publishing an electronic-only open access journal.

The current journal model didn’t just start breaking down recently. For example, the University of California, Berkeley carried out significant serial budget cuts more than thirty years ago because its budget couldn’t keep up with price increases. (I know; I was there.) But it’s getting worse . . . enough worse that, despite the best efforts of commercial publishers to assure us that everything’s OK, it’s clear that things must change.

The University of California and the Nature Publishing Group

Here’s just one example of how bad things are getting, one that created a sensation. It’s also an interesting example of how commercial publishers try to pit scholars against scholars and universities against universities. On June 4, 2010, the California Digital Library (CDL, which negotiates University of California–wide access arrangements) sent a letter to UC faculty members noting that Nature Publishing Group (NPG) proposed to quadruple UC’s site license fees for 2011. CDL, on UC’s behalf, pushed back—suggesting that CDL might have to suspend subscriptions to the 67 journals (including Nature itself) that UC currently buys access to, and that it might be time for a systemwide boycott of NPG journals, a voluntary boycott encouraging UC researchers
not to contribute papers to NPG journals, review manuscripts for those journals, or serve on their editorial boards.

This is strong stuff—and, along with the letter, CDL noted some of the numbers about UC systemwide online journal subscriptions. About 8,000 journals are involved—at average costs for the ten-campus licenses between $3,000 and $7,000 per journal. The proposed NPG fee would raise the price per journal from a current $4,465 to more than $17,000. Meanwhile, UC faculty have contributed more than 5,000 articles to NPG journals over the past six years.

It’s hard to believe that NPG thought a California public institution has additional funds in 2010 or didn’t know CDL has been negotiating workable compromises with other publishers. But NPG, which increased the price of institutional print subscriptions for Scientific American from $50 to $300 after acquiring the magazine, apparently felt it could get away with it. A June 9, 2010, NPG press release accused CDL of “sensationalist use of data out of context” and “misrepresentation of NPG pricing policies” and seemed to suggest that other universities were actually subsidizing UC’s access to NPG publications. More dueling press releases followed, with UC noting that NPG’s average annual price increases were three times the rate of inflation and roughly as much per year as UC’s materials budget increases over five years. If you want to dig deeper into the UC-NPG situation, recognizing that it’s only one case out of many (but higher profile than most), you should have no trouble finding dozens of commentaries and source documents. One excellent commentary, noting the ancillary damage to humanities, came from Bethany Nowviskie on June 9, 2010, under the title “fight club soap”; I suggest reading it directly at http://nowviskie.org/2010/fight-club-soap/. Peter Suber discusses “California against Nature” in the July 2, 2010, SPARC Open Access Newsletter (www.earlham.edu/~peters/fos/newsletter/07-02-10.htm), including not only several dozen links to elements of and commentaries on this particular conflict but also other items that put it in some context. This specific incident may not lead to immediate change—but by late August 2010, a joint statement took a conciliatory tone and CDL was once again negotiating with NPG—but it’s indicative. And it’s not alone. Several other major institutions have either canceled bundles of journals or have plans to do so. This incident, although extreme, may be typical of what we’re seeing and will continue to see as the existing subscription journal system breaks down. We have a respected publisher accusing a respected university of misrepresentation and misinformation, attempting to turn libraries and universities against one another, and seemingly suggesting that NPG was a more worthy recipient of a few last drops of blood from UC’s budgetary turnip than other publishers. This behavior only makes sense in a time when the whole enterprise is beginning to crumble.

There’s another issue here. The University of California includes an exceptionally large number of highly regarded researchers. It has real power when negotiating with publishers. Most universities, most colleges have nowhere near the negotiating power. If UC can’t afford the journals its researchers need, even with substantial discounts, how can smaller institutions even hope to provide adequate access? Open access may be the only long-term answer to that question.
The Breaking Model Damages Secondary Players First
There’s reason to believe that it isn’t the big commercial publishers and their overpriced journals that will be hit first as the subscription model continues to crumble. The first to go tend to be journals with smaller audiences and lesser reputations, including many of the more reasonably priced journals and those in the humanities.

The breaking model causes one specific economic dislocation and clarifies another economic distortion. The economic dislocation: journal subscriptions shove out monograph and other acquisitions. Some libraries have protected monographic budgets, and that may be a partial solution. The economic distortion is more sensitive: libraries have been underwriting professional societies indirectly, and can no longer afford to do so.

In essence, academic libraries need open access if they’re to continue any real semblance of maintaining long-term access to the records of the civilization. Harvard can’t subscribe to everything that would serve its researchers—and neither can any other institution. From the smallest academic libraries to the largest, and including most special libraries, support for open access is important to the libraries’ own long-term health and effectiveness.

A FEW WORDS ABOUT SCHOLARLY JOURNAL PUBLISHING
Before exploring open access further, you should understand the basics of scholarly journal publishing. Oversimplifying somewhat, here are the steps:

1. One or more scholars and researchers write an article describing the results of their research and scholarship. At this point, the authors automatically gain copyright in the article and can legally post the draft article.
2. The authors submit the article to a journal, where the article is reviewed by other scholars (peer review) and either accepted, rejected, or returned for revision. Almost all peer review is performed for free as part of scholarship, with the editor(s) managing the review process.
3. At some point between submission and acceptance, the publisher will require some written agreement from the authors—either assigning copyright to the publisher or granting specific right to the publisher. The consideration for this grant or assignment is not payment; it is publication. (Scholarly journal articles almost never involve payments to the authors, although the publisher may require payment from the authors or other agencies.)
4. The publisher carries out various tasks, including line editing, copy editing, proofreading, layout and markup, actual publication (print or electronic), and marketing or publicity. All of those tasks involve money or voluntary effort.

At the beginning of the process, the authors have clear legal rights to make the draft articles openly available, rights that may or may not continue past submission.
and acceptance. At the end of the process, access to either the submitted article or the published article—or some in-between state—depends on the agreements between the authors and publisher and the publisher’s policies. The heart of open access is improving those agreements and policies to assure that articles are freely available once they’re published.

CONCLUSION
Open access (OA) has enormous potential benefits for society as a whole and for your library and patrons in particular. That said, there’s a lot more to consider—and you should be aware that this book is a quick overview of a field about which millions of words have been written.

Chapter 2, “Understanding the Basics,” defines key terms in OA in more detail, cites some key documents and players, offers some notes on the state of OA in mid-2010, and considers predecessors to OA.

Chapter 3, “Issues for Open Access,” considers some real issues involved in moving OA forward.

Chapter 4, “Open Access Controversies,” considers two very different areas: a set of false controversies that opponents of OA continue to raise—and a different set of legitimate controversies.

Chapter 5, “Taking Action,” suggests roles for libraries and librarians to be actively involved in the progress of OA.

Chapter 6, “Exploring Open Access,” offers some resources for further investigation, including periodicals, blogs, books and others. Most (but not all) of these resources are themselves OA.

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4. Ibid.
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