

'A New Alexandria: Readers' Responses'
by Lisbet Rausing

Readers' comments on my article 'Towards a New Alexandria' in the (electronic) New Republic divide, roughly, into three categories: frustration that academic writings—and especially JSTOR—are not available to the general public; criticisms that universities and governments do not vigorously tackle the problem of public access to peer-reviewed data in the humanities and social sciences; and suggestions—sadly, rather few, and limited – for how universities and libraries can move forwards, towards a new Alexandria.

1. Views from the General Public and Independent Scholars

“As someone who longs for and never has access to JSTOR, it (your article) sings to me.”

Public historian, England

“Every time I've encountered JSTOR while trying to access an article, I've ended up not reading the article.”

Head of a Central Bank, OECD country

“I completely agree with you on the JSTOR availability issue. My mum often emails me asking whether I can send her journal articles that I can access through the Princeton account but she cannot. It does seem unfair and counterproductive that someone like her should not have access to such materials.”

Princeton undergraduate, whose mother is a community leader in East Africa

“For most of me and my friends this is something that is relevant every single day of school.”

London senior (high) school girl whose school has JSTOR access

“I am precisely the type of "victim" you mention: well educated, albeit non-academic, familiar with, but too often excluded from the academic and specialized journals I want to consult. . . . Were I not almost ninety and occasionally a bit unsteady on my feet, I would buy hundreds of copies of TAM and distribute them at the door of the Berkeley Faculty Club at lunch-time... Since that's a bit impractical, I will limit myself to forwarding it to colleagues in the world of the antiquarian booktrade.”

Antiquarian bookseller, California

“So much of what you recount I have struggled with for years. How difficult for an unaffiliated scholar to gain access to critical research databases! (You cite the Princeton Index of Christian Art and ArtStor, but to mention another, a real sore point for me personally, the Patrologia Latina – this major resource just can't be had at all if you are not part of a subscribing institution – the irony, digitizing it has actually made it less accessible). I brought up this problem with the College Art Association a couple of years ago, and now it is possible to get JSTOR as a member for a nominal annual fee (\$15) - but, it turns out, only for their own publications, like the Art Bulletin and Art Journal! Not especially helpful. I have managed to stay productive because I live in Washington DC and can do research footwork the old-fashioned way by physically going to multiple libraries (highly inefficient). If there is a way to join a forum for activists in this regard, please let me know.”

Independent scholar (historian of medieval art)

“I just wanted to flag up the frustration of non-academic writers like myself, who nevertheless need access to good quality research and historical records. For my last book, I was very keen to find descriptions and testimonies of Jewish partisans in Europe during the last war, and found it infuriating that so often when I was on the trail of something interesting I would come up against JSTOR and couldn't even get to glimpse enough of the paper to decide whether it

was potentially useful. Usually I would give up in frustration, and look elsewhere.”

Novelist, London

“My daughter is a Freshman in the Yard. To her, Widener is a large building with columns. It's not open after 5 pm and so doesn't fit her schedule. I have talked to her about the serendipity of open stacks, and pointed out that many great universities- e.g. Cal and Oxford to name but two, do not allow such freedom. I tell tales of the glory of the reading rooms and its brilliant renovation. . . None of it has any resonance. She's never been inside. Her story is not unusual for undergraduates I think.”

Parent, Harvard undergraduate

“It / your article strengthened my Protestantism! As a politician who has to deal with copyright issues as well as questions about how to best invest public resources in libraries and research, the piece is both a cri de coeur and a practical agenda for reform.”

Party Leader, significant Commonwealth country

“Much of the sociocultural documentation possessed by archives and libraries concerns indigenous, disenfranchised, or otherwise marginal people who have little easy access to university repositories and often lack the skill to use them. At Berkeley the language archives that contain much of the documentation of California Indian languages . . . are consulted mostly not by (conventional, university-based) scholars but by Native people, including those you might call "community scholars"...the material in some sense "belongs" to people who conventionally do not have access, and it should be a major part of the archivist's job to figure out how those people get access to their heritage. It's obviously physically safer in a university repository, in many cases, so I've become a big believer in free digital access...The devil's in the details, of course: how to either persuade those who currently own the copyrights to open them (including the

Elseviers and so on), or to persuade the rest of us to do the work that's needed to create the alternative venues. One place to start might be with the various journals that are run by professional societies...those societies need to be persuaded to make access free.”

