

THE SOCIETAL IMPACT OF OPEN ACCESS TO RESEARCH

Doctoral Dissertation Summary

by

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Open Access to scholarly literature has been an issue under debate since the early days of the World Wide Web. For over two decades, study after study have investigated the impact of Open Access (OA) to research papers in a variety of different contexts. Those studies have predominantly focused on the impact it has on the academic community itself. For example, so many studies were published on what is called the “Open Access Citation Advantage (OACA)”. They all tried to validate (or argue against) the claim that making an article openly available online results in more citations to that article, than its toll-access counterparts. Another large portion of studies have focused on business models associated with Open Access. Yet, implications of open access in non-academic contexts (practitioners, policymakers, patients, concerned citizens, etc.) have been the subject of many discussions and indeed was the basis for much of the advocacy work and its responses from science funding agencies, but rarely so in formal published studies. In fact, several researchers have specifically pointed to the lack of research in this area.

This study is the first comprehensive attempt to understand the potential impact of open access research on society at large (beyond academia). It starts by examining the rhetoric about societal benefits within the Open Access movement (as represented by advocates, policymakers and leading researchers). It goes on with collecting and synthesizing the scarce evidence available on the issue. The study then makes its contribution on the theoretical level by introducing a typology of the various science/society interfaces where access to research papers is needed. The proposed scheme is anticipated to provide guidance for future research on the issue. In effort to add to this scarce evidence, the study also investigate more closely two specific groups of research users from outside academia. It seeks to understand factors affecting citations to open access journals in patents of US pharmaceutical companies and sheds light on the rising trend of “independent researchers” and how they might benefit from open access to scholarly literature.

Open access is an issue of growing policy interest. More and more governments and science policymaking bodies are involved in the Open Access debate. There is considerable pressure (from both sides of the debate) on policymakers to respond and take related decisions. The study aims to contribute a clearer picture of the non-academic uses of research papers and ends by recommendations to science policy makers as well as future researchers in the field.