

Professor Ian Diamond
Chair, RCUK Executive Group
Research Councils UK Secretariat
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Date: 22 August

Dear Professor Diamond,

We are responding to the public letter, addressed to yourself, by Sally Morris (Executive Director of [ALPSP](#), the Association of Learned and Professional Society Publishers), concerning the [RCUK](#)'s proposed research [self-archiving](#) policy.

ALPSP says that the RCUK policy would have "disastrous consequences" for journals, yet all objective evidence is precisely contrary to this dire prediction. In the point-by-point rebuttal attached (below) to this letter, we document this on the basis of the actual data and a careful logical analysis. Here is a summary:

ALPSP argues that a policy of mandated self-archiving of research articles in freely accessible [repositories](#), when combined with the ready retrievability of those articles through search engines (such as [Google Scholar](#)) and interoperability (facilitated by standards such as [OAI-PMH](#)), "will accelerate the move to a disastrous scenario".

The disastrous scenario predicted by ALPSP is that an RCUK mandate would cause libraries to cancel subscriptions, which would in turn lead to the financial failure of scholarly journals, and so to the collapse of the quality control and peer review process that publishers manage.

Not only are these claims unsubstantiated, but [all the evidence to date](#) shows the reverse to be true: not only do journals thrive and co-exist alongside author self-archiving, but they can actually benefit from it -- both in terms of more [citations](#) and more subscriptions.

Moreover, there is a logical contradiction in the position adopted by ALPSP. On the one hand, ALPSP maintains that learned societies must be allowed to operate in a free market ("each publisher must have the right to establish the best way of expanding access to its journal content that is compatible with continuing viability"). Yet on the other hand, ALPSP is in effect asking RCUK to protect learned societies from the consequences of a free market -- specifically the right of those who have funded and produced research to make their product readily accessible for uptake by its intended users.

What no one denies is that today many researchers are unable to access all the research they need to do their work. As ALPSP itself acknowledges, researchers already have to make use of author self-archived articles in order to gain access to "otherwise inaccessible published articles," since [no research institution can afford](#) to subscribe to all the journals its researchers need.

In short, due to the current constraints on the accessibility of research results, the potential of British scholarship is not being maximised currently. Yet the constraints on

accessibility can now, in the digital age, be eliminated completely, to the benefit of the UK economy and society, exactly in the way RCUK has proposed.

For this reason, we believe that RCUK should go ahead and implement its immediate-self-archiving mandate, without further delay. That done, RCUK can meet with ALPSP and other interested parties to discuss and plan how the UK Institutional Repositories can collaborate with journals and their publishers in sharing the newfound benefits of maximising UK research access and impact.

(A point-by-point rebuttal is attached below. A longer analysis, signed also by some non-UK supporters, is at <http://www.ecs.soton.ac.uk/~harnad/Temp/alpsp.doc>)

Yours faithfully,

Professor Tim Berners-Lee (University of Southampton)
Professor Dave De Roure (University of Southampton)
Professor Stevan Harnad (University of Southampton)
Professor Nigel Shadbolt (University of Southampton)
Professor Derek Law (University of Strathclyde)
Dr. Peter Murray-Rust (University of Cambridge)
Professor Charles Oppenheim (Loughborough University)
Professor Yorick Wilks (University of Sheffield)

Point-by-point rebuttal:

ALPSP: a policy of mandated self-archiving of research articles in freely accessible repositories, when combined with the ready retrievability of those articles through search engines (such as Google Scholar) and interoperability (facilitated by standards such as OAI-PMH), will accelerate the move to a disastrous scenario.

This hypothesis has already been tested and the actual evidence affords not the slightest hint of any “move to a disastrous scenario.” Self-archiving is most advanced in physics, hence that is the strongest test of where it is moving: Since 1991, hundreds of thousands of articles have been made freely accessible and readily retrievable by physicists using the open archive called [arXiv](#); those articles have been extensively accessed, retrieved, used and cited by other researchers *exactly as their authors intended*. Yet when asked, both of the large physics learned societies (the Institute of Physics Publishing in the UK and the American Physical Society) responded very explicitly that they [cannot identify any loss of subscriptions](#) to their journals as a result of this critical mass of self-archived and readily retrievable physics articles¹.

