



The Alliance for Taxpayer Access

Frequently Asked Questions

What is “taxpayer access”?

By “taxpayer access” we mean free online access to the estimated 60,000 peer-reviewed articles describing scientific research funded by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) that are accepted for publication each year.

Ironically, most American taxpayers do not have ready access to the biomedical research for which they have paid. Open “taxpayer access” will change this.

What is the Alliance for Taxpayer Access?

The Alliance is an informal coalition of libraries, patient and health policy advocates, and other stakeholders who support reforms that will make publicly funded biomedical research accessible to the public. This Alliance supports NIH and Congressional leadership to adopt meaningful changes that respond to the public’s needs while recognizing the time-honored role of the peer review process performed by scientific journals.

The Alliance supports a measure under consideration by the National Institutes of Health and in Congress that would call for NIH grantees to deposit final manuscripts of their research articles in PubMed Central (PMC), NIH’s open online archive, at the time they are accepted for publication by a journal.

A list of organizations that are founding supporters of the Alliance is available at www.taxpayeraccess.org. The Alliance welcomes new supporters.

What are the principles behind the Alliance for Taxpayer Access?

There are three basic unifying principles:

1. American taxpayers are entitled to open access to the peer-reviewed scientific articles on research funded by the National Institutes of Health.
2. Open access to these reports will lead to usage by millions of physicians, public health professionals, patients, students, teachers, scientists and others, and will deliver an accelerated return on the taxpayers’ investment in NIH.
3. Widespread dissemination of these reports is an essential, inseparable component of our nation’s investment in science.

Who really cares about “taxpayer access?”

We all do, especially:

- Public policymakers who, acting on behalf of taxpayers, seek to maximize and accelerate the economic and social benefits to the public of their investment in biomedical research;
- Scientists who wish to expand their reach and dialogue with their peers and prominent institutions, and to encourage use and citation of their work;
- Patient and health care advocates who champion path-breaking research in order to accelerate cures for diseases;
- Academic institutions and research libraries that are unable to afford access to all the journals their users need;
- Teachers who are eager to share the latest findings in the biomedical field, and to nurture students with convenient access to previously hard-to-obtain or cost-prohibitive scientific resources; and
- Anyone who believes that taxpayers have a basic right to medical knowledge that they’ve already funded.

How is biomedical research accessible today?

The vast majority of biomedical research funded with tax dollars today is available only through increasingly costly journal subscriptions (often costing thousands of dollars annually for a single journal), through institutional licenses for online access (many research libraries spend well over a million dollars a year for access to the journals of a large publisher) or through the purchase of individual articles (for as much as \$30 per article).

What has changed with traditional scientific publishing?

Worldwide journal prices are rising significantly faster than inflation and library budgets. In North America, for example, research libraries’ expenditures on journals have more than tripled since 1986 -- forcing libraries to forgo the purchase of new journal titles and to cancel subscriptions altogether. Although the potential of the Internet to reduce costs and expand dissemination was widely anticipated, the realization of these potential benefits has largely eluded science.

Fortunately, there is a movement afoot to develop sustainable mechanisms for “open access” to research literature. (For more information on open access, see <http://www.earlham.edu/~peters/fos/boaifaq.htm#openaccess>.)

A principal open access strategy is called “open archiving.” Open archives are online digital repositories that are accessible to anyone with access to the World Wide Web. Many commercial and nonprofit publishers today allow authors to immediately archive their accepted articles under terms and conditions substantially similar to those proposed for NIH. (See examples at <http://www.sherpa.ac.uk/romeo.php?all=yes>.)

The well-known arXiv.org e-print repository -- serving physics, mathematics, non-linear science, computer science, and quantitative biology -- has coexisted with journals that perform peer review for a decade.

It is time for an open archive of taxpayer funded biomedical research, and NIH is the logical home for such a vital public utility.

Will “taxpayer access” mean the end of peer-reviewed biomedical journals?

Not at all. Open archives are compatible with peer review, copyright and career advancement. Journals will continue to play a critical role in advancing science and validating the work of researchers.

Some publishers, however, have opined that “taxpayer access” poses a threat to the revenue they receive from their subscription-supported journals. We believe the common sense approach suggested by Congress and under study at NIH provides adequate protection to publishers’ institutional subscriptions, which generally are the primary means of recovering publishing costs. Here’s why:

- The material to be deposited in NIH PubMed Central is not the final, formatted, paginated, copyedited, authoritative version of the article preferred by authors for citation purposes. While the quality of papers included in PMC has been validated and is suitable for use by individual taxpayers, we are convinced that scientists and researchers in an institutional setting will insist on access to the most authoritative version published in journals.
- For most of the approximately 4000 journals identified in the MEDLINE database, only a subset of their content is NIH-funded. Thus, the proportion of articles in a typical journal that would be openly accessible in PMC likely would be insufficient for libraries or individuals to cancel subscriptions.
- Many journals contain proprietary content valued by readers that would not be in PubMed Central. This includes editorial commentary and opinion, news and event information, review articles, and book reviews, for example. The need for access to this will protect journal subscriptions.

This is not to say that the journal publishing industry will be unaffected by the growing demand for open access to research. User expectations are rising and funding agencies around the world are increasingly recognizing the opportunity open access presents to enhance their return on investment. Over the long run, it is expected that the journal publishing industry will inevitably undergo changes -- just as have other industries impacted by the Internet. But the economic and social benefits far outweigh any disruption resulting from Internet-driven change.

***Authorized by the Alliance for Taxpayer Access
August 2004***