Open Access and the Society for Libyan Studies

By Philip Kenrick*

Abstract

UK government policy is firmly directed, through the agencies which control university and research funding, towards a situation in which much academic output will be made accessible to all on the Internet without payment. This has far-reaching consequences for all academic publishers, including the Society, by no means all of which have yet been taken into account by the policy-makers. Members of the Society need to understand the issues and to consider how best to adapt to changing circumstances and to defend its position where necessary.

Some members of the Society, but by no means all, will be aware of the current debate about Open Access. This is an issue which is being driven by the UK government and which will affect all publishers of academic journals (to start with), whether they like it or not. Change is being driven essentially by the science and medical disciplines, but there is pressure on all academic disciplines to conform to their proposals. There has not been due assessment or appreciation of the effect that this will have upon other fields of study: as an academic publisher, the Society for Libyan Studies has a duty, in its own interests, to consider the issues involved, to consider how it should respond and, if necessary, to make formal representations to the relevant policy makers. Since this debate is essentially about access to material through the Internet, all of the references below are to web pages.

Open Access: what does it mean?

A search for the topic 'Open Access' on the Internet will produce more than enough information for anyone who wants to know the details. A thumbnail sketch of the issues runs as follows.

There appear to be two basic drivers behind the debate and the emerging government policy.

(1) Academic journals of high repute, managed by commercial publishers, are able to charge extortionate subscription rates because their subscribers (essentially institutional, such as university libraries) feel obliged to take them. The universities feel powerless to manage ever-increasing library budgets and authors resent the fact that their articles are so expensive to read (even when individually accessible on-line through pay-per-view).

(2) Funders of academic research, such as the UK research councils (united under the umbrella body Research Councils UK – '**RCUK**') and the Wellcome Trust (which funds medical research) have begun to insist that research carried out with their money should be made accessible to the public for free. The reason why this insistence has come about now is that such free access has been made a practical reality by the Internet. Thus, once a publication has been designed – even if copies are printed and disseminated on paper – there is no significant cost to the publisher in making the digital source material (the PDF files from which it is printed) universally accessible.

How is it to be implemented?

In 2011 the UK government set up a working group on 'Expanding Access to Published Research Findings' under the chairmanship of Dame Janet Finch, which produced a report on 18 June 2012.[1] As a result of this, RCUK has adopted the following policy, declared to take effect on all research funded by them after 1 April 2013 and most recently updated in May 2013.[2] The preferred mode of publication will be **Gold Open Access**. The model for this will be that the costs of preparing the publication will be met not by the subscriber/reader (since access will be free) but by the author, who will pay an article processing charge ('**APC**'). The APCs will be funded through a block grant made to certain (but not all) universities for the purpose.

An alternative model that will be acceptable in circumstances where an author is unable to obtain or to pay an APC is known as **Green Open Access**. Under this model, the publisher will fund the production of the journal through the sale of subscriptions as before, but the author will be obliged to make it accessible for free (through some public digital repository, not necessarily provided by the publisher) after a certain interval of time (the '**embargo period**'). The intention is that the embargo period should be the minimum which will not undermine sales of the journal – i.e. a period calculated to be long enough to discourage subscribers from thinking 'If we wait a

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little while, we can get this information without payment and it will not be seriously out of date.'

The Finch working group and RCUK have also contemplated the existence during a transitional period of 'hybrid journals', which will carry a mixture of 'gold' articles which will be immediately accessible for free and 'green' articles which will initially be accessible in return for payment and will only become free after an agreed embargo period. This solution seems utterly bizarre, attempting to combine, as it does, two fundamentally incompatible business models. (Thus the taxpayer, through RCUK, pays up front for some articles in the journal, but also, through university library funding, still has to pay a subscription for the journal as a whole. The level of this subscription is necessarily set by the publisher before it is known how many 'gold' articles any particular issue will contain, and therefore how much advance funding will be available.)

There are many further complexities, some of which will be discussed below, but the preceding summary should give an adequate picture of the essentials. One further factor should be mentioned at this stage. The Higher Education Funding Council for England ('**HEFCE**') which carries out periodic assessments of university performance (formerly the Research Assessment Exercise, now Research Excellence Framework – '**REF**') has indicated an intention to put pressure on academic staff (and not just those in receipt of specific research funds) by asserting that only publications which conform to agreed Open Access standards will be taken into account when assessing performance in REF exercises after 2014. HEFCE issued a draft of its intended policy on 24 July 2013,[3] which is to be confirmed after a consultation period, probably early in 2014.

