

There's no justifying Research Council UK's support for gold open access

Higher education institutions are currently subsidising publishers at the expense of both the general public and the future standing of UK research, says **Stevan Harnad**

Unlike some forms of publication, academic [research](#) is publicly funded, conducted, peer-reviewed and reported so that it can be used, applied and built upon by the widest possible research community, not just those whose institutions can afford to subscribe to the journal in which it is published. Journals are expensive and even the [richest institutions](#) can only afford to subscribe to a [fraction](#) of them. As a result, potential [research progress is lost](#).

The answer is to make research [open access](#) (OA) in one of two ways. The first charges an author's institution a fee for publication instead of charging the user's institution a subscription fee for access. This is known as [gold OA](#) but most journals today are not [gold OA journals](#). The other route, [green OA](#), sees researchers publish their work in the most suitable subscription journal and make their final, peer-reviewed draft free for all [self-archiving](#) it in their institution's OA repository.

Providing gold OA is in the hands of publishers while green OA is in the hands of researchers. Gold OA fees are high, with funds currently locked into institutional subscriptions. Since most institutions already have repositories for a variety of uses, green OA costs nothing but a few extra keystrokes per paper, a server, some free software and a little set-up and maintenance.

Just as researchers need 'publish or perish' mandates from their institutions and funders to ensure they release research findings, rather than putting them in a desk drawer where no one can access them, they require self-archiving mandates to ensure findings are accessible to all potential users, not just subscribers.

The UK has led the world in the adoption of green OA mandates by both funders and institutions. The world's first was [adopted at the University of Southampton](#) in 2003. Southampton also provided the first free software for creating institutional OA repositories. Both the software and the [policy](#) have since become models of practice worldwide, although OA repository creation has grown 10 times faster than green OA mandate adoption.

Institutional mandates received an initial boost in 2004 from the UK parliamentary select committee's [historic recommendation on green OA](#). Within a few years, all the Research Council UK (RCUK) funding councils had mandated green OA, with US and EU funders and institutions soon following suit.

However, some publishers have [lobbied strongly against green OA](#), arguing that it will

destroy journal [publishing](#) and peer review. The alternative offered is 'hybrid gold OA', where a journal continues to collect subscription revenues but offers authors the option of paying an additional (sometimes sizeable) publication fee for the journal to make their article gold OA, along with the promise that as income grows, subscription prices will be reduced.

Hybrid gold OA is an excellent way for journals to preserve their current income streams come what may, but it is not a very good way to provide open access. The fees are high and institutional funds are still locked into subscriptions at a time when research funds are already scarce. Understandably then, uptake of hybrid gold OA (as well as 'pure' gold OA) is currently very low. But all that might change.

In July, publishers managed to persuade the Finch committee and UK science minister to divert enough of the UK's [research funding](#) to pay for gold OA (whether hybrid or pure) to ensure that all [UK research output is open access within two years](#). As a result, there is a tentative plan to modify RCUK's mandate on OA, requiring researchers to choose gold OA payment over cost-free green OA wherever the former is offered. The result, of course, will be that all [journals blithely offer hybrid gold OA](#), with the prospect of a publicly subsidised increase of 6% to their gross annual income – the UK produces about 6% of research published worldwide.

Even if this gratuitous waste of research funds is deemed affordable to the UK, it is certainly not affordable to the rest of the world. And if the RCUK policy proposal is not revised to remove this new clause and instead strengthen and reinforce green OA mandates, the UK will lose its historic leadership of the global open access movement along with a good deal of public money that could have been spent on supporting more research instead of subsidising publishers in the name of open access. The policy is also likely to engender a good deal of [resistance and non-compliance from researchers](#).

If and when globally mandated, green OA will empower institutions to cancel their journal holdings. This will not only force journals to cut costs and downsize to providing the service of peer review alone – at a much more reasonable price – but it will also release the institutional subscription money to pay for it. To pay pre-emptively instead for gold OA is to let the publishing tail keep wagging the research dog at the expense of both the public and of continued progress in research.

Stevan Harnad is a professor of web and internet science at [University of Southampton](#) and Canada research chair in cognitive sciences at [Université du Québec à Montréal](#)

GavinMoodie

3 September 2012 10:32PM

Thanx again to Professor Harnad for leading thought on open access.

I think it most unlikely that other countries will follow the UK in mandating gold open access. The UK's perseverance with gold open access would thus be an unreciprocated gift to the world

research community. While such public spirited generosity is laudable, I'm not sure that this is what Finch and the UK Government intends.

StevanHarnad

3 September 2012 11:34PM

WHAT'S UNJUSTIFIED IS NOT SUPPORTING GOLD OA BUT FORCING RCUK FUNDEES TO CHOOSE PAID HYBRID GOLD OA OVER COST-FREE GREEN OA

(The title assigned to my essay was not chosen by me.)

If the UK has the money to spare, it can spend it on Gold OA.

And it's not only fine but essential to mandate that RCUK fundees provide OA to their published journal articles.

What is not fine is forcing RCUK fundees to pay hybrid (subscription/Gold) publishers extra for hybrid Gold OA rather than letting them providing Green OA themselves, by self-archiving their published articles in their institutional repositories, cost-free.

I never used the word "true" in the passage: "Hybrid gold OA is an excellent way for journals to preserve their current income streams come what may, but it is not a very good way to provide *true* open access." I just said "open access" (and that's all I meant).

(The usual rhetoric is that only Gold OA, and not Green OA, is "true" OA: I of course completely reject that. Also the notion that "Gratis OA" [free online access] is not "true" OA, only "Libre OA" [free online access plus certain re-use rights] is "true" OA. -- OA, too, has its fundamentalists, and you will be hearing from them in the comments on this essay...)

