

Library Access for Sociologists outside Academia

Issues and Possibilities

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Introduction

Academic libraries provide resources that are not usually available from public libraries. These include academic books, monographs and reports; government and official publications; and access to the many academic journals that report research findings. They also offer access to bibliographic tools for searching archives of material (for example, Web of Science and Medline).

While freeware tools such as Google Scholar and Mendeley have democratised searching for research and academic books and papers, the digitisation of information has sustained the divide between academic and non-academic libraries, with each playing to its strengths. In particular, the academic library now provides access to a wider range of research articles than ever via its subscription to online journals. Whereas searching through bound journal back-issues in the stack-rooms of libraries could be a long-winded and frustrating (though occasionally exhilarating) exercise, today those with access rights to an academic library can search vast resources of journals past and present via an internet connection from anywhere in the world.

Because much academic content in journals is available only by subscription, the revolution in online journal publishing has widened the inequality of access between the privileged few with academic library access and those without. For sociologists outside academia (SoAs), this poses a real barrier to engagement with current research and sociological debates, to which the emergence of open-access journal publishing offers only a partial solution. In this briefing, I shall address the possibilities for SoAs to overcome the problems faced by lack of access to an academic library. Before that, I shall quickly review the publishing models that exist in academic world, and the emergence of the open-access model.

The Academic Publishing Model

Academic journal and book publishing are worldwide commercial enterprises. Some of the largest publishing houses have academic book arms, while journal publishing is dominated by a few corporations each publishing many titles, plus a few not-for-profit or co-operative outfits publishing single journals (a good example of the latter in sociology is *Sociological Research Online*, funded by an initial government grant and run from the University of Surrey). Academic and professional associations such as the BSA sometimes enter into relationships with commercial publishers in order to out-source the costs of publishing and printing. In return, they may get a share of the profit from the book or journal, and in the case of a journal like *Sociology*, free copies for all association members as a membership perk.

The business model for both journals and books depends upon low-cost production of relatively small print-runs (in comparison with non-academic books or magazines). Income from books comes from retail sales and from purchases by academic and public libraries, while for journals, the income stream is dominated by academic library subscriptions. To control costs, authors of academic books get a royalty of between 8 and 15 per cent of the retail price, while journal authors get no fee. A small honorarium may be paid to a journal editor, who otherwise gets no remuneration for her/his editorial efforts.

This business model has led to the flourishing of very many specialist journals, often with fairly low readerships. Increasingly, readership of academic journals is online, meaning that publishers are even more dependent upon subscriptions from academic libraries. Libraries will negotiate a price with a publisher for a package of specialist journals, but as librarians are under pressure to contain costs, there can be a focus upon mainstream journals at the expense of very specialist titles or new journals. While providing unprecedented access to research papers by those with reading rights, the subscription model of journal publication restricts access, creating problems for readers without an academic library affiliation, with 'pay-per-view' charges for non-affiliates of typically between £30 and £80 per paper.

The Open Access Model

This subscription model has been challenged by a number of journals, both independents and those within consortia such as Biomed Central. These have adopted an exclusively open-access business model, in which authors pay an article processing charge (APC) for their

research to be published, while reading access is free to all, usually exclusively online. Other subscription-based journals may also offer an open-access option to their authors. This model overcomes the problem of limited readership access, but has the disadvantage that it discriminates against those unable to pay an APC (which can be up to £2000), and raises issues about the objectivity of peer review and hence the quality of published work when publishers have a financial interest in accepting and publishing papers submitted to their journal.

More recently, open access to academic research has been driven in the UK and elsewhere by a concern that publicly-funded research should be freely available to the public. A government working group led by Dame Janet Finch called in 2012 for a new model of research publishing and stated that

Barriers to access – particularly when the research is publicly-funded – are increasingly unacceptable in an online world: for such barriers restrict the innovation, growth and other benefits which can flow from research. (Finch, 2012: 5)

Finch's group regard open access as the future for research paper publication, and envisaged that this will become the dominant worldwide business model for journal publication in due course. They argued for a model of walk-in access to the content of the majority of journals via public libraries. In the short term, the UK government accepted the working group recommendation that all research funded by public bodies and charities should be published open access. At least in the short term, the UK government has provided some monies via universities to defray the expenses of open access publication of publicly-funded research. This is the *Gold* model of open access publication.

The working party also encouraged the development of not-for-profit repositories for research papers hosted by universities or third parties, with open access to all readers. Authors lodge their published articles with these repositories following an initial embargo period (between 12 and 24 months) during which access is restricted to a journal's subscribers and pay-per-view readers, or via the paper version of the journal. This is the *Green* model of open access.

On the surface, the Finch Report is very good news for SOAs. If fully implemented, online access to all journal content will be guaranteed for all. However, this transition is unlikely to happen quickly, if at all, for a number of reasons:

- For the majority of research, there will not necessarily be funding available to pay for Gold open access APCs. A quick audit of papers in *Sociology* reveals that just 18 per cent of papers published in 2012 were based on public or charity funding, so 82 per cent of author under a Gold system would need to fund their own APCs personally or from their institutions.
- Existing mass journal publishers such as Sage, Wiley and Taylor & Francis are multinational enterprises with substantial investments in the current business model of subscription-based access and charge-free authoring. While they are dipping their toes in the water with journals such as *Sage Open* and *Routledge Open*, full commitment to the Gold model would need an assurance that authors globally will be able to pay APCs. Particularly in the arts, humanities and social sciences, this is unlikely to materialise, as much research in these areas is unfunded.
- Because research, science, and journals operate across national boundaries, development of the Gold model requires all the major developed-world governments to commit to this approach before there is any likelihood of it being adopted fully.
- Professional associations have expressed concern at the potential loss of a major stream of income deriving from their relationship with commercial journal publishers.