It should be noted that with regard to both HEFCE and RCUK, the policy is currently stated to apply only to journal articles and conference proceedings. It is considered desirable that monographs should eventually be included within its scope, but the practicalities of achieving this have not yet been agreed.

What does this mean for the Society for Libyan Studies?

Adopting Gold Open Access. This is the model preferred by what may be termed, for convenience, the coercive bodies. It would mean that any articles within their scope of influence (essentially all research by academic staff in UK universities), whether printed or not, would be accessible on-line without payment to the world at large from the effective date of publication. This would apply to the most important articles on British research in Libya – and particularly reports on our flagship projects. They would bring with them (in theory) funds to cover the cost of publication. What would happen to the remainder of the material that we usually publish (e.g. articles by those who cannot offer APCs, such as independent authors or foreign authors, book reviews etc.)? Since the cream of the material would be available for free, there would be much less incentive to pay for the journal, and subscription income (= membership of the Society, but also importantly, subscriptions by institutions) would fall. It is difficult to see how a sustainable economic model could be devised to support this situation. We would have to change the basis of our membership, which is centred on the publication of the journal, and we would become a very different kind of academic body. (What could we offer to individuals? Why would they wish to join the Society?)

Adopting Green Open Access. This model offers more promise for the environment in which the Society for Libyan Studies operates, but only under certain conditions. The economic model would be essentially unchanged from the present practice: there would be a printed journal and, after the present issue, an on-line version also, accessible to members for free and to others on a pay-per-view basis. After a certain embargo period, the on-line version (or at least those articles which concern the coercive bodies) would become accessible for free. This would be a viable way forward for us, provided the length of the embargo period is sufficient not to undermine the subscription income.

Non-compliance. If the Society persists with its current model (i.e. funding its journal, *Libyan Studies*, through membership subscriptions) and does not offer open access of any kind, then we risk finding that the best British research concerning Libya – including those projects to which we give financial support – can no longer be published in our journal, but have to seek other outlets which do comply with the requirements of the coercive bodies. This would lead to the absurd situation in which the Society, as the principal promoter in the UK of studies on Libya, could only publish articles by UK scholars not in receipt of public funds, together with articles by foreign scholars (provided that they are not subject to corresponding national policies). It is unlikely that we could continue to attract the same level of membership in this situation, and particularly to retain the interest of institutional subscribers. The Society and its journal would cease to be economically viable.

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Table 1. Analysis of contents of Libyan Studies *over a five-year period.*

	2008		2009		2010		2011		2012	
	No.	Pages	No.	Pages	No.	Pages	No.	Pages	No.	Pages
Articles subject to Open Access requirements and eligible for APC support	5	135	5	122	4	94	6	81	2	33
Articles by UK authors potentially without APCs (e.g. research students, freelance, retired)	6	107	1	9	2	34	2	16	2	20
Articles of foreign origin	3	41	3	45	2	29	3	39	6	88
Book reviews, obituaries, Annual Report and other ineligible content	12	35	11	21	5	16	11	26	10	22
Preliminary pages, blank pages, Arabic abstracts etc.		34		27		11		22		21
Total no. of pages		**352**		**224**		**184**		**184**		**184**

Table 2. Totals for the five-year period.

	Articles		Pages	
	No.	%	No.	%
Articles subject to Open Access requirements and eligible for APC support	22	21.8	465	45.9
Articles by UK authors potentially without APCs (e.g. research students, freelance, retired)	13	12.9	186	18.4
Articles of foreign origin	17	16.8	242	23.9
Book reviews, obituaries, Annual Report and other ineligible content	49	48.5	120	11.8
Totals	**101**	**100**	**1013**	**100**

Some statistics

In order to flesh out the scenarios portrayed above, the contents of the last five issues of *Libyan Studies* have been assessed in terms of the relevant categories into which they would have fallen, had the criteria of the coercive bodies been applied to them. The results are shown above in Tables 1 and 2.

The analysis shows that 45.9 per cent of the journal's content by volume would be subject to the criteria of the coercive bodies. If this were removed elsewhere, the journal would be emasculated to the point of assuredly losing its market; on the other hand, to make the journal free to all readers and to seek funding in support of the remaining content would also be insuperable. Green Open Access, protected by a sufficient embargo period, seems to be the only viable option for its continuation.

