

At Harvard, a Proposal to Publish Free on Web
NEW YORK TIMES

(Thanks to Colin Steele for drawing this article to our attention)

Publish or perish has long been the burden of every aspiring university professor. But the question the Harvard faculty will decide on Tuesday is whether to publish - on the Web, at least - free.

Faculty members are scheduled to vote on a measure that would permit Harvard to distribute their scholarship online, instead of signing exclusive agreements with scholarly journals that often have tiny readerships and high subscription costs.

Although the outcome of Tuesday's vote would apply only to Harvard's arts and sciences faculty, the impact, given the university's prestige, could be significant for the open-access movement, which seeks to make scientific and scholarly research available to as many people as possible at no cost.

"In place of a closed, privileged and costly system, it will help open up the world of learning to everyone who wants to learn," said Robert Darnton, director of the university library. "It will be a first step toward freeing scholarship from the stranglehold of commercial publishers by making it freely available on our own university repository."

Under the proposal Harvard would deposit finished papers in an open-access repository run by the library that would instantly make them available on the Internet. Authors would still retain their copyright and could publish anywhere they pleased - including at a high-priced journal, if the journal would have them.

What distinguishes this plan from current practice, said Stuart Shieber, a professor of computer science who is sponsoring the faculty motion, is that it would create an "opt-out" system: an article would be included unless the author specifically requested it not be. Mr. Shieber was the chairman of a committee set up by Harvard's provost to investigate scholarly publishing; this proposal grew out of one of the recommendations, he said.

The publishing industry, as well as some scholarly groups, have opposed some forms of open access, contending that free distribution of scholarly articles would ultimately eat away at journals' value and wreck the existing business model. Such a development would in turn damage the quality of research, they argue, by allowing articles that have not gone through a rigorous process of peer review to be broadcast on the Internet as easily as a video clip of Britney Spears's latest hairdo. It would also cut into subsidies that some journals provide for educational training and professional meetings, they say.

J. Lorand Matory, a professor of anthropology and African and African American studies at Harvard, said he sympathized with the goal of bringing down the sometimes exorbitant price of scientific periodicals, but worried that a result would be to eliminate a whole range of less popular journals that are subsidized by more profitable ones.

Art history periodicals, for example, are extremely expensive to publish because of the reproduction costs, and subscriptions pay for those as well as some of the discipline's annual gatherings.

Professor Matory also pointed out that "any professor who wants to put his or her article up online can."

Asked about the Harvard proposal, Allan Adler, vice president for legal and governmental affairs at the Association of American Publishers, said that mandates are what publishers object to, as when Congress required that any work financed by the National Institutes for Health be funneled through PubMed Central, an open-access repository maintained by the National Library of Medicine.

"As long as they leave the element of choice for authors and publishers," he said, "there isn't a problem."

Supporters of open access say that the current system creates a different set of problems for academics. Expensive journals cut into a library's budget for scholarly books and monographs, which hurts academic publishers, which hurts the coming generation of scholars who must publish to gain tenure.

Professor Shieber also doubts that free distribution would undermine the journal industry. "We don't know if that would happen," he said. "There is little evidence to support that it would." Nearly all scholarly articles on physics have been freely available on the Internet for more than a decade, he added, and physics journals continue to thrive.

As for the vote, Professor Shieber said: "As far as I know, everyone I've ever talked to is supportive of the underlying principle. Still there is a difference between an underlying principle and specific proposal."

(NEW YORK TIMES, By PATRICIA COHEN
Published: February 12, 2008)