Professor, UC Berkeley

“If I go to Google and type in JSTOR, I get the automatic option to sign up with my professor’s / university account, and I have free access to the site. If I did not have access to my professor’s / university account, perhaps I would not be able to sign in.”

PhD and research assistant, exemplifying how surprisingly unaware university-based scholars are that the general public cannot access academic knowledge.

2. Criticism of Academe’s Lack of Progress in Sharing Peer-Reviewed Research with the Public

“I am with you on the frustration that the closest we have to a group that should be an enlightened self-governing peer group - the academe - has not been able to do the right thing with copyright in the new age.”

Political commentator, London

“Part of the problem is that academic hierarchies and promotions have not caught up with the new digital world.”
Oxbridge professor. He adds that his c 3 million YouTube lecture hits, in a Research Assessment Exercise, “was worth the shortest, peer-reviewed article in an obscure journal.”

“A range of public and private sector organisations are committed to Open Access, and have (as appropriate) OA policies, statements of principle or relevant business models that are wholly supportive of OA. This, on its own, has not yet been sufficient to see a major shift toward OA in the UK

higher education sector, despite the clear benefits that such a shift would bring.”

Vice-Chancellor, Russell Group university, UK

“Will there be an open society and open academy that will encourage the sharing of knowledge and the collective creation of new knowledge. It seems, on one hand, utopian, and on the other, YouTubian – just feasible...I am trying to make more of our resources available through digitisation, but the vexations of commercial licensing and the restrictions of UK copyright law (indeed, all copyright, but the UK laws are even more restrictive than the US).”

Head, major university library, UK

“Several years back, at the time I was head of an association for an academic field in the US and called for...scholars to publish electronically and for universities to take such publications into full consideration as part of promotion and tenure, I received a flood of angry responses.”

Professor, Ivy League university

“The Library of Congress periodically comes under pressure from the US Congress to recover costs for services beyond its walls. That's just part of the US political landscape and the mindset of many legislators. We might think it unfortunate, but it's one of those facts of life.”

Librarian, Ivy League university

“Universities behave like Yugoslav workers' self-management...they think only of the work collective and not of their customers.”

Fellow at a Washington think-tank

“I think libraries are living up to their core mission and making what they can available freely on the web. IP and copyright concerns in the electronic world continue to muddy these efforts, however.”

Dean, Ivy League University

“As a librarian, I have been frustrated with the JSTOR-type closed doors. As an editor, I grimaced at long-term copyrights to authors and their descendants! Let's hope that the tidal wave of demand will force open access.”

Librarian, small Christian college, Missouri

“Librarians don't know what their role should be in this new world where all scholarly information is in the public domain.”

Dean, business school, mid-West

“Nobody is in charge and therefore all of these initiatives become partial solutions, perhaps dependent on individual companies, universities or countries, rather than part of a worldwide effective effort. That is the nexus of the problem...I, of course, deeply concur in your belief that academic materials should be exempted from commercial copyright. We've created an unrealistic golden circle of those who can read and learn from some of our current world's most important research and writing. Open access just makes so much more sense.”

President, East Coast private college

“The bitter truth is that we who are engaged in public domain project lack financing and thus work in a small scale and in our spare time. JSTOR has an income model...EU sponsors projects where only national libraries are invited, and...when national head librarians are pensioned off and new ones appointed, digitalisation skills is not a merit.”

