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Access to Research: 'a big step forwards' or a 'stillborn access initiative'? By Ken Chad

Access to Research: 'a big step forwards' or a 'stillborn access initiative'?

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Public libraries are now able to offer their users free access to a wealth of electronic journal articles. Subjects include art, architecture, business, engineering, history, languages, politics, philosophy, mathematics and the sciences. So, unlike academic libraries, public libraries do not have to pay for journal subscriptions to around 8,000 titles (representing around 1.5 million articles). Furthermore, the technical infrastructure is provided free too. The Publishers Licensing Society (PLS) commented that:

'At a time when public libraries are under pressure, such a move is expected to strengthen their position in the communities they serve, and lead to increased usage and value.'[1]

So in a bleak time for public services is this just the kind of boost public libraries need?

Access to Research[2], a two year pilot scheme, was formally launched on 3rd February 2014. The initiative has been led and implemented by the PLS, while the search delivery software, Summon, has been provided free of charge by ProQuest. Other partners include the Publishers Association (The PA) and the Association for Learned and Professional Society Publishers (ALPSP) together with the Society for Chief Librarians (SCL).

The government has welcomed the initiative. According to universities and science minister David Willetts who attended the launch event:

'This will connect people, ... to a wealth of global knowledge - maximising its impact and value...independent researchers and small businesses can now access many of the world's best academic papers through their local libraries.'[3]

'My fellow Britons, rejoice!'

The initiative stems from the Finch Report of July 2012[4] which has been widely debated in academic circles but, up to now, has been largely off the radar of most public librarians. The report recommended that major publishers should license public libraries to provide access to

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[1] PLS. (2014). *Access to Research*. Available: http://www.pls.org.uk/Pages/AccessToResearch.aspx?PageView=Shared
[2] PLS. (2014). *Access to Research*. Available: http://www.accesstoresearch.org.uk/

[3] Virtual College. (2014). *Public libraries placing learning resources online*. Available: http://www.virtual-college.co.uk/news/Public-libraries-placing-learning-resources-online-newsitems-801689946.aspx
[4] Finch, Janet. (Jul 2012). *Accessibility, sustainability, excellence: how to expand access to research publications*. Available: http://www.researchinfonet.org/publish/finch/

journals free of charge, for 'walk-in' users at library premises. The walk-in limitation is important. You will have to go to the library in order to access the journal, though you can walk out with a printed copy of it[5]. A (retired academic) researcher into traditional song and street literature, who no longer enjoys any academic affiliation, was enthusiastic:

'My fellow Britons, rejoice! This is a major victory for those of us who believe that access to knowledge should not be restricted to a small elitist coterie of privileged, largely middle class, academics and students at our universities. Of course, they can get it all direct into their offices and homes, whereas us plebs will have to traipse off to the public library. So la lutte continue! But it is a big step forward.'[6]

Janene Cox, President of the Society of Chief Librarians was more measured, but equally positive at her presentation at the launch event:

'Whilst access to research can sound dry and academic, what this project is doing is enabling vast amounts of content to be freely available via the public library network...Libraries have always been about learning- and it remains a vital part of our function. The public library, whether that be physical or virtual space, is trusted; it is safe and it is engaging and creative- this service will be an exciting addition and an enormous enhancement for our digital offer to communities.'[7]

'This misbegotten initiative'

However, not everyone has been so positive. Commenting on a piece in Times Higher Education (THE),

open access advocate Mike Taylor remarked:

'I can tell you now that the take-up for this misbegotten initiative will be zero.... I can only assume that was always the intention of the barrier-based publishers on the Finch committee that came up with this initiative: to deliver a stillborn access initiative that they can point to and say "See, no-one wants open access."'[8]

And of course not all journal articles are behind subscription paywalls anyway. Much content is already 'open access' and freely available. David Prosser (Executive Director of Research Libraries UK), commenting on the same THE article, said: 'Alternatively, you could use CORE[9] to search almost 20 million papers and access them

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[5] PLS. (2014). *Licence for Access to Research in Public Libraries*. Available: http://www.pls.org.uk/Pages/Licence%20Agreement_A2R.pdf

[6] Quoted in a posting from Andy Turner, VLE Manager, Institute for Teaching on the *LIS-LINK* discussion list. 5th Feb 2014.

Available: https://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/cgi-bin/webadmin?A1=ind1402&L=lis-link#21

[7] Cox, Janene. (2014). Quoted from her speech at the *Access to Research* launch event. Available: http://blog.mendeley.com/tag/access-to-research/

[8] See comments on: Jump, Paul. (Feb 2014). *Publishers launch free journal access for libraries.* Available: http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/news/publishers-launch-free-journal-access-for-libraries/2010999.article.

[9] KMI. (2014). *CORE (COnnecting REpositories)*. Available: http://core.kmi.open.ac.uk/search

all from the comfort of your own home'.[10]

Ian Anstice, founder of Public Library News website agreed that: 'It makes little sense to limit the offer to physical buildings, but we're beggars not choosers. Yes, it's a crumb off the table, but if we're being starved of food (and we are) then that's fine by me and we'd be mistaken to turn it down. Of course the publishers have an agenda, but, at this juncture, their agenda tallies with ours - getting people in through the door and not disappointing them.' [11]

The 'People's University' re-born?

Access to journal articles is just part of a much bigger agenda and opportunity for public libraries. Taking this in conjunction with rise of online learning, and particularly 'MOOCs' (providing free access to courses from many universities around the world)[12] , there could be huge potential for public libraries to up their game in terms of the learning agenda. Maybe we should think of this as a broader opportunity for public libraries to re-energise their old role as 'The People's University.'[13] Many academic libraries have re-engineered buildings and have seen significant increases in use as learning spaces. Public libraries could do more along similar lines. They are advocated as 'community hubs' and there is a vital role for such public spaces in our communities. Strengthening their learning dimension with an offer of free e-journals, alongside exploiting MOOCs in attractive learning spaces, could be a winning combination. Learning is seen increasingly as a social activity. Just as many public libraries support reading groups, perhaps they could do more to foster 'Learning Groups'. That might do something to improve the retention rates of students engaging with MOOCs. The main issue I see is the capability and capacity of public libraries to adequately seize that opportunity.

Biography

Ken set up his consulting business in 2007 to help enable libraries, and business supporting libraries, to deliver improved services and reduce costs through more effective and imaginative use of technology. His consulting activities include reviewing/auditing library IT infrastructure and systems, help with strategy, user needs and the procurement of new and replacement systems. He has published articles and presented widely on the strategic impact of technology-driven change.
Ken is a member (MCLIP) of CILIP, ALA and a committee member of UKSG . He set up, and manages, a number of free, open community resources including the Higher Education Library Technology (HELibTech) wiki and Local Government Library Technology (LGLibTech).

[10] See comments on: Jump, Paul. (Feb 2014). *Publishers launch free journal access for libraries.* Available: http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/news/publishers-launch-free-journal-access-for-libraries/2010999.article

[11] Post to the *LIS-Pub-Libs* discussion list on 5th February 2014.

[12] Higher Education Library Technology. (2014) *MOOCs and Libraries.* Available: http://helibtech.com/MOOCs+and+Libraries

[13] Johnson, Alvin. (Oct 1938). The Public Library: A People's University. *The Library Quarterly*. 8 (4), 542-544.