I will be giving a keynote on "[How and Why the RCUK Open Access Policy Needs to Be Revised](#)" at Digital Research 2012 at St. Catherine's College, Oxford, on September 11th

rossmounce

4 September 2012 12:02AM

As a current researcher I disagree entirely with Stevan's position here.

Gold Open Access enables text mining and content mining research (as previously covered in the Guardian <http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/2012/may/23/text-mining-research-tool-forbidden>).

These techniques have the "potential to create 250bnUSD (200bnGBP) of annual value to Europe's economy" [quote from Guardian article linked above] and thus are *certainly* worth paying a little bit to enable.

Green Open Access as endorsed by Stevan will **not** enable text mining or content mining research and thus we would only have 'free to read papers' but no additional benefit. Take a look at most institutional repositories across the country and you'll see Green OA is NOT working at the moment (and I see no reason why it would work as a mechanism for ensuring 100% open access in the future). There is metadata for publications but rarely in my experience are full text articles actually there to download. Thus Green OA (although theoretically an option) does not appear to work in practice. Gold OA does work (and has many research and economic benefits) and thus I support it, as do Research Councils UK and the UK government.

StevanHarnad

4 September 2012 12:51AM

DATA-MINING RIGHTS, PRIORITIES AND PRAGMATICS

- (1) All research and researchers urgently need and benefit from free online access ("Gratis OA") to the research to which their institutions cannot afford subscription access.
- (2) Not all research or researchers (either as author or as users) need text-mining rights or other re-use rights ("Libre OA").
- (3) Some do, and Libre OA rights will come, but it is out of reach today, for most research.
- (4) Gratis OA is within reach: all it needs is (effective) Green OA self-archiving mandates from researchers' institutions and funders.
- (5) Effective Green OA mandates require a compliance monitoring and verification mechanism, which most institutional and funder mandates today (including RCUK) still lack.
- (6) The effective compliance monitoring mechanism is (6a) for both funders and institutions to mandate convergent institutional deposit rather than divergent institution-external deposit, so institutions monitor compliance for their own output; (6b) deposit must be done immediately upon acceptance for publication (so any publisher embargo applies only to the date of making the deposit OA, not the date of making the deposit), and (6c) repository deposit must be designated as the sole mechanism for submitting publications for research assessment and performance evaluation (REF, etc.)
- (7) Using scarce research money to pay publishers extra for Gold OA with data-mining rights today is a waste of money for most research; it may be justified (if there are the funds to pay for it) for some fields of research.
- (8) Effective universal Green OA mandates from institutions and funders worldwide will not only deliver global Gratis OA, but they are also the fastest, surest and cheapest way to induce a transition to Libre Gold OA.

Gareth100

4 September 2012 11:29AM

Response to [rossmounce](#), 4 September 2012 12:02AM

Anything that takes funding away from research and uses it to subsidise publishers is a very bad idea, in these particularly straitened times, it is something that the UK research community cannot support.

If anyone wants a pdf copy of any of my papers, they will get one if they email me.

This initiative (like so much from this current government) has been poorly thought out.

StevanHarnad

4 September 2012 1:00PM

@Gareth100: *"If anyone wants a pdf copy of any of my papers, they will get one if they email me"*

Why not just deposit in your [institutional repository](#)? Saves a lot of [keystrokes](#). Even during a

publisher OA [embargo](#).

rossmounce

4 September 2012 11:56AM

Response to [Gareth100](#), 4 September 2012 11:29AM

Dear Gareth100,

Textmining often requires access to MILLIONS of papers. It is wonderful that you will provide me access to your paper if I email you. But this is not a remotely feasible mechanism to get access to millions of papers.

Gold OA ensures instant and permanent availability for research. Green OA is distinctly patchy.

StevanHarnad

4 September 2012 12:37PM

PATCHINESS, PRICEYNESS, PRIORITIES AND PRAGMATICS

@rossmounce: "Textmining often requires access to MILLIONS of papers. It is wonderful that you will provide me access to your paper if I email you. But this is not a remotely feasible mechanism to get access to millions of papers. Gold OA ensures instant and permanent availability for research. Green OA is distinctly patchy."

And, as noted, text-mining rights for those MILLIONS of papers would cost MILLIONS AND MILLIONS of pounds for just the UK's 6% of yearly research output, over and above what the UK already pays publishers for subscriptions, if it were paid for as Libre Gold OA fees. Even more for the 94% from the rest of the world.

That's distinctly pricey for something that the UK alone can only supply patchily (6%), and for which the worldwide demand is in any case decidedly patchy.

(What percentage of the papers in what percentage of all fields do you think really need to have text-mining rights? And how urgent do you think that need is? And how does it compare with the need for free online access -- Gratis OA -- for all papers, today?)

Please come back when you have a cost/benefit analysis -- as well as a realistic practical strategy for reaching your desired outcome -- rather than repeating that you find Green OA "distinctly patchy".

Patchy it may be, but it is a practical compromise strategy that has already been tested and shown to work (where effectively implemented, along the lines I described, e.g., in [Belgium](#)).

And it is affordable, scaleable and sustainable, rather than needlessly squandering millions and millions to pay publishers even more, and for something that is not nearly as urgent nor as universally needed as free online access to peer-reviewed research.

jimblejumble

4 September 2012 12:19PM

Southampton also provided the first free software for creating institutional OA repositories.

Flogging EPrints again are we, eh Stevan?

StevanHarnad

4 September 2012 12:52PM

@jiblejumble: "*Flogging EPrints again are we?*"

No sham, Sherlock...