Editorial

Bipartisan Bill for Public Access to Research—Time for Action

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The "red" versus "blue" state divide, most graphically captured in mapped results of the infamous United States presidential election battle between George Bush and Al Gore in 2000, has come to symbolize the political polarization of America. It may be surprising, therefore, to find a Republican from President Bush's decidedly red state of Texas and Gore's running mate, a Democrat from the blue state of Connecticut, agreeing on anything. Yet just such a pair has recently recognized that one issue, at least, rises above partisan forces: open access to publicly funded research. Senators John Cornyn (Texas) and Joseph Lieberman (Connecticut) have introduced a bill whereby federal agencies with research expenditure over US$100 million per year must ensure that research articles produced from their grants are deposited in an Internet-accessible public archive within six months of acceptance by a peer-reviewed journal. The bill, called the Federal Research Public Access Act of 2006 (S.2695) (FRPAA), explains its rationale: "Congress finds that the Federal Government funds basic and applied research with the expectation that new ideas and discoveries that result from the research, if shared and effectively disseminated, will advance science and improve the lives and welfare of people of the United States and around the world" [1]. And, no doubt gratifying to the bill's sponsors, a recent Harris poll shows that the American public is overwhelmingly in support of public access to federally funded research [2].

Last year, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) instituted a policy recommending, but not requiring, its grantees to deposit their research articles into its archive, PubMed Central, within one year of acceptance for publication [3]. One year later, compliance remains low, perhaps not surprising given the voluntary nature of this process and the opposition expressed to it by many publishers. When the NIH was first called on to consider its policies on access to research—a result of direct recommendations from Congressional appropriators—several publishing organizations lobbied hard against the NIH's efforts. Those groups are taking the same tack with this new legislation, presenting doomsday scenarios that predict public access will undermine the very peer-review process that supports scientific progress. And yet the evidence from publishers who have moved voluntarily in the direction outlined by the FRPAA is entirely contrary to these doomsayers. Incentives to subscribe to such journals will remain—by virtue of the six-month delay in public access, the value that publishers add in the final published form of the article, and the fact few journals will contain only content that is affected by this bill. Evidence from the physics community is that extensive open-access archives have no adverse impact on subscription revenue [4].

If enacted, the legislation proposed in the FRPAA would avoid several pitfalls of the earlier NIH policy. First and foremost, it requires, rather than recommends, that articles be deposited in public archives. It states that the article to be deposited is the accepted version of the author's peer-reviewed manuscript, incorporating all changes during peer review, allowing publishers the option of replacing the manuscript with the final publication. Importantly, the legislation also overcomes the sticky issue of copyright. Rather than making deposition of the article subject to publisher consent, federal agencies would be required to "make effective use of any law or guidance relating to the creation and reservation of a Government license that provides for the reproduction, publication, release, or other uses of a final manuscript for Federal purposes."

Of course, the Public Library of Science espouses full and immediate access to final published articles as the end-game of what will no doubt be a long process in publishing reform. In that regard, we view it as equally important that this legislation would also stimulate publishers to explore new models to support their business, potentially paving the way for a fundamental shift in the subscription-based model.

Looking more internationally, the United States would not be alone in mandating public access to its research. A pioneer in promoting open access, the Wellcome Trust (a biomedical research funder based in the United Kingdom), has already instituted a similar policy, mandating that grantholders make their work available within six months of publication via a public repository [5]. The Wellcome Trust has also taken the essential next step by providing funds to pay for publication in open-access journals. And recently, a report for the European Commission entitled "Study on the Economic and Technical Evolution of the Scientific Publication Markets in Europe" similarly recommended a move to make public access to research publications a condition of funding [6].

Funding the dissemination of research results should be of critical concern to the research funders, who want to maximize their research investment. Publishing is already being paid for by funding agencies and institutions; the question is how to channel this money most effectively to meet the need for wider access. That

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this need is sometimes overlooked by those at well-funded institutions is not surprising; a researcher I met recently from University College London simply did not believe me when I said I could not freely access a relatively common journal in his field. Indeed, a recent survey by the Publishing Research Consortium came to the conclusion that supporting open access to research is not the most critical concern for researchers at the bench of well-funded universities, where many are not even aware of where their subscription access comes from [7]. Paradoxically, the same survey indicated that over one third of these researchers do not have access to all the articles they need.

As part of its investment in restoring the infrastructure of Iraq, the United States government has recently spearheaded an initiative to make a large corpus of scientific literature available to scientists working in Iraq [8], much larger, in fact, than is readily available to the American taxpayer. If passed, the FRPAA would benefit scientific progress at home, in Iraq, and around the world, regardless of political boundaries; and the United States would still be at the vanguard in producing change in the way we disseminate science. You can help, by showing your support for the FRPAA. Visit http://www.taxpayeraccess.org/frpaa/index.html for more details. ■

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