



“Achieving an Equitable Transition to Open Access”

Interview with Andrea Powell

Director of outreach and publisher coordinator for the Research for Life initiative

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KENNEALLY: Over the past two decades, the Research For Life initiative has sought to close the world’s knowledge gap. A global coalition of UN entities, NGOs, publishers, and universities, Research For Life now provides free or very low-cost access to thousands of research publications, books, and online resources in lower- and middle-income countries, from Armenia to Vietnam. A new white paper assesses the current level of uptake of open access publishing models in those countries and examines barriers to adoption of OA.

Welcome to Copyright Clearance Center’s podcast series. I’m Christopher Kenneally for Beyond the Book. Produced by the International Center for the Study of Research at Elsevier, in collaboration with the International Association of STM Publishers, the report, “Achieving an Equitable Transition to Open Access,” suggests actions that publishers and institutions can take to support researchers and to ensure that the emerging research publishing paradigm is more inclusive. Andrea Powell is STM’s director of outreach and publisher coordinator for the Research for Life initiative. She joins me now from her UK office. Welcome to Beyond the Book, Andrea.

POWELL: Hello, Christopher. I’m delighted to be here.

KENNEALLY: Thank you for joining us and for telling us about this report. You are co-author with Rob Johnson of Research Consulting and Rachel Herbert, who is a senior research evaluation manager at Elsevier, for this report. I think the best place for us to start to help listeners understand the importance of the points you’re making here is to describe the conditions that researchers in lower- and middle-income countries face when seeking access to scholarly publications.

POWELL: Sure. Well, I think I might just take ourselves back a few years, back to the launch of Research For Life, because back in the early 2000s, access to research journals was very much controlled by subscription – the subscription business model. For researchers in lower- and middle-income countries, this presented a



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huge barrier to access. As journals moved gradually online and more likely losing their print equivalents, that access became even more challenging.

What Research For Life aimed to do was to break down those barriers to access by allowing researchers in registered and eligible nonprofit institutions – so educational institutions, government departments, and so on – to register for free, or as you say, very low-cost access to those publications, so that we could ensure that researchers in the global south weren't disadvantaged. The access has therefore improved significantly since those days. We have over 10,000 registered institutions globally, and usage is strong across all the programs.

Of course, there are still many challenges facing researchers in those countries, which have only been exacerbated by the recent problems with the COVID-19 pandemic. But we're working hard and continually to ensure that researchers are aware that they do have access to research content through Research For Life, and we work with the librarians in those institutions to help mediate that access and to provide the capacity and the skills that are needed to be able to interrogate that research collection.

KENNEALLY: It really does sound like you are working very hard to close that knowledge gap, and a great deal of progress has been made so far, but open access complicates the challenge. Tell us how.

POWELL: Yes. So open access does create a whole new set of challenges. On the one hand, it makes a large amount of content much more readily accessible, because there are no subscription barriers. In fact, we include about 14,000 open access journals in the Research For Life collection. So we ensure that access to that content is easy for our registered users.

But on the other hand, open access as a publishing business model creates a different kind of obstacle, because it prevents researchers with limited access to funds from publishing in those outlets. So while the open access model has created in many ways a more level playing field for access to knowledge, when it comes to being part of the research process and making one's own research available, for those researchers who are striving to become part of the international research community, it simply moves the barrier to a different place.

KENNEALLY: So you are discussing right there the so-called article processing charges, the fees that researchers or their grant supporters have to pay in order for an article to be published in open access – usually so-called open access gold journals.



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POWELL: Gold – yes, that’s right. And you’re right to point out – we made this point in our paper that there are other models for open access publishing, but the gold model, where the author pays an article processing charge to ensure that their article is published, is still the dominant model and certainly is going to be part of the mix for some time to come.

KENNEALLY: And those fees can range from a few hundred dollars or a few hundred British pounds to several thousand. So it’s not insignificant for any researcher, but particularly researchers in the regions we’re discussing.

POWELL: Indeed. We should point out that many publishers waive those fees for researchers in the countries we’re talking about. But what we’ve discovered in our research is that many researchers are unaware that waivers exist. We’ve discovered also that publishers can be quite inconsistent amongst themselves in the way that they apply such waivers. So one of the recommendations we’re making is that publishers are more transparent about the kind of APC waivers that are on offer, and maybe we can help them to work to a greater consistency in the way that they are presented and implemented, because that will simplify the process and will encourage researchers to submit their articles to those same journals.

KENNEALLY: And the recommendations, Andrea Powell, that are included in your report came from a discussion, a workshop, that you and Rob Johnson led at the Researcher to Reader conference in February 2020. You asked the stakeholders in attendance at the workshop, how can we collaborate to support the transition to open access? What did you hear?

POWELL: That’s right. We were wanting to explore these challenges with a group of mixed delegates. We had a range of publishers, librarians, and we also were lucky enough to have a couple of researchers from – one was from Ghana, I think one was from Kenya. So we had representatives from the countries that we’re focusing on. And we wanted to explore ways in which we as a community could help to achieve a more level playing field for researchers, recognizing that we can’t solve all the problems on our own, nor can we solve them all overnight, because many of the problems relate to how research is funded in these particular countries.

