

Engaging the public in academic research – what has the open access movement ever done for them?

UKSG eNews 496

20 August 2021



Jane Belger, Research and Open Access Librarian, University of the West of England, Bristol

Back in 2019, before Covid, lockdown and remote learning became part of our everyday vocabulary, I was approached by a colleague from the University of Bristol Library Research support team to work on a joint public engagement event for Open access week. The subject was “Engaging the public in academic research – what has open access done for the wider community”^[1] It was appealing as so often we talk about the benefits of open access for the general public without actually having any real-world evidence.

After discussion, we decided to run an information evening on the opportunities open access publishing offers including a demonstration of freely available discovery tools. This would be run as part of the scheduled programme of events offered by the Friends of Redland library in Bristol.

Finding an audience.

The Friends of Redland Library handled the bookings and took care of the advertising via posters in the library and Twitter. This was then shared on the social media accounts at the University of the West of England and University of Bristol.

It’ll be alright on the night!

Presenting in a public library was very different from our normal day jobs. There was no ready-made lecture theatre and we had to borrow a screen and projector. However, the volunteers were very



helpful in getting everything set up for us. We had a sizeable enthusiastic audience from a variety of backgrounds and age groups. Some were former academics keen to carry on with their research from home, others were younger, wanting material to support their studies.

The session was divided into 4 sections:

- Background on the importance of open access to research.
- A demonstration of open access tools and the universities' repositories.
- How to read an academic paper.
- Hands on computer time.

We decided it was important to include a section on how to read an academic paper in order to help the attendees to get the most out of accessing peer reviewed material. It was delivered by Tim Worth, an Academic Study Skills Coordinators at the University of Bristol

The attendees were particularly interested in the open access tools that we demonstrated. These included CORE, Unpaywall and Kopernio. We also showed them the range of material available from our own respective repositories and how this can be accessed remotely. We offered hands on time on the computers afterwards but most participants preferred to ask their questions and then go away and use their own devices at home.

As research support librarians, we spend a lot of our time emphasizing the benefits of open access to researchers. This tends to focus on increased visibility and citations with a nod to 'public good and publicly funded research'. However, talking to members of the public about their own research and the importance of being able to access up to date articles gave us real examples of the benefits of open access to take back to the researchers we support.

Going online

Following the success of the event, we intended to look at other possible locations to run the information session. However, before anything could be planned, Covid struck and we became focused on providing online training sessions for our own staff and students. Then, as things calmed down in the summer of 2020, I began to think about all the misinformation circulating and the increased access to peer reviewed material, following the opening up of additional material by publishers in response to the pandemic. At the University of the West of England, alumni and members of the public have been able to visit the library for study and borrowing. Unfortunately, since March 2020, this has not been possible due to restrictions on campus. It therefore seemed like a good idea to show them how they could access research outputs without leaving home.

I contacted my colleagues at Bristol and we agreed to offer an online event focused on increased access to research in response to Covid 19. This time we included a segment on accessing open research data. Despite a number of registrations for the event in November 2020, we had only 1 attendee. Although disappointing, we were able to offer her a tailored support session. As a self-employed education specialist, she had no access to subscribed content so being shown how to access peer reviewed material normally hidden behind a pay wall was a game changer.

Lessons learned

We learnt the importance of open access to a variety of audiences including independent researchers and professionals. These interactions provide important case studies for future training events aimed at students and early career researchers. When publishing, not everyone thinks about their target audience outside of academia and whether they will be able to access the research that is being produced.

We also learnt the importance of targeting the right audience in the right place with the most appropriate marketing platform. The online event was advertised via the University of the West of England events pages and shared by the library twitter accounts at the University of Bristol and the University of the West of England. For future events we recognized that we need to enlist the support of the appropriate professional bodies, alumni offices or public libraries to maximize attendance.

However, both events were a fantastic opportunity to talk to people outside of the universities who can benefit from access to the research as well as working collaboratively with colleagues at another institution. Personally, I find this really inspiring and would like to thank **Alex Clarke**, **Tim Worth** and **Zosia Beckles** at the University of Bristol for the original idea and involving me in the project.

[1] *Theme of 2019 International Open Access Week To Be “Open for Whom? Equity in Open Knowledge” – Open Access Week, 2019* Available from <http://www.openaccessweek.org/m/blogpost?id=5385115%3ABlogPost%3A181651>)

These views are the authors’ own and do not necessarily reflect the views of UKSG.



This UKSG Editorial is taken from the industry newsletter UKSG eNews, published every two weeks exclusively for UKSG members. The newsletter provides up-to-the-minute news of current issues and developments within the global knowledge community.

To enjoy *UKSG eNews* and other member benefits [become a UKSG member](#).