The embargo period

It will be clear that Green Open Access is likely to be the option which will best secure the future of *Libyan Studies*. But this will be so only if the embargo period is long enough not to undermine subscription income, and particularly that from institutions (i.e. libraries). RCUK has a declared long-term aim that embargo periods should be no longer than six months. In the mean time, unfortunately, its policy is confusing. It states that in the **STEM** disciplines (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) it should be no more than six months, but that in the **HSS** disciplines (Humanities and Social Sciences) it should be no more than twelve.[4] In the next sentence it states that 'Where funding for APCs is unavailable to an author during the transition period, longer embargo periods will be allowable' (12 months/24 months). Surely embargo periods only apply where APCs do not? HEFCE has stated its intention to follow the policy of RCUK.[5]

There has been little recognition so far of the appropriateness of different embargo periods. If the point is to protect subscription income, one must ask in every case how rapidly the article or journal content becomes out of date. This is capable of theoretical definition in terms of a half-life: how long is the interval between publication and the time when the work has been read by half of the people who will ever read it? It may not be possible to measure this precisely, but it is not difficult to appreciate that the rate of obsolescence of scientific or medical research is far more rapid than it is in the humanities. In a historical discipline it may not matter greatly if an important article is not discovered until it has been in print for several years, and conversely, once it is in print, it may be read with profit (and returned to) for many years to come. It seems obvious to me, though I have seen

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no mention of it anywhere, that frequency of publication is an important guide to the longevity of content. If a journal appears monthly, it obviously sets out to purvey the very latest research, and after six months this may well be considered obsolete – or at least, if the reader has not read it by now, he or she has a great deal more reading to catch up with! If a journal appears only once a year, authors are clearly content to wait that long for their articles to appear, and readers will be less particular about the month in which they receive or read it. Should not embargo periods be expressed in terms of frequency of publication? If a six-month embargo is considered appropriate for a journal which appears monthly, surely a six-year embargo would not be out of place for an annual publication. Purely intuitively, it seems to me that for an annual publication in the field of *Libyan Studies*, an embargo period of not less than three years is desirable to protect subscription income.[6] Unfortunately, simply to test a shorter period, if it proved inadequate, might be disastrous and therefore unrepeatable!

The British Academy and the broader picture

The British Academy is the primary body in the UK representing the views of those in the Humanities and Social Sciences. As such, it has played a vigorous part in the debate on Open Access, arguing the position of these disciplines with both parliament and the coercive bodies. It has recently published a stimulating and important series of essays by different contributors, under the title *Debating Open Access*, edited by Nigel Vincent and Chris Wickham.[7] This is not a policy document, but a series of personal views from various different perspectives. The whole volume is well worth reading and many of the points which have been made above in regard to our own case have been stimulated by the various essays it contains. I wish here to pick out only a few additional points that seem to me particularly telling.

Rita Gardner is Director of the Royal Geographical Society; she writes (13–29) on *Open Access and learned societies*. She emphasizes (16) that she has 'come across no learned society that does not believe in, and support, open *access* in principle.' Rather, their concern is centrally related to *sustainability* – i.e. the inadequacy of resources to pay in advance for Gold and the potential of embargo periods that are too short to undermine the subscription model for Green. She reports (17) that 'in many instances HSS journals have half-lives for citation and readership of three to four years, or longer.' Further, the argument that UK public money, in the form of library subscriptions, is unnecessarily funding expensive journals is manifestly untrue for learned societies (18–19). In the case of the Society for Libyan Studies, only 22 per cent of our institutional subscribers are in the UK (and this percentage is likely to diminish further when Cambridge University Press takes on the publication and markets it more widely).

Stuart Schieber is Professor of Computer Science at Harvard. He writes (30–41) on *Ecumenical open access and the Finch Report principles*. Professor Schieber is a strong proponent of Open Access, and draws particular attention to the fundamental inconsistency in the concept of the hybrid (Gold + Green) journal model, which has already been mentioned. Notable, however, in this contribution, is the unqualified assertion that the subscription model for journals 'is manifestly dysfunctional' (33: also 'inherently dysfunctional', 36). He describes the situation, outlined at the head of this article, in which journal subscriptions are inflated by commercial publishers because institutional subscribers cannot afford not to pay them. This is a model which evidently exists – but he fails utterly to recognize that it is NOT the only model which exists. Many journals in the HSS disciplines are dependent on individual subscribers for a significant part of their income; while they may well charge a higher rate to institutions (and why not? Those copies will be read by many people) I doubt that the same hyperinflation of subscriptions exists. Both libraries and individuals are far more likely to cancel their subscriptions than in the scientific fields if they consider a journal to be too expensive. There is a market economy here which works in a perfectly respectable fashion.