Programmer and open-access volunteer, Sweden

“The reality is that senior faculty, while sympathetic to the effort, are uninterested in expending the energy to change the realpolitik of the situation. It was neatly summed up for me by one professor this way: "Look, I hold a Chair and I have an international reputation. I can publish anywhere and people will read my stuff." But the graduate students in my lab cannot afford that luxury. They have to try to get

published in *Cell* or *Nature*. Those are the publication that matter for tenure decisions – not some open-access storage site on the web. I sympathize with Darnton but I can't change the system."

Alumni, Harvard

"Here's an interesting back-story to consider with your article. When Tim Berners-Lee invented the web, what website did he create? The "World Wide Web Virtual Library." It's still around. But it didn't flourish and today it's a quaint curiosity. What flourished instead was Wikipedia. While also library-like, Wikipedia flourished because it was an open, read-write, always-evolving system. The WWW-VL was an old-school library, with materials selected by the privileged webmaster-librarian (Yahoo also adopted this model for its directory). To the extent that librarians and academics aim for control, fixity, and permanence on the web, perhaps they are going against the grain (to mix a metaphor). Academia is a priesthood, and may not easily mix with the flock."

Librarian, Washington DC

"The entire intellectual contents of Library of Congress Subject Headings can now be downloaded in two minutes as a single file of 602 megabytes in the form of 3,998,090 triples [7], one per line. The publisher of those seven big, red expensive volumes you find at every reference desk, continually updated and typically on automatic reorder by the thousands of libraries that use the subject headings, is undoubtedly very unhappy...Currently, my gut feeling, shared by close colleagues, is that the library world will continue to cultivate its closed world, with its special formats, and become increasingly irrelevant – beautiful cathedrals with empty pews in the shadow of skyscrapers."

Computer expert, specializing in library meta-data

"Taking a long-term view we must ask - will the structured data used by libraries be of lasting value? ... The basic architecture of the catalogue creates a finite set of

relationships among works. Sometimes the categories are useful (e.g. German literature organized by region and period) but the possible relationships for any work and user are infinite. Is Kafka a German author? A Jewish author?...But what if I am looking for material of authors writing in their second language? Will the catalogue know where to direct me? ...It is not clear that libraries offer the best model for understanding what their users want... in some cases Amazon is far better at identifying what the user wants than is a standard library catalogue. And this is achieved using tagging, user analysis, identifying personal preferences etc. not with the painstaking construction of hierarchical categories as in a library...There is an insularity to the professional discourse on improving library descriptions. It may be that even when accessed for free, library standards and description will have limited impact on other communities, and in order to retain users, libraries will have to undergo a radical shift in thinking about serving users' needs. The basic premise - that library catalogues are very important resource for the semantic web and interlinking knowledge - may not prove correct over the long term. The real question may not be how can libraries successfully 'teach' the semantic web, (through sharing their internal systems of classification) but whether libraries can learn enough from the web to remain relevant... In summary - converting library catalogues is useful but it will not be a game changer for libraries themselves (unless they learn how to ingest and provide far richer information to users) or the semantic web (which may find far better ways of organizing and presenting information than that of library catalogues).”
Israeli scholar and commentator

3. Suggestions on Practical Moves Towards Public Access to Academic Research

“It seems like the only way it would work in practice is for there to be a general repository (your Alexandria) that's

independent of colleges and universities, and where the random Bryn Mawr faculty can (indeed, must) put their work.”
Professor at a flagship public US university

“What you see here / the financial crises for university libraries / are eye-watering facts of life that go with the "eye-watering prices" that you correctly say, we should not be paying...We do indeed have licenses to vital material that we cannot share with independent scholars, unless these folks are here to walk into our libraries (then, they get it all)...We need the will to push Fair Use.”

Librarian, major public university library

“You can write to Proquest and request to move your thesis and dissertation into the public domain (for example the Harvard scholarly repository). They will send you a form to sign relinquishing your rights to author fees (which is usually little if any income they pay you for any sales)”

Librarian, south-western US university

“One route around academic/commercial barriers you might mention is direct communication and personal web pages, where I often find information otherwise guarded.”

Physicist, mountain state university
