As readers of this blog almost certainly know, this week was Open Access Week, and it’s been heartening to see all of the stories about how open access is creating new opportunities for scholarship, and transforming scholarly communication.

It’s also been interesting to see organizations that one might not think of as being open access proponents proclaiming their OA bona fides this week. On Tuesday this press release from Nature came across my Twitter feed. I shared it with my colleagues Kevin and Haley, joking that our job was done and we could go home, now that even in Nature over 60% of published research articles were open access under Creative Commons licenses.

Even though Nature neglects to mention in this release that they are bringing in a lot of money from open access through high article processing charges (they aren’t doing this just to be nice) I still think it’s an important milestone because it shows that open access is becoming the norm, even in mainstream, high visibility journals. I’m optimistic that this is another indicator that we’re on our way to some kind of tipping point for open access, where other effects will come into play.
One of the statistics given in the press release is that the percentage of authors choosing CC-BY licenses in Nature Publishing Group’s open access journals rose from 26% in 2014 to 96% in September 2015. Just last year, a study by Taylor & Francis indicated that, when asked (or at least when asked with the leading questions in the T&F study), authors were more likely to choose other CC variants, yet in *Nature* open access journals the choice of CC-BY is now nearly unanimous. Maybe “choice” is too strong a word – they appear to have achieved this primarily by setting CC-BY as the default. Just as in the past when signing over all your rights to a publisher was the default (and, unfortunately, in many journals still is), it seems that few authors realize they can make a change, or see a strong reason to do so. What this signals is the power of setting a default.

When we were working toward an open access policy for Duke University faculty in 2010, we talked about setting the default to open. As we discussed the proposed open access policy with Duke faculty, we never called it a mandate, and we haven’t treated it as a mandate, in that the policy doesn’t force anyone to do something they are disinclined to do. But absent any expressed desire to the contrary (via an opt out) the policy enabled the faculty and the University to make as much scholarship produced at Duke be as widely available as possible. We approached the policy as a default position, and built services to make it easy for Duke authors to make their work open access via an institutional repository and have it appear on their University and departmental profile pages, so there are few reasons now not to do it. It will still take time, but I think this “green” open access option is something authors will increasingly be aware of and see as a natural and easy step in their publishing process. They’ll see open access links showing up on their colleagues’ profiles, being included in syllabi and getting cited by new audiences around the world, and linked from news stories, for example, and word of mouth will tell them that it’s really easy to get that for themselves too.

What makes me optimistic about the figures in the *Nature* press release is that they point to an environment where even in high visibility journals open access
is no longer that thing only your activist colleague does, but is something that many people are doing as a matter of course. And as the percentage of authors making their work open access grows, suddenly various decision-making heuristics and biases start to tip in the other direction. Pretty soon the outlier will be the scholar whose work is not openly available, either via “green” repositories or “gold” open access journals, and I think momentum toward almost universal OA will increase.

Our work isn’t done, of course. Even with open access as a default, the next challenge will be to manage the costs. So far the shift to OA has mostly been an additional cost, and the big publishers who made big profits before are continuing to make big profits now via these new models. Even as OA becomes prevalent, and scholars see it as the norm, we’ll still have to work hard to find ways to exert downward pressure on author processing charges and other publishing costs, so that open access doesn’t just become another profit center that exploits scholarly authors and their funders and institutions. We need to do better to surface these costs, and to put in place mechanisms and perhaps shift to supporting other publishers and other models that will keep costs down.

But for now let’s call this a victory. Recognizing there’s still a lot to do, let’s pop the champagne bottle, celebrate open access week, and then get back to work on the next round of creating a better scholarly communication ecosystem.

ONE THOUGHT ON “OPEN ACCESS AT THE TIPPING POINT”

Annabelle Smyth

OCTOBER 26, 2015 AT 3:51 PM

The increase in authors using CC-BY licenses is amazing. That jump from 26%-96% is astounding. That is an amazing transformation.

COMMENTS ARE CLOSED.