Chris Wickham is Professor of Medieval History at the University of Oxford and is Vice President (Publications) of the British Academy. He writes (42–53) of the international repercussions of the proposed policies. There are prestigious journals in his field of studies which are published in other countries, and to which he would naturally like to contribute. But in many countries, Open Access policies are far less developed than in the UK, which is making a bid to be a world leader in the process. Thus the current policy threatens to bar him from publishing in foreign journals (48), and it will also disadvantage foreign scholars without APCs who wish to publish in Gold UK journals. This risks creating a British academic separatism which is wholly inimical to the concept of global academic collegiality.

Stephen Curry is Professor of Structural Biology at Imperial College. He explores *Political, cultural and technological dimensions of open access* (54–67). I do not propose to say anything about this essay here, though it tackles complex issues of peer review (another thorny topic), publication metrics (impact

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factors, citation rates) and the relationship between these issues and fully-open-access on-line journals. Martin Paul Eve, Lecturer in English Literature at the University of Lincoln, discusses in further detail (68–81) the mechanism of peer review and the opportunities which the new publishing environment offers, both for revising the way in which it is managed and for validating publications.

Ziyad Marar is the Global Publishing Director of SAGE, a leading academic publisher, having worked with them since 1989. His chosen topic (82–95) is *Creating scholarly knowledge in the digital age*. He does not concern himself directly with the prescriptions of the coercive bodies, but rather explores the effect of the opportunities which now exist for the instant dissemination of knowledge of any kind. He points to the danger that the rapid acquisition of instant knowledge and its regurgitation threatens to trivialize the whole process, sidelining the extended reflection which is necessary for the acquisition of real expertise. This is more of a problem in the HSS disciplines than in the natural sciences, for many HSS scholars 'are dealing with what have been called "wicked" problems which don't submit in an orderly way to scientific analysis' (88). He goes on to make important points about the shallowness of automated metrics (impact factors, citation indices etc.), which confuse *popularity* with *authority* (92). This is an issue of ever greater importance as HEFCE develops its REF strategies for the future.

Robin Osborne (Professor of Ancient History at the University of Cambridge) argues (96–105) that *open access makes no sense*. This is a vigorous polemic which argues that those who fund his teaching (HEFCE) or his research (possibly RCUK) are not engaging him in a contract for services or for the supply of a particular product. Rather, they are encouraging him to develop his own talents and expertise and that these remain, at core, his own and not subject to anyone else's dictates as to how he uses them. Thus, no one should be able to insist that he makes his research findings available for free. He asserts (104) that 'there can be no such thing as free access to academic research. Academic research is a process – a process which universities teach (at a fee).' Curiously, he is here confusing academic research (which quite clearly is not free) with *access* to academic research, the freedom of which the current debate is about. He insists that his research comes at a price but does not answer the question of whether he would like others to have easier access to what he writes.

Nigel Vincent is Professor Emeritus of General and Romance Linguistics at the University of Manchester and Vice President (Research and Higher Education Policy) of the British Academy. He is the author of the final essay, on *The monograph challenge* (106–19). This is a very interesting exploration of the role of two types of published output which are important in the HSS disciplines but far less so elsewhere: these are the monograph and the volume of collected papers. There is as yet no agreement on how these are to be treated in respect of the Open Access debate, and neither RCUK nor HEFCE has yet evinced a policy for them. (Volumes of congress proceedings are, however, explicitly included in their policies as if they are journals.) There is too much in this paper to summarize succinctly, but what struck me really forcibly was the table on page 108, reproduced below (Table 3). The data in this table 'is taken from a partial survey of submissions to RAE 2008. For each discipline half a dozen institutions were sampled, chosen to represent different sizes and types of university. The one property they have in common is that all were drawn from those that had scored in the top ten for the Unit of Assessment in question (measured in terms of overall GPA) since the intention was to focus on work that the panels had judged to be the best in the respective fields. The last line of the table displays as a control comparative data from Chemistry, a laboratory science where the only type of outlet is the journal article.'

Table 3. Proportions of output types in a sample of RAE 2008 submissions.

