

Clarification from Chris Beckett and Simon Inger, November 2006

Stevan Harnad, in his posting of 13th November to the American Scientist Open Access Forum list and copied to several others, raised a number of issues with our recently published research [*Self-Archiving and Journal Subscriptions*], which we felt should be addressed and clarified.

Stevan focuses his criticism on five main points:

1. The methodology deployed, and the entire point of conducting a conjoint survey at all
2. Whether or not OA articles can be considered a 'product' in any meaningful sense
3. The issue of bias
4. The statement of apparently obvious or banal findings
5. The validity of inferring cancellation behaviour from the findings

Let's discuss these in order:

1. We decided to undertake a conjoint survey because we felt that other attitudinal surveys of what future intentions might be were highly prone to being bogged down exactly because surveyees were asked in absolute terms to what extent they would like one scenario, and then another, without ever asking them to choose between them.

A survey that asks people if they like steak to eat, and then asks if they like chicken to eat, is not as powerful as a survey that asks them to choose between steak and chicken. Bring in another variable, such as, 'how well done do you like your meat?' and you get a very different answer depending on whether the surveyee preferred steak or chicken in the first place. By combining these factors with others through a conjoint survey, you might just find out how bad the steak has to be before chicken tartare starts to command a market share!

We hope this illustrates the whole purpose of applying the conjoint methodology to the situation that publishing currently faces; it forces people to reveal the true underlying factors in their decision-making in a way that hasn't been done before.

2. Can articles in Open Access repositories be considered a product and one that librarians may select instead of journals? Absolutely they can. Is the issue here that they are free via OA, or that they are not organised and packaged?

If we were to stand on a street corner and give away mobile phones, they would be every bit as much as a product as one you paid for in a shop. Would we cause some people not to go into the shop and buy a mobile? Sure we would. Would some people not trust the mobile we gave them and buy one anyway? Yes, they would. Would some people use our mobiles as a spare and buy another anyway? Yes, they would do that too. A survey might tell you in what proportions people would undertake these actions. But you can be certain that at least some of the people would use the mobile we gave them and postpone or cancel the acquisition of a paid-for phone.

So we believe that articles available via OA, even though they are free, are still very much a product. For now, they may not be considered as a product because they are not organised into product-shaped offerings, such as journals. But at the same time we are aware of organisations that are building products which combine the power of OAI/PMH (and the crawling power of Google); existing abstracting & indexing databases; publisher operated link servers; and library-operated link servers: to build an organised route to OA materials - a route that would allow a non-subscriber to be directed to the free OA repository version of a journal article instead of the publisher's version. Once these products exist, we are sure our research indicates that *some* librarians at least will actually switch to OA versions for *some* of their information needs, while others will continue to purchase the journal product for a whole raft of reasons and others will provide, i.e. acquire, both options.

3. The whole Open Access debate evokes an emotional response from publishers, librarians and researchers on both sides of the debate. At the same time, so does the word 'cancellation'. For that matter, so does the phrase 'serials crisis'. We wanted to avoid using all of these phrases in the research, so as not to cloud people's judgement in favour of their beliefs alone. This is one way of avoiding one type of bias. Specifically, the type of bias we sought to eliminate was an emotional bias, not a bias for or against OA per se. It can be equally well argued that another survey should be done with these words actually mentioned. The results may well be different - but no more or less valid than ours; such a survey would be measuring a different thing. It is up to each individual reader of the report to decide which kind of response, and hence survey, they would prefer.

4. The critique states that some of the findings are obvious and banal: 'The fact that everyone would like something for free rather than paying for it', for example. In fact the survey shows that not everyone would prefer that - even in a completely 'like for like' situation - possibly because people are suspicious of free things.

Much more important, however, is how - *and to what extent* - the decision becomes qualified by other factors. (Would you like free raw chicken for dinner or paid-for cooked chicken?) Look closely and the results show that the lure of 'free' has only so much pulling power, and a combination of other factors pulls more potently against it. So, in themselves, the importance of each of the attributes has limited value - it is in combination that their true meaning comes through.

5. So, can we infer cancellation behaviour from the results? Yes, we can, because it is unrealistic to expect that everyone that expresses a preference for acquiring a product that looks very much like content on OA repositories would still continue to acquire a paid-for version. Some will; of that we have very little doubt. But likewise some won't. To that end I think we *can infer that cancellation will occur*. It may be after someone has provided an organisational layer on top of the repositories. It may be after improved librarian awareness of the alternative has occurred. And it may require way more than 15% of the material to be available on OA.