

# Overview of the House of Commons Science and Technology Select Committee inquiry into Scientific Publications

Based on an introductory paper presented at the UKSG seminar 'Scientific Publications: Free for all?', The Geological Society, London, Tuesday 23 November 2004

The Science and Technology Select Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to examine the expenditure, administration and policy of the Office of Science and Technology (OST) and its associated bodies. OST has a responsibility for science across Government, thus the Committee's remit is similarly broad.

The Committee published its Report, *Scientific Publications: Free for all?*, on Tuesday 20 July 2004. The Report looked at the current market for scientific publications from the perspective of publishers, libraries and end-users. The Committee had two main findings. The first was that the UK Government should help to co-ordinate and fund the establishment of an inter-linked network of institutional repositories, and that publicly funded researchers should be mandated to deposit a copy of each of their research papers in this way. The second was that the Government should encourage further experimentation with the 'author pays' publishing model.

The Committee published the Government Response to its Report on 8 November 2004, alongside a further short Committee Report and responses from other organizations.



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The House of Commons Science and Technology Select Committee's Report, *Scientific Publications: Free for all?*, has reverberated around the scientific community.<sup>1</sup> The publicity that it attracted has brought much needed attention to the issues surrounding the way in which we publish scientific papers. These issues must remain in the public eye if we are to persuade the Government to do something to address the inequities of the current system. As yet the Government has done nothing – this is painfully apparent in its Response to our Report – but we think that we can still persuade them of the need to act.

The inquiry into scientific publications presented the Science and Technology Select Committee with its first opportunity to examine at first

hand the work of the hugely successful UK publishing industry. Our remit is formally to scrutinize the work of the Office of Science and Technology (OST), which is part of the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI), and its associated public bodies. However, OST's remit is itself very broad: science is a cross-departmental issue, and so OST has some responsibility for science across Government. The Select Committee takes this as a cue to be similarly wide ranging in its scrutiny of science and technology matters. In the past we have looked at the work of the Home Office, the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), the Department for International Development (DFID) and the Department of Health (DH). It was with considerable relish that we expanded our repertoire yet further

to look at all the Government departments who have an interest in the way scientific research findings are published: DTI, DfES, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, DFID and DH.

Although the Select Committee wants to make scientific publishing a political issue, it certainly isn't a *party* political issue. The Committee that produced the Report is comprised of Members from all three of the main political parties: Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrat. Although we were starting from many different viewpoints, and had some initial differences of opinion, we were all agreed that the present situation is unacceptable and that sweeping improvements are needed. When we first undertook the inquiry we had not been fully aware of the vast amount of public money that feeds the scientific publishing process. Whatever the arguments about publishing models, it is clear that the Government has a responsibility to ensure that it gets value for the money that it spends.

The debate about scientific publications has been gathering momentum for about two years now. The Science and Technology Committee became aware of it through discussions with researchers. Several members of the Committee have academic backgrounds and clearly remember being asked by their university libraries to decide which of the journals that they read they could do without. The choice was never an easy one, but the libraries simply could not afford to take the full range of academic journals as subscriptions became more and more expensive each year. An entire movement has sprung up in reaction to this problem: it declares itself to be in favour of 'open access'. This movement and the publishing industry have adopted stances that are broadly antagonistic towards each other.

The Committee heard compelling arguments on both sides. We decided, however, that the issues were too complex to allow a decision that wholeheartedly endorsed the position of either of the two main interest groups involved. Our Report does not attempt to tear down the entire publishing edifice. All the evidence that the Committee received suggested that the UK, and the market, is unprepared for such a move. Instead, the Report proposes changes to the existing publishing system that should increase the availability of scientific papers for those who need to read them, whilst allowing for more radical change in the longer term if

necessary. The central recommendations of the Report were:

- Research funders should mandate their funded researchers to self archive their research papers, preferably on institutionally-based repositories, where they can be readily accessed by the public;
- The Government should facilitate and fund the creation of a network of repositories to allow readers to search all UK-based repositories from a single site, and to provide a 'shop front' for UK research;
- The Government should encourage and support further experimentation with the 'author pays' publishing model, particularly by making available a portion of Research Council grants for authors to experiment in this way; and
- The Government should conduct research into the problems that have been identified with the 'author pays' model, including 'free riders', the UK balance of payments, the future of learned societies, copyright and, in certain contexts, the rigorousness of peer review, and should explore ways in which these problems could be overcome.

*Scientific Publications: Free for all?* was so well received in both the scientific and the publishing communities that the Government's very negative Response to it was particularly disappointing.<sup>2</sup> Our primary frustration was the Government's tendency to argue, in the Response, against a Report that the Committee had not produced; a Report that recommended an immediate and wholesale transition to the 'author pays' model. Rather than taking up the recommendations for further experimentation, the Government dismissed the 'author pays' model out of hand. This did not appear to the Committee to be a good example of evidence-based policy making.

Still more disappointing was the Government's response to our recommendations on self archiving. Although the Response did not introduce any elements that would prevent the development of institutional repositories, neither did it commit to any measures that would encourage or co-ordinate them. This is tantamount to a straightforward rejection of our recommendations on this issue. Unless repositories are properly funded and co-ordinated they cannot confer the benefits that we identified: there would be no single-site searching for authors, and no 'shop front' for UK research.

In other words, journal articles would be no more accessible than they are at present.

Having presented all its evidence so carefully, the Committee was astonished to learn that the Government did not accept that there is a problem with the way that journal articles are currently published. Such denials can only store up problems for the future, when they will be even more difficult and costly to remedy.

Furthermore, the Committee suspected that the Government had sought to prevent the submission of an independent response to the Committee's Report by a non-departmental public body, the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC). The JISC's response differed substantially to that of the Government. The Committee found it regrettable that an expert body should have felt constrained in carrying out its advisory role, assigned to it by Government. We regarded the approach taken by the DTI to independent advice that conflicts with its own view as unduly sensitive.

The Committee took the unusual step of publishing a further Report, *Responses to the Committee's Tenth Report, Session 2003–04, Scientific Publications: Free for all?* alongside the Government Response and responses from other organizations that had been central to the Committee's original findings.<sup>3</sup> The Government is now obliged to respond to the Committee again, and the Committee hopes that it will reconsider its original position when it does so.

Scientific publishing is not an issue that will go away. The European Commission is currently exploring similar issues to those covered in our Report; the Wellcome Trust has come out in favour

of self archiving and the Research Councils are widely expected to do the same; and there are developments abroad, in the US, in Italy and in Germany. With some perseverance we hope that soon there will also be changes made to UK policy.

## References

1. Tenth Report of the Science and Technology Committee, Session 2003–04, *Scientific Publications: Free for all*, HC 399. Committee Reports are available on its web site: <http://www.parliament.uk/s&tcom> (Accessed 14 January 2005.)
2. Fourteenth Report of the Science and Technology Committee, Session 2003–04, *Responses to the Committee's Tenth Report, Session 2003–04, Scientific Publications: Free for all?*, HC 1200, Appendix 1.
3. Fourteenth Report of the Science and Technology Committee, Session 2003–04, *Responses to the Committee's Tenth Report, Session 2003–04, Scientific Publications: Free for all?*, HC 1200.

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