



Why convenience is the new access

UKSG eNews 415

16 Feb 2018

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As digital consumers we have long taken for granted the idea of getting music, video, news, and even our groceries, at the click of the button. Why then, even when all systems are working as they should, does it still take somewhere between 5 and 15 clicks to access journal article PDFs? Endlessly 'chasing links', waiting for laggy redirects, and (re-)completing login forms are taken as a matter of course in academic literature searches. I am confident that these practices will one day be missed no more than modem dial-tones and 'Asking Jeeves'.

For a sufficiently determined researcher, there is always a route to a given article PDF. That said, the route may be impractically convoluted or even bring the user into the 'darker gray' sources of PDFs. This model doesn't help anyone, and is not a sustainable foundation for the industry.

In typical literature searches, Google results are skimmed, with click-outs to possibly paywalled pages, occasionally followed by a deeper search of Pubmed or similar abstract discovery services. If no PDF can be found, the next step is a furtive visit to sites like Sci-Hub in preference to traditional fallback options, such as interlibrary loans. These often require additional end-user effort, and only rarely result in an immediate positive end-user experience. For readers, article access needs to be viewed in the context of a larger convenience problem.

However the problem is more insidious than just "too much clicking and waiting". Consumers of research are routinely expected to take on the mental overhead of worrying about document version (accepted manuscript, article in press, preprint, version of record, etc), varying business models (green OA, gold OA, subscription, etc), embargoes and other tangential concerns.

As we all know, this situation leads to needless researcher frustration, users re-inventing their own often impractical, non-scalable, and non-sustainable ways of getting PDF journal articles, not to mention the time wasted that could be spent more productively on actually doing research.

General comparisons between academic publishing and consumer content industries may be forced and cliché, though it is worthwhile to consider the different end user experiences. Listeners of music have the luxury of enjoying their albums largely ignorant as to the royalty agreements between a recording artist and their labels. The same is not true for academic literature. I would argue that readers of academic articles are not primarily concerned by the publishing model chosen by the authors when looking for an article. In other words, a scientist reading about breakthroughs in her field doesn't really care whether the article is OA or not. What counts is getting the article full text with minimum fuss. In my view, the relative convenience of Sci-Hub goes a large way in explaining its popularity among searchers at well resourced institutions and libraries.

Even seemingly minor details like the location of the PDF download button can prove taxing and

mean unnecessary distractions from accessing the article full-text. Top left, top right, below the fold or hidden in dropdown, there is no consensus on where to place the PDF download button.

Imagine how much time is wasted in aggregate by researchers around the world just hunting for download PDF buttons across the 19+ different online platforms (Kopernio data on the average number of distinct online platforms accessed by individual researchers in a one month period) typical researchers use as part of their literature searches. Youtube would no doubt suffer in popularity if every video watched was preceded by a ritual hunt for the play button. Again - this is not primarily a matter of access, but of convenience.

These user experience problems are compounded for academics with off-campus article access needs. VPN (virtual private network) clients have rightly fallen out of fashion due to their need for configuration and updates, technical support and because they are all too often blocked in hotels, airports and other ad-hoc working locations. Similarly, IP-based proxy methods require modified research workflows and repeated re-authentication. Federated authentication solutions sound promising on paper, but have not managed to reach critical mass. Moreover, privacy challenges are harder to resolve compared to IP-based authentication, and resulting workflows can be confusing for researchers.

In any case, these authentication technologies, quite understandably, prioritise access over convenience. But end-users should not need to be educated in these new technologies, for example when and where to use proxies, OpenAthens or Shibboleth or which credentials to use. What's still missing is a way to combine these initiatives into a seamless and delightful experience to access all content, of course including that already paid for through institutional subscriptions.

Tools like the OA Button and Unpaywall have made commendable efforts to increase the accessibility of OA content. However, since both widgets are firmly rooted in the 'access problem' view of the world, such approaches are, by themselves, unlikely to provide a sufficiently encompassing answer to researchers' needs. What's missing is a service that is agnostic of publishing models, access technologies, and webpage layouts, and focuses on convenience as the primary objective. With [Kopernio](#) we are trying to bring a fresh perspective and put researcher convenience above all else. What could be simpler than a single consistently-presented button that hides the unredeeming complexity of locating and retrieving article PDFs?

But even when an article PDF has been obtained, it is worth keeping in mind that not all PDFs are born equal. Professionally typeset journal articles are the official versions of record, and are usually easier on the eye than draft manuscripts and pre-prints. What is more, final published articles are sure to contain all corrections from reviewer comments. As such, what counts is not just convenient access to 'a' PDF, but the 'best' PDF to which a given user is entitled.

For researchers with existing institutional subscriptions this should be the publisher's version of record, delivered via existing subscriptions in preference to the various other versions that may find their way into public repositories or Scientific Social Networks. Where a publisher's version of record is not available, institutional subscriptions can be complemented with pre-prints or manuscripts. Delivering the best available article version at the point of need is a win for end-users, institutions, and publishers alike.

As a parting thought, let us consider the ten million researchers that will collectively access 2.4 billion journal article PDFs this year. To these researchers individually as well as for our industry as a whole, both access and convenience are significant problems. Amazon can give its customers what they want with one click even for products that have not yet been paid for. We should be able to do the same for journal articles, especially as these have often already been paid for via institutional subscriptions. We should really be more ambitious. "Let's move the goalposts from access to convenience, Alexa . . ."



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