

Reading more into open access

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Will Wakeling, dean of University Libraries at Northeastern, discusses open access to scholarly works and how it benefits researchers.

For many years, the traditional method to access researchers' scholarly works, particularly in the sciences and social sciences, has been through paid subscriptions to journals. But in recent years, a movement toward "open access" has grown, providing free access to such material online. The issue has also drawn national attention this year, with thousands of researchers supporting a boycott of a leading scientific journal publisher, while competing bills before Congress tackle the issue of requiring open access to publicly funded research. Northeastern University news office asked Will Wakeling, dean of University Libraries at Northeastern, to discuss what open access is all about and what this trend means for the

research community.

What is open access, and what does it mean for those producing and reading scholarly research?

Open access, in one sense, is part of a broader cultural shift toward free access to information that can be easily, instantly found online. This idea is manifested in various ways, including popular sites such as Wikipedia and scholarly networks like PLoS, the Public Library of Science.

For our purposes and the purposes of free access to scholarly work, open access means removing the price and permission barriers involved in reading scholarly journals. Access to scholarly works has traditionally been based on a commercial model. If you don't pay, you don't read. So universities have ended up paying large amounts to publishers to buy back access for their researchers to the very literature that those faculty members and researchers have been responsible for creating. What makes the open-access movement so radical is its potential to change that vicious business cycle.

As a publishing model, open access doesn't have to jettison the best features of the traditional commercial publishing models. For one thing, open access does not prevent a rigorous peer-review process. There are plenty of examples of high-impact, mainstream journals adopting open-access configurations. There's also nothing inherent in the open-access model to stop the generation of revenue. Just because you as a publisher make articles free to read doesn't mean you can't recover publishing costs, as some open-access journals collect processing fees from authors. Academic institutions and funding bodies can, in turn, support their researchers by helping to cover these costs.

What is going on at Northeastern around open

access?

The library is creating the Digital Repository Service (DRS), a secure environment for storing, managing and providing open access to digital materials that support teaching, research and service activities at Northeastern. This includes IRis, which currently contains more than 3,500 faculty publications, university-produced materials, and dissertations and master's theses. Researchers can also place their experimental data in the DRS, along with background research materials to accompany their publications. The Library already supports an open-access, peer-reviewed journal, [Annals of Environmental Science](#).

We're also working to support other options for access that avoid high costs falling on the reader. These include Open Educational Resources (OERs), such as textbooks and classroom materials developed from work available through open access. Faculty members in the mathematics and biology departments, for example, are already developing and using such resources.

As our society continues to be more and more “plugged in,” how do you see this trend toward open access evolving?

The trend is onward and upward. A key component of the evolution of open access will be the increased interest and willingness of scholars to look at alternative modes of publishing their research using blogs, social media and other digital formats. Along with this loosening up comes an evolving and more open attitude to copyright, exemplified in the increasing popularity of the Creative Commons approach. Meanwhile, one of the most important ways in which scholars and researchers are accelerating the movement toward open access is in negotiating with their publishers to secure their rights as authors to post their own

published work, something that many standard publishing contracts restrict. This is certainly an area the library can help them with.

Another related facet of open access lies in the open-data movement, which, properly controlled, has tremendous potential for the sharing and reuse of core data sets in disciplines such as mapping, genomes, chemical compounds, and medical and bioscience data and practices.

Ultimately, success for the open-access movement will depend jointly on the commitment of individual scholars and appropriate institutional support. We need to find ways to fund [open-access](#) publishing for researchers not able to draw on external grants. We need to encourage faculty members to produce OERs that can help create viable alternatives to expensive commercial student textbooks. The result can be an increase in the range and quality of freely available scholarship, and major improvements in the resources available to the academy and the community at large to solve problems and advance knowledge.

Provided by Northeastern University

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