

Libertà vo cercando

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Free information works. In the sense that Open Access Journals, scientific journals which can be accessed at no cost, thereby guaranteeing free access to everyone, are at the same time able to guarantee the same quality as –or even better than- that of traditional journals, which can only be read by those willing to pay a price, be it the cover price or a subscription.

This item of news (we consider it good news) was delivered a few weeks ago by James Testa and Marie E. McVeigh.¹ The two researchers from Thomson-ISI examined 148 natural science journals surveyed by ISI, which have the characteristic of being “open access”, that is, they may be read, downloaded, printed, copied and distributed at no cost. These journals are electronic and regularly subject to peer review.

Testa and McVeigh measured the Impact Factor (IF) of several articles published by each of them between 1999 and 2002 and found that, on average, it was not lower than that of traditional journals. In fact, for recent years it was even higher (albeit only just).

This proves that free information works and that guaranteeing free access to scientific information does not in any way impair its quality.

Why do we consider this good news? For two reasons at least. One is purely economic. The other is cultural.

The economic reason is that over the last decades the price of traditional scientific journals has grown much faster than inflation.² This has made it difficult for many libraries to renew their subscriptions (or start new ones) and has prevented many researchers, in both developing and developed countries, from consulting a large part of the scientific literature. In other words, the ever-increasing cost of journals has limited the complete freedom of scientific communication. Which is not good. Open access journals tend to restore some of this lost freedom. Which is good. All the more so if, at the same time, they are able to guarantee high standards of quality.

The second reason is more profound. And no less important. Modern science was born in the 17th century, theorizing and practising complete freedom of communication. Over the last decades, and even more intensely in recent years, this distinctive characteristic -which cannot be taken for granted- of scientific culture has been attacked from different sides, perhaps not fiercely,

but in a rather malignant way. By publishing houses, who have been raising their prices. But also by “corporate scientists”, who defend both the values of science and those of the market (secrecy, more or less partial, is one of these). Finally, by those, too many and too often, who in the name of security (a very valuable commodity) are willing to sacrifice complete freedom of information (at least as valuable a commodity).

We believe it is also our duty to react, calmly and unhurriedly, to these minor but malevolent attacks. This is why we publicly rejoice whenever the full and complete freedom of scientific communication is reaffirmed. After all, the democracy of knowledge is, and in future will be to an even greater extent, one of the foundations of democracy in the broadest sense.

Notes and references

¹ Testa J., McVeigh M. E. (2004). The Impact of Open Access Journals. <http://www.isinet.com/media/presentrep/acropdf/impact-oa-journals.pdf>

² Scanu M. (2003). In the free web of science. JCOM 2 (4).