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Open access to US government work urged

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Alison McCook

Email: abmccook@yahoo.com

A US House of Representatives committee has recommended that the National Institutes of Health (NIH) provide free access to all research it funds and asked the NIH to submit a plan by December 1, 2004 for how to implement the new policy in fiscal year 2005.

The committee's report stipulates that NIH deposit the final manuscript and any supplemental materials from NIH-funded research to PubMed Central 6 months after publication. And if any publishing costs are covered by NIH funds, the research would be available immediately upon publication. The recommendation must be approved by the Senate before going into effect.

The announcement last week, lauded by proponents of open access, came just before a [similar development](#) in the United Kingdom, where the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee recommended that the government insist that government-funded researchers deposit a copy of their scientific papers in an electronic archive that can be accessed for free online.

"This is the policy that many of us have been advocating for some time," [Peter Suber](#), from Earlham College in Richmond, Ind., told *The Scientist*. "It's an extraordinarily important step."

The response from publishers, however, was less positive. Barbara Meredith, vice president of Professional and Scholarly Publishing at the [Association of American Publishers](#) (AAP), told *The Scientist* that, if enacted, the NIH recommendation could undermine the sustainability of the publishing industry and exert a "chilling effect" on NIH-funded authors by potentially limiting which journals accept their work.

She added that the AAP does not oppose open access, but it does oppose the government's decision to interfere with the free market by deciding how research should be published. "There's no justification at all for congressional action," Meredith said.

Instead, she recommended that an investigation be conducted with the input of "all stakeholders" in the range of business models, including open access. Meredith added that she and her colleagues plan to "work on Senate staffers" during the upcoming recess before they vote on the proposal.

Robert Campbell, president of [Blackwell Publishing](#), which currently offers only a few open-access journals, agreed that the publishing industry may suffer from this change - but not necessarily.

A similar system is already common in other subjects, like physics, Campbell said, where researchers often publish in traditional journals then self-archive their papers. And they've found that papers listed in free archives often get more citations, which is ultimately good for the journal, he said. "It seems to be working out," Campbell told *The Scientist*. "You could say it's a win-win situation."

Campbell added that it may be particularly challenging for Blackwell to switch to a more open-access model because it is a publisher of societies, which often attract members with low-cost access to journals and therefore fear free access could discourage membership.

However, Campbell noted that the societies will likely want to watch and see whether free access to government research has any economic implications. "I think they'll be slow to give an opinion," he said. "It's not clear yet whether we will be hit."

Suber argued that the US recommendation is "perfectly compatible" with traditional business models, because it establishes a 6-month embargo before the research can be released, which is likely long enough for publishers to retain their subscription base. He added that last month, Elsevier, one of the biggest science publishers, [announced](#) that authors could post a final version of their manuscript on a personal or institutional Web site, which is accessible to anyone with an Internet connection.

In addition, Richard K. Johnson, director of the [Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources Coalition](#), said that journals that choose funding over quality will quickly develop a bad reputation. "I can't see that this would change selection policies on the part of the journal," he told *The Scientist*.

Suber noted that the NIH is the largest science funder in the US federal government, and it is ultimately responsible to its own funder - the taxpayers, who deserve access to the research they paid for. "The NIH does not work for the publishers. It works for the taxpayers," he said.

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