

British group outlines plan for open-access publishing for publicly funded research papers

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Open access logo, originally designed by Public Library of Science

(Phys.org) -- The computer and subsequent Internet age have brought all manner of change to modern society, one of which is easy access to published scientific research papers; where before it would typically take months for a paper to be published, now it can be done almost instantly and accessed just as quickly. But with such change comes resistance as established entities seek to hold on to their position, even as others push for change. Today, most serious research papers are published by just a handful of journals, who then charge a fee for people to access them.

One problem with this system is that it leads some to ask why the public should have to pay to access research papers that came about as the result of public funding. To address this issue in Britain, the government there has asked a working group of individuals to look into the problem and then to make some recommendations. Their report, headed by Dame Janet Finch, has been [published](#) online and is available without cost to anyone who wishes to read it.

In short, the working group is recommending that [open-access](#) sites be set up and that publicly funded papers be published on them. In their opinion, the best option is to have those that submit the papers (or their funding group) pay a fee to have the paper peer reviewed and edited before it goes online allowing [free access](#) for all.

Not everyone agrees with these recommendations, of course, most specifically those well respected journals such as *Nature*, *The Royal Society*, [Science](#), etc. They contend that the process they have set up adds value to paper publishing and that moving to an environment where researchers pay for publication, rather than charging readers an access fee would lead to diminishing [product quality](#).

As it stands now, when a research team writes a paper for publication, they submit it to one of the respected journals. There an editor reads it to determine if the research has scientific value and to check to see if it was carried out in proper fashion. The editor then either accepts the paper as is, sends it back for fixing or rejects it outright. Once the editor accepts a paper, it is sent to a group of unpaid academic professionals in the field who read it and sometimes try to recreate the results. If it passes peer-review, the journal edits the paper and adds it to its list of online content behind a paywall. All of this costs the [journal](#) money of course, which is why it needs to charge so much for access to the published work.

What's still not clear is how changing to an open-access system would impact costs; for those that wish to publish, open-access publishers and those that continue to publish non-publicly financed research projects. Nor is it clear whether the peer-review process or the litmus test of whether the paper has any real value could be maintained by an open-access system.

The British government is apparently behind the move towards open-access, though it's not clear how far they might go to ensure open-access publication of all publicly funded documents. Even so, papers by British individuals or institutions account for just 6% of all such papers published. On the other hand, British publishers account for some 20% of all published [research papers](#) in the world, which means if things change in Britain, they might cause a change throughout the rest of the research paper publishing world as well.

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