

The Public Library of Science campaign: a statement of policy by SGM Council

Recently, a letter has been circulating (www.publiclibraryofscience.org) urging life scientists to boycott journals, as authors, editors or referees, which do not:

- allow free on-line access to full-text articles from 6 months after publication
- deposit all content in public repositories such as PubMed Central.

The proposal has caused considerable debate and responses are appearing in various media. SGM Council has considered the matter and wishes to draw certain matters to the attention of members and other interested parties.

The objective of the Society for General Microbiology is to promote the science of microbiology. We do this by:

- publishing three journals, with quality ensured by rigorous peer review and editorial standards, and high production standards, including an excellent level of service to authors, readers, editors and referees
- supporting the career development of members, especially in the early stages
- holding a successful and enjoyable programme of scientific meetings
- organizing a number of educational and outreach activities to foster the wider understanding of microbiology. These include initiatives aimed at countering uninformed attacks on science; such attacks constitute at least as great a threat to the future of research as does a limitation on access to the published literature.

The income from subscriptions to SGM journals is used to cover the considerable costs of the peer review and production processes, including on-line publication. The modest surplus remaining is used entirely to support the wider charitable activities listed above.

● Free on-line access to back issues

As scientists and scientific publishers, we recognize the merit of making full-text articles as freely available as possible. Access to the tables of contents and abstracts of the SGM journals at HighWire Press (www.sgmjournals.org) is free to all for current and all past issues. Full-text articles are currently made freely available to non-subscribers 12 months after publication.

This access control period will be kept under review, but it has to be said that many learned society, not-for-profit publishers are seriously concerned that making information freely available after only 6 months could seriously compromise income from journals, and hence place their economic viability and survival in doubt.

It is notable that the small number of journals that have moved to free availability after 6 months are largely those which support production costs by imposing page charges, which SGM does not. Several are published by large US societies which subsidize their activities by levying registration charges for meetings, which SGM does not.

So far, the large commercial publishers have made few moves to make any back issues freely available. It has indeed been suggested (*Nature* **410**, 502) that they may relish the attack by Public Library of Science on the low cost journals produced by learned societies, as a means of seeing off the competition.

Overall, Council feels that any moves to increase free access to the Society's journals need to be approached cautiously and in the context of the activities and business model of the Society as a whole.

● Deposition of content on PubMed Central and other public servers

The Society's electronic journals at HighWire Press have advanced features, either available now or under implementation, which make them amongst the most sophisticated in the world. These features include simultaneous searching across the 250 titles on HighWire, toll-free linking to cited articles, and soon linking to journals in other databases through the CrossRef scheme. Increasingly, our articles on HighWire can be 'pointed to' from other databases, to give seamless access.

Yet the main proponents of Public Library of Science have set great store in trying to coerce learned society publishers to deposit their data on PubMed Central and have been roundly criticized from many quarters on the grounds of impracticality, costs, lack of added value and more. Some of the main criticisms include:

- Technical difficulties and costs. Processing text and graphics files for mounting on different systems is complex, expensive and difficult. Why do it when the material is already available? SGM cannot afford to duplicate the costs it incurs at HighWire and in house.
- Technical difficulties at PubMed Central have meant that even though the site has been live for over a year, it still contains very few journals and some journals still lack basics such as a search facility. The Public Library of Science proposal for one or more central repositories may at present be a goal that is very difficult to achieve.
- Keeping material on a publisher's site enables the publisher to take responsibility for the reliability and maintenance of the data, including corrigenda, and to administer the copyright to protect the interests of authors. SGM is currently participating in two long-term archiving experiments, 'LOCKSS' and 'Dark Cave', to secure data in perpetuity.
- *Science* magazine (published by the American Association for the Advancement of Science) has expressed severe reservations about depositing a large proportion of the quality biomedical literature on PubMed Central, which is ultimately under the control of the US Government, and would effectively create a monopoly. SGM Council recommends that members give very careful consideration to these drawbacks before considering whether to support the Public Library of Science campaign.