But what we discussed was identifying some very concrete and practical ways in which we as a community could support the transition to open access. So we heard, for example, as I mentioned earlier, that if we could be more transparent about APC waiver availability, be more consistent in how they’re applied, that would make a big difference, and we could communicate that message to our Research For Life constituents. At the moment, it’s very hard to communicate a message which is so patchy and so mixed across the board.



We also discussed that not only are researchers from developing countries underrepresented in the publishing output, they're also very severely underrepresented in the peer review system. So we wanted to find ways that publishers could engage with researchers from the global south to bring them onto editorial boards, to involve them in peer review processing, build their capacity to carry out these very important scholarly activities, so that they become part of that global conversation and give them a more equitable role alongside their peers in more developed countries.

KENNEALLY: So really, it's about increasing the collaboration and encouraging that collaboration between the industrialized regions and these lower- and middle-income countries. But what's also related to this is the so-called Sustainable Development Goals that the UN has outlined. So why is support for Sustainable Development Goals important in this regard?

POWELL: Well, the Sustainable Development Goals really set out the great challenges that we as a human population face over the coming years and set out some very specific targets and objectives that are designed to help eradicate poverty and to address many of these global concerns. The Sustainable Development Goals make it very clear that access to knowledge and the communication of knowledge and scientific research is not an outcome of development, but it's a catalyst for development. You cannot achieve the development and improvements you want without the associated research being more widely and more fairly available.

The other point that is made in the SDGs is that is that research must be done by the researchers in these countries and within those countries. It isn't something that should be done to them. So building capacity within the scientific research community in the global south, which of course are the countries that are most affected by the challenges of global climate change and water shortages and so on – so the SDGs really underpin our efforts to improve access to knowledge and to improve the dissemination of that knowledge.

KENNEALLY: The Researcher to Reader conference in February 2020, where so many of these points were articulated, was probably one of the last, if not the last, conferences that the scholarly publishing world has been able to hold since the arrival of the pandemic. I wonder if you can tie this to the COVID-19 crisis and just, again, how that underscores the importance of this work.

POWELL: Yes, you're absolutely right, and the organizers of that conference have acknowledged their good fortune in having been able to hold that event earlier this year. In fact, funnily enough, one of the presenters from Kenya joined the meeting



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by videoconference from Kenya not because of COVID-19 restrictions, but because of problems getting a visa. But it was kind of an early sign of what future conferences might look like. Actually, what it meant – I think many of us have seen this since then – is we have able to achieve greater participation in virtual conferences than we had been previously in physical ones. So actually, the fact that we're no longer able to travel doesn't necessarily mean that we can no longer communicate and share our knowledge.

What we are seeing, of course, in many regions – we're all sitting in our home offices these days. And that's not just up here in the global north, but in many of the Research For Life institutions, researchers are also working from home, and the internet and broadband access in their communities can be much more challenging than in ours. So usage of some of our content has been affected by that new virtual working paradigm. But I think what it's also done is accelerated the need for knowledge sharing and the need for collaboration in research. What we're seeing with the research that surrounds the COVID-19 pandemic is that the global community is working collaboratively to process research more quickly, to share it more quickly, to add it to the corpus of information, which can then be used as an evidence base for future decision-making. Beyond just the pure interest of Research For Life, what we are seeing is that real focus on the need for strong international collaboration and open and transparent knowledge sharing.

KENNEALLY: Apart from the urgency that COVID-19 brings to all of this, it is clear that it's possible to make these kind of changes. COVID-19, as you say, has accelerated the change, but it's also, I think, revealed to us that the things that we thought weren't possible only a few months ago indeed are possible.

POWELL: Yes, I think that's very true. I was very heartened that at the Research For Life general partners meeting, which took place virtually in July – we were all supposed to be in Chicago at the AMA, but instead, we were all in our home offices dialing in from around the world. And actually, as I say, we had terrific participation from Research For Life users in many other countries that wouldn't normally have participated in that meeting. So I think things have become possible, and I think this new way of working has opened up our eyes to how those new ways of working can improve outcomes for development, and I hope that we'll build on that going forward.

What I'm working on as well is ensuring that the content available through Research For Life is as broad as possible, covering as many disciplines as possible, and that more and more publishers make their content available and that we work to carry out online training for our users to build their capacity so that they can make the best use of the content that's available to them.



KENNEALLY: And the report, “Achieving an Equitable Transition to Open Access,” is available for download free from the International Center for the Study of Research at Elsevier. We’ve been speaking with one of the co-authors of that report, Andrea Powell, who is STM’s director of outreach and publisher coordination for the Research For Life initiative. Andrea Powell, thanks so much for joining me today on Beyond the Book.

POWELL: It’s been my great pleasure, Chris.

KENNEALLY: Beyond the Book is produced by Copyright Clearance Center. Our co-producer and recording engineer is Jeremy Brieske of Burst Marketing. Subscribe to the program wherever you go for podcasts and follow us on Twitter and Facebook. The complete Beyond the Book podcast archive is available at beyondthebook.com. I’m Christopher Kenneally. Thanks for listening and join us again soon on CCC’s Beyond the Book.

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