Towards the consolidation of an infrastructure for Green Open Access: Interview to Open Access Button

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Open Access Button was born out of the frustration of 2 students with no access to scientific literature on the web. How did you come up with this idea and to what extent do you think that seamless access to knowledge has improved for researchers today?

In 2013, Open Access Button co-founders, Joseph McArthur and David Carroll, were both undergraduate students in the United Kingdom. As students at UK universities both had seemingly great access to scientific literature, but routinely still hit paywalls. Joe and David met Nick Shockey at an International Federation of Medical Students’ Associations conference and learned of the solution to paywalls --- open access. Almost four years to the date, David sent an email Nick discussing the idea for the Open Access Button -- a browser extension that people could report paywalls along with where they were in the world and why they needed the paper. Over the past four years the Button has expanded to include data and get users instant, legal access research but we’ve maintained a singular motivation - to make paywalls a thing of the past.

Seamless access to knowledge has improved for researchers, but unless a researcher is reading an Open Access journal or accessing a journal their library subscribes to while on the university wi-fi it often isn’t seamless. We’re excited for the growth of openness in scholarly publishing, but there’s more work to do. We’re aiming to improve the seamless access to knowledge with our new integration with interlibrary loan and continuing to advocate for open research. Ultimately, the future we want is Open to be the default where everyone can get instant, legal access to all research.

Open Access Button searches for freely available papers and datasets hosted in open access repositories. How does the system work actually (for instance, does it find works with no DOI?), how are repositories selected for inclusion and why popular social academic sites are precluded?

Users can find research with a DOI, but also the URL, PMID, title, and citation. The Button is currently integrated with every major aggregator of self-archived materials, including Share, BASE, CORE, OpenAIRE, Dissem.in, oaDOI and Europe PMC to connect users to legal, open access copies of papers. We’ll be integrating with various interlibrary loan systems and library catalogues to bring the Button closer into users’ workflows and onto campuses. With one click users can simultaneously search thousands of repositories in a few seconds. If there is an open access copy out there, we’ll get it for you.

We have decided to not include popular academic social networks, such as ResearchGate and Academia.edu, because many papers posted on these sites are not permitted to be shared there. The majority of contemporary publishing agreements give permission to authors to archive in repositories or post on their personal website, but typically not commercial social networking sites. However, even if a paper is legally permitted to be on these webs, they are not guaranteed to be there forever. A user could delete their account, the site could start requiring paid memberships to access, or simply change their link structure. We want to provide users with legal, permanent access to the research they need. This is why the work of librarians managing institutional repositories is so important - research is not simply available, but discoverable with a permanent URL and trained staff to ensure it stays accessible well into the future. Open access isn’t just access for now, but into the future.
Open Access Button is also working on encouraging researchers to share their research. Would you tell us more?

Yes, we’re quite excited about our request system and encouraging researchers to share their work! If we cannot give a user legal, instant access to the research they need, we send a request to the author. This is a friendly email informing the corresponding author that a user was unable to get access to their research. We invite them to share their research in order to help the user, but also so they can improve the discoverability and impact of their research by archiving it. We either ask for a link from the author or offer to archive files they provide to us in either Zenodo or the Open Science Framework. We’re constantly improving the request system and increasing our positive success rate. With each request we hope we will be able to provide access quickly to the original requestor, but the best part is that each fulfilled request solves the access problem to future researchers, doctors, students, and curious individuals who will try to discover that same piece of the research. Check out the request page and support a few! It’s hard work, but we’re so excited to be opening up more research one request at a time.

A few weeks ago a like-minded initiative has been launched, that of Unpaywall. Where do both initiatives intersect and where do they complement each other?

The Open Access Button and Unpaywall are both aimed at getting users instant access to paywalled articles. Both projects have shared code and are on the mission to vanquish paywalls. The wonderful thing about openness is that more contributors can accelerate progress. We’re committed to making paywalls a thing of the past, research data widely shared, and open the default for research. We’re excited to have more partners in tackling this important work.

To close, let’s turn the focus to your work in Right to Research Coalition. What does the initiative aim to achieve and how is the global community of early career researchers engaged?

The Right to Research Coalition was founded on the idea that young people can dramatically accelerate our progress towards an open world, which in turn powers solutions to society’s biggest challenges. At the moment, we’re building OpenCon, a conference and community to accelerate Open Access, Open Data & Open Education. Early career researchers are at the heart of organizing, programming, and bringing the event and community to their campuses. Together with them, thousands of people in dozens of countries have attended OpenCon events.