	Books (%)	Chapters in books (%)	Journal Articles (%)	Other (%)
English	39	27	31	3
History	40	22	37	1
French	37	23	39	1
Philosophy	14	20	65	1
Sociology	22	10	64	3
Law	18	15	65	1
Politics	29	9	62	0
Economics	1	2	89	7
Chemistry	0	0	100	0

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Clearly, a discipline which has no use for monographs or collective volumes has no use either for book reviews (an important feature of HSS journals which would disappear under the Gold model), and this again merely emphasizes that any coercive policy on academic publication which is to have academic merit must take into account the very diverse nature of research in different disciplines.

Further niceties

Two other issues are important to the Open Access environment, but cannot be discussed in detail here. The first of these is copyright licensing. A range of Creative Commons licences has been developed which allow or restrict to varying degrees what others can do in terms of citing, reproducing and re-using published work.[8] The coercive bodies are keen to see academic work published under the most permissive of these, but there is much resistance and the matter is currently unresolved.

The second issue concerns the repository in which material published under the Green model is made accessible once the embargo period has expired. (It may be assumed under the Gold model that the publisher makes the content available.) The publisher of a Green journal will naturally have the PDF files from which the printed issue was created, and these may be made available. (Increasingly now, publishers provide these PDF files to authors in place of the former offprints.) However, in some disciplines it is already common practice to place in (typically) a university or subject repository what is known as an 'accepted manuscript.' This is the precise text that will be published, after interventions by reviewers and editors have been taken into account, lacking only the formatting applied by the publisher in the actual publication. This version, made freely accessible, has been declared by the coercive bodies to be acceptable evidence of open access publication. Here again, the contrast between different disciplines becomes starkly apparent. In the STEM disciplines, where article lengths are typically short (10 pages?),[9] it will often be sufficient to cite an article as a whole, and precise page references may not be important. In the HSS disciplines, where 20 or even 50 pages are not uncommon for an article, the actual layout is of far greater significance. To insist upon, or even to encourage, the deposition of versions other than the publisher's final layout of an article risks creating serious confusion and ambiguity when referring to it.

Concluding thoughts

The Society for Libyan Studies is a very small fish in the sea of academic publishing, and even amongst learned societies. Yet if our mode of existence is seriously threatened, this is a threat to the very diversity of academic enterprise in the UK. Different learned societies have very different economic models. The Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies, for instance, has a journal circulation which is ten times the size of ours, and the income from the journal generates funds for bursaries and other kinds of sponsorship within the Society's field of interest. (In their accounts for 2012, subscription income together with journal sales amounted to £213,827, while the production costs of the Society's two journals, not counting paid staff time, amounted to £25,520.)

In our case, in the financial year 2011–12, membership subscriptions and casual journal sales amounted to £9,979, which was only 8.9% of our income, while the vast majority (78%) came in the form of a grant from the British Academy in aid of the administration of the Society and the research which it promotes. On the expenditure side, the cost of producing and distributing the journal, together with the honorarium paid to the editor, amounted to £12,030. It has been my understanding that the cost of the journal should not significantly exceed the income which it generates, though some flexibility may be excused on the basis that the editorial costs underpin the quality of the output (in which the British Academy has an interest) and that a significant part of the content is made up of reports on research funded by the Society (and therefore by the Academy).

Were it to be the case in the future that the journal becomes unsustainable, we would certainly cease to be a membership society in the sense that we are now, and it would be a lot more difficult for those authors who publish with us to find alternative outlets for their articles. We could still carry out our other functions, in the sense of being an advisory body charged with helping the British Academy to promote British research in Libya – but I think that would be a sad substitute for what we are now.

Notes

1 See http://www.researchinfonet.org/publish/finch/
2 See http://www.rcuk.ac.uk/research/Pages/outputs.aspx
3 See http://www.hefce.ac.uk/whatwedo/rsrch/rinfrastruct/openaccess/
4 See the document in note 2, p. 2.
5 See the document in note 3, p. 3.
6 This is the position which was adopted in December 2012 by the editors of 21 UK history journals: see http://www.history.ac.uk/news/2012-12-10/statement-position-relation-open-access
7 The British Academy, London, 1 July 2013; see http://www.britac.ac.uk/openaccess/ for the Academy's participation in public debate and for a freely downloadable copy of this publication.
8 See http://creativecommons.org/licenses/
9 Society of Antiquaries of London, Briefing note re Open Access Meeting for Journal Managers, 15 February 2013, p. 4.

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