

Authors willing to pay for instant web access

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Authors of journal articles want their efforts certified by peer review and made conveniently available to the widest possible readership. They do not expect or receive royalties. What they hope for is 'impact' ♦ attention, especially from other researchers, and recognition, especially from those who decide on hiring and promotions. Journal articles have greater impact if they are immediately and widely accessible. Maximum impact is achieved by immediate free web access (see [Nature 410, 1024♦1025; 2001](#)).

Journal publishers are taking advantage of the web's quick, convenient delivery of information by creating electronic versions of their traditional print journals, accessible only to subscribers or to clients of an institution with a site licence. Authors are not offered immediate free web access for their articles.

The Entomological Society of America (ESA), publisher of four leading entomological journals, recently began [selling immediate free access](#). The results suggest that a market-driven transition to free access for all articles in all journals is possible.

ESA's business plan is simple: it will provide immediate free web access, at a fair price, to authors who want it. As the cost of offering this rises (because of subscription cancellations), the price will increase. No author will be required to purchase it, and sales of subscriptions to the journals will continue as long as they are profitable. The endpoint of this plan is uncertain, but it may lead to the demise of paper publication and subscriptions, as authors and the institutions that support them embrace free access and strive to reduce costs.

Direct costs of the present system include printing paper issues, limiting access to electronic versions, and making past and present volumes accessible in hundreds of research libraries. Indirect costs are reduced impact of articles and severely restricted access by researchers in smaller institutions and in developing countries. Nonetheless, many stakeholders believe that printed issues, or at least tolls in the form of subscriptions and site licences, will continue indefinitely.

ESA began selling immediate free web access in January 2000. During the first two months of the service, authors bought it for 13% of articles, rising steadily to 59% during March and April 2001. The price for the service is currently 75% of the price of 100 paper reprints, for example \$90 for a 7-page article. This price provides a greater profit margin than for paper reprints, which are expensive to produce and deliver. Immediate free web access requires only that the PDF file of the article is made freely accessible on ESA's web server.

If immediate free access is a profit-making service that many authors want and will pay for, why is ESA apparently the only publisher that sells it? For scientific societies, the answer is probably that their institutional inertia is great and their members have yet to lobby for it ♦ as ESA members did. Commercial publishers may fear that selling immediate free access to those who want it may lead to all authors buying it, in which case revenues from subscriptions and site licences might cease.

On the other hand, societies have supplemented modest incomes from lower-priced library subscriptions with member dues and page charges. Without journal subscriptions, societies and commercial publishers will collect page charges to pay for refereeing, editing and composing. Publishers will pay nothing to make the articles freely web accessible, because research libraries and PubMed Central will post them without charge.

Authors should encourage publishers to provide immediate free access at a fair price. Other things being equal, many will prefer to publish in journals that provide it, especially as electronic literature indexes begin linking directly to the e-versions of articles. Most authors would like nothing better than for their articles to be available in full text, without tolls, via links in widely used literature indexes.