ALPSP: Librarians will increasingly find that ‘good enough’ versions of a significant proportion of articles in journals are freely available; in a situation where they lack the funds to purchase all the content their users want, it is inconceivable that they would not seek to save money by cancelling subscriptions to those journals. As a result, those journals will die.

First, neither research topics nor research journals have national boundaries. RCUK-funded researchers publish articles in thousands of journals, and those articles represent the output of only a small fraction of the world’s research population. It is therefore extremely unlikely that a ‘significant proportion’ of the articles in any particular journal will become freely available as a consequence of the RCUK policy.

Second, as we know, [some](#) physics journals already *do* contain a ‘significant proportion’ of articles that have been self-archived in the physics repository, arXiv -- yet librarians have not cancelled subscriptions: the journals continue to survive and thrive.

ALPSP: *The consequences of the destruction of journals’ viability are very serious. Not only will it become impossible to support the whole process of quality control, including (but not limited to) peer review, but in addition, the research community will lose all the other value and prestige which is added, for both author and reader, through inclusion in a highly rated journal with a clearly understood audience and rich online functionality*

Wherever authors and readers value the rich online functionality added by publishers they will still wish to have access to the journal, either through personal subscriptions or through their libraries. This is obviously the case for the physics journals. Publishers who add significant value create a product that users and their institutions will pay for.

Researchers who cannot access the journal version, however – because their institutions “lack the funds to purchase all the content their users want” -- should not be denied access to the basic research results, which have always been given away for free by their authors (to their publishers, as well as to all requesters of reprints). Nor should those authors be denied the usage and impact of those users. Such limitations on access have always [hampered the impact and progress](#) of British scholarship.

ALPSP: *We absolutely reject unsupported assertions that self-archiving in publicly accessible repositories does not and will not damage journals. Indeed, we are accumulating a growing body of evidence that the opposite is the case, even at this early stage.*

For example:

[1] *Increasingly, librarians are making use of COUNTER-compliant (and therefore comparable) usage statistics to guide their decisions to renew or cancel journals. The Institute of Physics Publishing is therefore concerned to see that article downloads from its site are significantly lower for those journals whose content is substantially replicated in the ArXiv repository than for those which are not.*

And what is the evidence supporting the assertion that ‘the opposite is the case’ and journals are damaged? None. As we know, the Institute of Physics Publishing (like the American Physical Society) has already stated publicly that it cannot identify any loss of subscriptions as a result of 14 years of self-archiving by physicists¹. Moreover, institutional repository software developers are now working *with* publishers on ways to ensure that the usage of articles in repositories is credited to the publisher.

ALPSP: [2] *Citation statistics and the resultant impact factors are of enormous importance to authors and their institutions; they also influence librarians’ renewal/cancellation decisions. Both the Institute of Physics and the London Mathematical Society are therefore troubled to note an increasing tendency for authors to cite only the repository version of an article, without mentioning the journal in which it was later published.*

Librarians’ decisions to cancel or subscribe to journals are made on the basis of a variety of measures, citation statistics being just one of them². But [self-archiving increases citations](#), so journals carrying self-archived articles will perform *better* under this measure.

Citing the canonical version of an article wherever possible is a matter of author best-practice; it is misleading to cite momentary lags in scholarliness as if they were an argument

against self-archiving. All of this can and will be quite easily and naturally adjusted, partly through updated scholarly practice and partly through institutional and publisher repositories collaborating in a system of [pooled and shared citation statistics](#) – all credited to the official published version, as proper scholarliness dictates. These are all just natural adaptations to the new medium.

ALPSP: [3] Evidence is also growing that free availability of content has a very rapid negative effect on subscriptions. Oxford University Press made the contents of *Nucleic Acids Research* freely available online six months after publication; subscription loss was much greater than in related journals where the content was free after a year...

[4] The BMJ Publishing Group has noted a similar effect...

[5] In the USA, the Institute for Operations Research and the Management Sciences ... made freely available on the Web... noted a subscriptions decline

In all three examples *whole journals* were made freely available, in their entirety, with all the added value and rich online functionality that a journal provides. This is not at all the same as the self-archiving of authors' drafts, which are simply the basic research results, provided by the author on a single-article basis. The latter, not the former, is the target of the proposed RCUK policy. It is hence highly misleading to cite the effects of the former as evidence of negative effects of the latter.

