Date: Fri, 5 Jan 2001 16:31:23 -0800
To: lead@publiclibraryofscience.org
From: "Patrick O. Brown" <pbrown@cmgm.stanford.edu>
Subject: a reply to Nick's message

> Date: Fri, 5 Jan 2001 15:14:20 -0800
> To: Nicholas Cozzarelli <ncozzare@socrates.Berkeley.EDU>
> From: "Patrick O. Brown" <pbrown@cmgm.stanford.edu>
> Subject: Re: Building support for a public library of science
> Cc: varmus@mskcc.org, mbeisen@lbl.gov,pbrown@cmgm
> Bcc:
> X-Attachments:
>
> HI Nick,
> some quick comments.
>
> > Friends,
> > I am convinced that very few journals will be seen as complying unless we reach out dramatically to the publishing community to try to meet them partway.
>
> I think we should be and we are trying to reach out to them. I've made considerable effort to do so, as have many others in our group, but it's the journals who are being passive aggressive.
>
> > Indeed, I fear that it may be too late. My own efforts to get the JBC to agree to a compromise that Pat and Mike agreed to have been totally unsuccessful. It is clear to me that the Public Library of Science while intended to promote PubMed Central has had exactly the opposite effect.
>
> Do you mean to imply that some journals that were inclined to participate in PMC have responded to a letter promising enthusiastic support of such a move, signed by hundreds of thoughtful and responsible colleagues, by reversing their course. I find that rather implausible. (If it's true, then it's shockingly infantile and irresponsible behavior on the part of the journals). Could you give me an example?
>
> > The journals that we could hope to join us feel, rightfully so, that they have been pioneers in promoting the free distribution of science. They feel insulted by the tone of the Public Library Initiative that makes them now the bad guys.
>
> It certainly does not. It makes the journals that are making a sincere effort to promote the "free distribution of science" (as opposed to the controlled distribution of published work, at no charge, through their monopoly-controlled conduits) into the heros, who are duly rewarded with the exclusive support of the signers of the letter.
>
> If a journal wants to be called a "good guy", then it should earn that accolade by heeding the utterly reasonable request of the hundreds of responsible scientists who have signed the letter. I think their response is like that of an "enlightened" plantation owner who can't understand why the slaves aren't grateful for their three square meals a day.
>
> > My gloomy prediction is that so few journals will sign on to the current constrictive covenant that many of the signatories will remove their name or feel that they have to go back on their word.
>
> We'll see. I'm still very optimistic that we will start to get some serious journals signing on, and this will progressively marginalize the journals that refuse to do so, as well as providing good options for the signers of the letter to publish their work. If we don't see some real progress soon, then I think we need to start thinking about: 1. providing journals that will explicitly fill the niches left by the existing journals that insist on being bad citizens, and 2. Raising this as a public policy issue (should the sole permanent record of $20 billion/yr of taxpayer-funded research be given away to publishers who own it as their private property, restrict public access and its use for the public good, and have effective monopolies over important parts of our scientific legacy. "there ought to be a law!" - I think it may be a small step to extend the govt regulation that states that the US govt retains the right to distribute and use publications resulting from work of its

employees, to all work funded by US govt grants. And if this is coupled with the explicit policy that the work is placed in the public domain, then I think there would be strong international support for such a policy.

> They will feel embarrassed and angry and will direct that anger not at the publishers but at the proponents of the public library.

They ARE the proponents of the public library. I assume that they truly believe in the letter they signed, and that they therefore sincerely believe that the publishers should be paid for their service but not own the published work of others. If so, then I would imagine that they will indeed be angry at the publishers, and I for one, (and I'm sure many of the other signers of the letters - (you know these people - they are not a bunch of wimps)), will become more and more public in challenging the legitimacy of the publishers' ownership of the published record, and making sure that the anger is directed where it should be.

> They will be leery of ever participating in grass roots Ghandian initiatives again and the backlash will extend to PMC.

I've been very impressed at the willingness and enthusiasm of scientists to take on this issue. If they prove to be as feckless as you think they will be, then they will get what they deserve - but I don't share your pessimism.

> Forgive my Cassandraesh prophesy but I think we have to do something dramatic to gain the participation of a wider group of journals or the whole initiative will be counterproductive.

Yes. And the dramatic thing that we should do is to raise the heat on the publishers by getting 10,000 signatures on the letter, getting more individual scientists to put direct pressure on their journals, and perhaps raising this as a public policy issue. We need to make it clear that if they fail to do the right thing, it's the journals and not the supporters of this initiative that will lose.

Thanks as always for your provocative comments.

Happy New Year.

pat

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