



CARL/ABRC Backgrounder Series #4

BIOMED Central

An alternative to Scholarly Publishing

January 2002

Kathleen Shearer

Established as an alternative to the current publishing model, BioMed Central's (www.biomedcentral.com) core belief is that subscription-based access to research is hindering rather than helping scientific communication. Most publishers of primary research articles cover their costs, and often make high profits, by charging users—mostly through library subscriptions. This results in both high costs and many restrictions to access and usage. The company proposes that all research findings in medicine and biology should be freely accessible to all, and that a successful science publishing operation can be built by providing subscription-based information services to the scientific community (BioMed Central, "What is BioMed Central?": 2001. [www.biomedcentral/info/aboutus.asp]).

In 2001, BioMed Central announced its first set of research journals available at no cost to the readers. The journals use BioMed Central's publishing infrastructure, which comprises an online submission system, electronically assisted peer review, digitization, and publication of accepted articles in both Adobe PDF and HTML formats. Peer-reviewed research articles in these journals will join the rest of the citations to respected medical literature through indexing in the National Library of Medicine's (NLM) PubMed (Medline) bibliographic database. The full text will also go immediately into PubMed Central, NLM's electronic repository of medical journal articles available to Web users at no cost. (Information Today, Volume 18, Issue 7: July/August 2001 [www.infotoday.com]).

To meet the costs of publishing, the BioMed Central business model was based on a \$500 submission charge to authors per paper it published. As of January 1, 2002, BioMed Central has modified its business model to remove the burden on individual researchers by offering institutional memberships. Membership will allow all research staff and students within an institution to submit an unlimited amount of research papers to the 60 or so journals currently published by BioMed Central (with at least 20 more to come next year). Furthermore, it will allow all the abstracts of relevant articles generated at the institution, irrespective of where they were published, to be archived on a customize page on the BioMed Central web site. The abstracts of the articles listed will be included in any searches performed on the BioMed Central web site and be linked to the full text (if available) on the institution's own server or proxy server. Annual memberships are offered at rates ranging from USD 1,500 (for 20-500 full time researchers and postgraduates) to USD 7,500 (for more than 5,000 staff) (EPS Update Note: January 9, 2001. [<http://www.epsltd.com/UpdateNotes/Today.htm>])

While feedback about the BioMed Central business model remains mostly positive, some have their reservations. The following comments come from an article in Information Today and a recent discussion about BioMed Central on the Liblicense Listserve:

Paul Ayris, chair of the Scholarly Communications Task Force for the Consortium of University Research Libraries (CURL)

"Traditional models of publishing are changing fast, and research libraries should welcome BioMed Central's efforts to tackle the academic, financial, and technological challenges in forging new modes of scholarly discourse"
(Information Today, Volume 18, Issue 7: July/August 2001. [www.infotoday.com]).

Betty Sutherland, Associate University Librarian (Health Sciences), Dalhousie University

"Is this not a case of "page charges" (which have been a fact of life in the scholarly journal publishing world for ages, especially in the case of society publishers) in a new guise?"

"Unless Dalhousie University and my former employer, the Government of Canada, are different than other universities and research institutions, their libraries have not paid researchers' page charges in the past. Why then should it be the libraries who do so now?"

"I'm not necessarily opposed to the idea of an institutional membership in BioMed; just opposed to the idea that it would be the institution's library that would pay it, as if it were "just another subscription".

(Sutherland, B. Liblicense-L List Archives: January 9, 2002."
[<http://www.library.yale.edu/~llicense/ListArchives/0201/msg00009.html>])

Phil Davis, Life Sciences Bibliographer, Cornell University

"Personally, I don't see an intrinsic difference between institutions paying a fixed fee to BioMed and page charges required by many society presses, except who pays the fee (the library or the author). They are both fees levied on the submitter. In the new model, a flat yearly fee is charged irrespective of the number of articles submitted to a small number (50) new and untested online journals. It also comes with the restriction that the sum of these author charges goes to one commercial publisher as opposed to being spread around the publishing world. I think the concept of providing free uninhibited access to scholarly information is a laudable concept; however, I think that the BioMed solution is more restrictive and limiting than the traditional model. BioMed is *not* a non-profit society publisher -- they are a for-profit commercial enterprise competing for subscription dollars like everyone else. If libraries are considering the BioMed model, we should also consider paying the page-charges to non-profit publishers, many of which have proven to produce prestigious scholarly journals at affordable prices to libraries."

(Davis, P. Liblicense-L List Archives: January 9, 2002.
[<http://www.library.yale.edu/~llicense/ListArchives/0201/msg00010.html>])

Paul M. Gherman, University Librarian, Vanderbilt University

"Librarian's objections to the BioMed model of page charges, if that is what you want to call them is very short-sighted. The one-time payment per article assures that that article will be available to the world in perpetuity. This is a far different model than each of us paying per article under the current system. I have strongly supported this concept for a number of years as an eventual means of allowing much lower cost access by the world, (not just those able to pay) to information."

"If we carry this model forward, there is hope that we can eventually sign a pact with publishers that ownership of information remains with the authors while we take the risk out of publishing which is the reason why publishers claim they need the protections of copyright in the first place. By the BioMed model, the publisher recovers their investment and some profit regardless whether or not a single subscription is sold, and in return, the world gains free access to this information."

(Gherman, P. Liblicense-L List Archives: January 10, 2002.
[<http://www.library.yale.edu/~llicense/ListArchives/0201/msg00014.html>])

David Worlock, Electronic Publishing Services

"On the one hand, it removes a number of problems associated with the individual writer's status (research team member, institutional staff member etc) and recognises that increasingly, institutions want a greater say in the downstream management of their intellectual property (if it is, wholly or in part, their own)."

"It also provides additional value to institutions, which they can offer to researchers who they seek to recruit, and provides an inducement to publish that aligns with the institution's needs as well as the individual's career requirements. And, of course, it preserves the free and open access policy which is clearly close to contributor/user perceptions of good practice."

"If there are enough institutions to make it work (and work fast enough – a not inconsiderable issue in itself), then this is another bold move from a publisher seemingly determined to recreate a scientific literature dissemination model that is derived directly from what users want. Finding the right budget holder in some institutions will be an issue. In others, especially where researchers individually would have been forced to invoke BioMed Central's waiver policy, there is a prospect of getting something where nothing was previously available. And if institutional support quickens the pace of BioMed Central's development, it will also enable it to expand its publishing activities more rapidly."

(Warock, D. EPS Update Note: 9 January 2002. [<http://www.epsLtd.com/UpdateNotes/Today.htm>])