(And although the RCUK is not proposing to mandate whole-journal open access, it is worth noting that there is also plenty of evidence that journals have *benefited* from being made freely available: *Molecular Biology of the Cell's* (MBC's) subscriptions have grown steadily after free access was provided by its publisher, The American Society for Cell Biology³. MBC also enjoys a high impact factor and healthy submissions by authors encouraged by the increased exposure their articles receive. The same has happened for journals published by other societies⁴.)

ALPSP: In addition, it is increasingly clear that this is exactly how researchers are already using search engines such as Scirus and Google Scholar... 'At this point, my main use of both [Scirus and Google Scholar] is for finding free Web versions of otherwise inaccessible published articles... Both Scirus and Scholar were also useful for finding author-hosted article copies, preprints, e-prints, and other permutations of the same article.'

[Scirus](#), [Google Scholar](#) and the [other search engines](#) that retrieve open access articles serve the research community by enabling researchers to find and access articles they would otherwise be unable to read because they are hidden behind subscription barriers. These services help to maximise research access, usage and impact, all to the benefit of British science and scholarship, exactly as their authors and their institutions and funders wish them to do.

ALPSP: In the light of this growing evidence of serious and irreversible damage, each publisher must have the right to establish the best way of expanding access to its journal content that is compatible with continuing viability.

So far no evidence of serious and irreversible damage inflicted by self-archiving has been presented by ALPSP. This is unsurprising, because none exists. Publishers should do what they can to expand access and remain viable. But they certainly have no right to prevent researchers, their institutions and their funders from expanding access to their research findings either – nor to expect them to wait and see whether their publishers will one day maximise access for them.

ALPSP: This is not best achieved by mandating the earliest possible self-archiving, and thus forcing the adoption of untried and uncosted publishing practices.

Self-archiving – and what the RCUK is mandating -- is not a *publishing practice* at all: it is an *author practice*. And it has been tried and tested – with great success – for over 15 years without ‘forcing the adoption’ of any ‘untried and uncosted publishing practices.’ What UK research needs now is more self-archiving, not more delay and counterfactual projections.

ALPSP: This in turn will deprive learned societies of an important income stream, without which many will be unable to support their other activities – such as meetings, bursaries, research funding, public education and patient information – which are of huge benefit both to their research communities and to the general public.

Please contrast this double-doomsday scenario (“self-archiving will not only destroy journals but all the other good works of learned societies”) with the following quote from Dr Elizabeth Marincola, Executive Director of the American Society for Cell Biology, a sizeable but not huge society (10,000 members; many US scientific and medical societies have over 100,000):

"I think the more dependent societies are on their publications, the farther away they are from the real needs of their members. If they were really doing good work and their members were aware of this, then they wouldn't be so fearful..... When my colleagues come to me and say they couldn't possibly think of putting their publishing revenues at risk, I think 'why haven't you been diversifying your revenue sources all along and why haven't you been diversifying your products all along?' The ASCB offers a diverse range of products so that if publications were at risk financially, we wouldn't lose our membership base because there are lots of other reasons why people are members."³

This perfectly encapsulates why we should not be taking too seriously the dire warnings from those learned societies who warn that self-archiving will damage research and its dissemination. The dissemination of research findings should be a high-priority service for learned societies, but not a commercial end-in-itself that generates profit to subsidise other activities, *at the expense of British research itself*.

RCUK should go ahead and implement its immediate-self-archiving mandate, without any further delay, and *then* meet with ALPSP and other interested parties to discuss and plan how the UK Institutional Repositories can collaborate with journals and their publishers in pooling download and citation statistics, and in other other ways of sharing the benefits of maximising UK research access and impact.

References

1. Swan, A (2004). *American Scientist Open Access Forum* [3 February, 2005](#)
2. Personal communication from a UK University Library Director: “I know of no HE library where librarians make cancellation or subscription decisions. Typically they say to the department/faculty ‘We have to save £X,000" from your share of the serials budget, what do you want to cut?’. These are seen as *academic* -- not metrics-driven – judgements, and *no* librarian makes those academic judgements, as they are indefensible in Senate... [S]uch decisions are almost always wholly subjective, not objective, and have nothing to do with the existence or otherwise of repositories.”

3. [The society lady: an interview with Elizabeth Marincola](#) (2003) Open Access Now, October 6, 2003
4. Walker, T (2002) [Two societies show how to profit by providing free access](#). Learned Publishing **15**, 279-284.

Copies also sent to:

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