Partly for these reasons, but also for strategic business motives, the major journal publishers have currently opted for a 'hybrid' model, offering Gold open access to those able and willing to pay, and fee-free restricted access to those who are not. The latter have the option, after an embargo period, of publishing online in free-to-access Green-access repositories run by universities or third parties such as *Academia.edu*. In this way, journals protect much of their subscription funding, and gain additional money from Gold authors! As noted, these major players are also investing in parallel Gold open-access journals alongside their conventional ones.

This hybrid system offers the worst of all worlds for SOAs. On one hand, they are unlikely to have the funds to pay to get work published via Gold open access. On the other, they will continue to lack access to non-Gold papers until an embargo period is over. So until academic institutions decide (or are forced by cuts to decide) to withdraw from subscribing to hybrid journals, and the whole world of journal publishing faces the apocalypse of Gold-only journals, what can SOAs do to get the access they need to academic research papers?

SoAs: gaining Access to Academic Resources

None of the following suggestions can substitute entirely for a new system of open access, and it will remain the case that SOAs will not have the straightforward access to academic resources afforded to those with reading rights at a higher education library. However, they are partial, pragmatic (and legal) ways for SOAs to improve their access to academic research.

1. Getting library access

- The **Access to Research** scheme offers access to a wider range of academic journals from public libraries throughout the UK. Best to check before you set out though, as your local library may not be a participating member. See <http://www.accesstoresearch.org.uk/>
- **Alumni** of many universities may be able to negotiate access to the library of the university where they studied, and this may include access to e-resources, either freely or for a fee. It is worth approaching your alma mater to find out what benefits are available to alumni. You may be in a stronger position if you can demonstrate that you are engaged in work or a personal or professional project that requires access
- **Retired staff** of higher education institutions should similarly be able to negotiate access to the library at their former place of work.
- If you are living in or close to a **university town**, approach the librarian to discuss gaining access. Many universities will offer some access to local people, but again you need to show why you need this access, and there may be a charge.
- **NHS health professionals** should be able to get access via their local university medical library. Approach the librarian.
- Consider becoming a reader of the **British Library**. There are two locations, in London and at Boston Spa, West Yorkshire. You will need to complete an application form for a reader pass. <http://www.bl.uk/>
- Use the **British Library Document Supply Service** (also known as inter-library loans). This will give access to most papers, but the charges may be equivalent to those you will pay direct from the journal.

- Use any benefits from your **professional memberships**: for example, BSA members have free access to 40 *Sage* journals, including the four BSA titles.

2. Work-arounds

The following are ways to get hold of research papers if you are unable to get access by any of the above methods. The first step is to choose a search engine to search for relevant papers. You could search on websites such as Mendeley or Academia.edu (see appendix for web addresses), although perhaps the most accessible is Google Scholar. You can track down the papers you wish to access either by searching with key words or with the title of the paper. Once you have found the paper you want to read:

- Click the link to **visit the journal** where the paper is published, to check access. Some papers are open access so this must be your first step. Pay-per-view details will also be indicated, and you can decide if you are willing to pay for your access.
- Check the publisher's home page for **free trial** access offers: this can be useful if you are conducting a short piece of desk research and only need temporary access.
- If unsuccessful, go back to Scholar, to see if a **pdf of the paper** is available. If there is such a pdf, it will be highlighted on the right hand side. This will be the case if the author has lodged a copy in an open-access repository.
- If no pdf is shown, you will see on the listing a link to **different web addresses** where the paper can be accessed. This will say something like *All 4 versions*. These will typically be bibliographic sites like PubMed and PsycNet. You may find a link from one of these to an open access version of the paper. This is worth doing, as some of these sites seem to have access through firewalls.
- If still no joy, go back to the journal site and identify **the author and their affiliation**. Use Google to find them on the net. Most researchers have a web page and a search of the form *Jane Smith Manchester* should get you a hit on the web page of an academic at a Manchester university called Jane Smith. From there, check the **author's list of publications**. Savvy academics now put a link to a pdf of their papers from their web page.
- If there is not a link, search for them on *Academia.edu*. They may have put a copy of the paper on this **repository**.

- If the author is at a UK university, they may have put their paper on their university research repository. Links to many of these repositories can be found from **Sherpa** (http://www.sherpa.ac.uk/documents/rep_distrib.html).

3. Contact the author for their paper

It may seem obvious, but remarkably few people do this. You will have their e-mail either from the journal or the author's web page. E-mail them, and ask for a pdf, explaining that you do not have access to a university library. Authors are usually permitted under their copyright agreement with the publisher to send a copy of a journal pdf (or hard copy offprint) to individuals. I have never known an author to refuse to send a copy of their paper!

4. A last resort

Some publishers permit subscribers to e-mail a copy of a paper pdf to another individual, as long as it is for scholarly (i.e. non-commercial) purposes. Check the publisher's terms and conditions to see if this permitted for the paper you are seeking. If so, it may be possible to obtain a copy of the paper from a colleague or another SOA member with an individual or institutional subscription. Unfortunately, not all publishers permit this.

Links

Academia.edu	http://www.academia.edu/
Google Scholar	http://scholar.google.co.uk/
Mendeley	http://www.mendeley.com/research-papers/
Sherpa	http://www.sherpa.ac.uk/documents/rep_distrib.html

Further Reading

The Finch Report: <http://www.researchinfonet.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/Finch-Group-report-FINAL-VERSION.pdf>

BSA Network: the Spring 2013 issue had extended discussion of open access. BSA members can read this online at:

http://www.britisoc.co.uk/media/51135/Network_113_Spring_2013.pdf