

COMMENTARY

Congress Has a Role to Play in Making Research Public



JON KRAUSE FOR THE CHRONICLE

THE ACADEMIC WORLD has been faced with a serious and growing problem in scholarly communication in recent years. Peer-reviewed scholarly journals are published increasingly by commercial publishing interests, which now control more than 60 percent of scholarly journals. Given this near-monopoly, the costs of subscription-based online resources have been skyrocketing, even as publishing costs have fallen with increasing movement into digital media. These cost increases are simply not sustainable if scholars are to have continued access to key literature. Fortunately, late last month a bill before Congress that would have made this bad situation far worse, the Research Works Act, died as a result of a widespread outcry from the academic community.

At the same time, and on a much more positive note, the Federal Research Public Access Act was being revived. While the Research Works Act threatened to close access to publicly financed research, the public-access act, introduced in Congress in 2009 and reintroduced in both chambers last month, would require that U.S. agencies with annual budgets exceeding \$100-million make journal articles based on federally financed research available on the Internet. This bill emphasizes the importance of scholars' access to research results, as well as the rights of U.S. citizens to get the information that their tax dollars pay for.

This proposal is the day compared with the Research Work Act's night. The contrast centers on questions of who should "own" journal-published scholarship, who should be able to reap the fruits of publicly financed research, and to whom the benefits of that research should accrue. But the most fundamental question is, in essence, whether the results of scholarly research are a public good or not: If the public pays for research, shouldn't the public have access to the results?

Sponsors of the Federal Research Public Access Act wisely modeled it on the National Institutes of Health's public-access policy, which is a shining jewel in the crown of the recent progress in opening access to scholarly journal publications. It requires that "all investigators funded by the NIH submit or have submitted for them to the National Library of Medicine's PubMed Central an electronic version of their final, peer-reviewed manuscripts upon acceptance for publication, to be made publicly available no

later than 12 months after the official date of publication."

That NIH policy has been an unqualified success. It costs about \$4.5-million annually (out of an annual budget of \$30-billion), and PubMed Central provides access to 2.3 million articles from 2,884 journals, with more than 500,000 users daily. Moreover, a recent model-based assessment indicated that the investment in opening access to federally financed scientific articles would yield at least a fivefold return in research-and-development payoffs; of those returns, about 60 percent is expected to accrue directly to the U.S. economy.

More generally, many scholars, university administrators, and librarians feel that the current journal-publication system does not work, if "working" means effective dissemination of publicly financed research results among scholars and the broader public. That is, while access fees for journals continue to rise drastically, libraries' subscription budgets have remained flat, at best. The result is a system that is not sustainable for scholars and their institutions. Many people would argue that the current system has reached a tipping point, in which the scientific literature is fast becoming off-limits to the very scholars who provide the intellectual material that the publishers publish.

It is well beyond time for Congress to recognize its role in supporting the advancement of research, science, and the economy when it pays for academic and scientific research. Providing funds for that research is a critical (and expensive) endeavor, with billions of dollars a year going to scholars and research centers around the country, spurring economies of vast proportions. Providing access to the results of the research is the final act of stewardship that Congress must take.

Still, the work isn't done until the results of each of those research projects are communicated to the public, writ large, to serve as catalysts for innovation. Congress must see the Federal Research Public Access Act as an important part of the country's research endeavor, and a crucial component of the public's access to knowledge. ■

**By Ada Emmett,
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