



## Other Voices: Proposal to impose fees on research articles should be rejected

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In a historic electoral season, a little-noticed but controversial piece of legislation has been sponsored by Congressman John Conyers, D-Detroit, who recently ran unopposed in the 14th District. Introduced to the House Judiciary Committee on Sept. 11, House Resolution 6845 - the Fair Copyright in Research Works Act - addresses intellectual properties rights, especially those pertaining to public availability of scholarly articles.

H.R. 6845 seeks to reverse a National Institutes of Health (NIH) Public Access Policy that requires research articles funded by taxpayer dollars to be made publicly available online within one year of their publication.

Before this policy, the public had to pay for government-sponsored research through taxes, and then paid again when they wanted to obtain an article. Much of the research community suffered, too. Although large universities can afford institutional subscriptions, independent research firms and small universities had to decide what information to purchase, and what to forgo. It was a colossal frustration for researchers and an injustice for taxpayers who paid unregulated prices for research they themselves funded.

This isn't just an academic debate, though it concerns academia. If your child is diagnosed with a genetic disease or one of your parents gets cancer, scholarly research articles provide authoritative information that allows you to educate yourself about possible treatment options and disease characteristics. In the old system that H.R. 6845 wants to restore, you would pay for each research article you wanted.

Furthermore, these articles are not cheap, especially when you want to read multiple sources. Many of the most authoritative journals, including the New England Journal of Medicine, JAMA, and Nature, charge at least \$10 to \$15 per article. You may spend hundreds of dollars to obtain the very research that your taxpaying dollars support. Since the NIH policy change, however, all articles over one year old are publicly available. Moreover, because research is a cumulative, step-wise process, older articles - not just the newest - are often essential. Under H.R. 6845, all research will command the same high prices.

Consider PubMed Central, an NIH-curated online database and one of the pre-eminent academic resources in the world. Thanks to the NIH's Public Access Policy, nearly 4,000 manuscripts are added to PubMed each month - a fantastic testament to the productivity of science. Since the new NIH policy to require published manuscripts, submissions have increased from 19 percent of all peer-reviewed publications in 2007 to an estimated 56 percent for 2008.

H.R. 6845 would delay this process and make the deposition of these articles more difficult, preventing researchers, physicians, and the public from retrieving critical information. In addition, arguments by supporters of H.R. 6845 that submissions to the NIH hurt journal subscriptions are suspect. Dr. Elias Zerhouni, director of NIH, has stated that he sees "no evidence that this has been harmful" to publishers. According the current NIH Public Access Policy, the publishing companies still profit from the article for one year, just not forever.

Should Conyers' bill become law, the research community - and the innovation it spurs - will also be impeded. Knowledge-based economies, such as those driven by scientific inquiry, are fueled by the rapid dissemination of information. Efforts that derail the flow of scientific communication will only hurt the U.S. by delaying the economic benefits of shared knowledge, weakening our ability to pursue further scientific advances, and setting a precedent of protectionism. Ultimately, this will serve to hurt our health care status and economic standing.

In recent weeks, we've seen what can happen when large corporations riding on public money go unregulated. Doing the same thing to medical research is dangerous not only to our wallets, but also to our health care. Rep. Conyers should put the needs of public citizens above those of corporate publishing houses and reject H.R. 6845.

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