

# Open access

An argument for free access of public research

In the US, e.g., figures created by [employs of the government](#) during their work are [public domain](#). This is exactly like it should be, right? Tax payers payed for it already, why should they have to pay again if they want to use it.

Licensing [ [edit](#) ]



Illustration 1: License statement below a figure in Wikipedia. CC BY-SA: Wikipedia

Recently I wanted to use a figure from the Austrian Zentralanstalt für Meteorologie und Geodynamik ([ZAMG](#)), a federal institution and found their copyright somewhat more [restrictive](#). I get why they would want to prevent commercial usage of their work (they also sell their products) but for scientific, non-commercial use their work should be free for sure? To be fair, they replied within one day to my request and gave me permission to use the figure.

But this brings me to the point I want to make here, because we in academia are not a lot better: A lot of research is publicly funded, but still a lot of scientific journals have horrendous fees. That is "okay" as long as you are a scientist yourself, because normally your university will pay for your access (or not, depending on their financial situation). A quick survey in neighboring offices brought me to this conclusion: a lot of articles are still behind pay-walls and we often don't even realize it because the free university access kicks in automatically within the university network (side note: in the Graz PRO SCIENTIA group actually almost everybody knew the approximate price of articles in their field). But what is the justification towards an interested laymen, who "funded" the work with "her/his" tax money and then ends up with something like this:

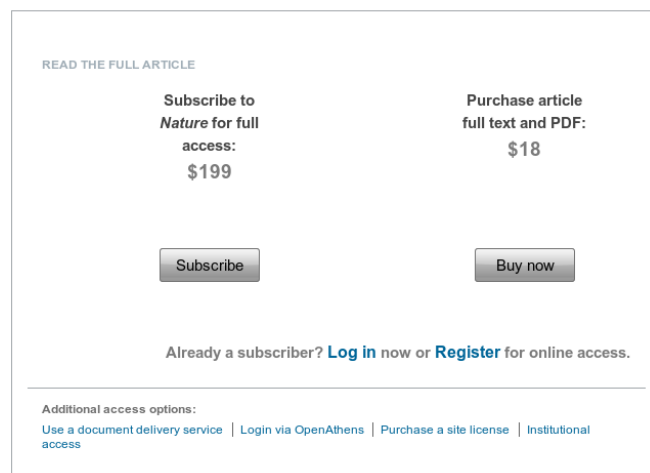


Illustration 2: Login mask from Nature.

Merely \$18 for an article and the authors probably also paid more than they would have in some open access journal, but hey, it's Nature!

The alternative are so called open access journals or journals which at least allow the authors to publish their article under an open access license. One of the most popular open access licenses is the [Creative Commons](#) license, which is, for example, used by the journals of the [European Geoscience Union](#).

But this option often puts the authors in an awkward position because open access articles are substantially more expensive than their closed access equivalents. And as long as not everybody is doing it, costs explode because you have to pay the open access fee on the one hand and on the other hand still have to pay for the access to all the other articles which are not yet open access. Furthermore, journal access is at the moment normally paid at university level, while the open access fees often have to be paid from the (often very limited) project budget. Although some universities like my university, the University of Graz, at least offer some [additional funding](#) (link in German) for open access publications.

And this is the crux of the matter, because -correctly and comprehensively implemented- open access publishing would leave everybody with the same amount of money: publishers because they are compensated by the higher fees publishing authors pay and authors because they don't pay access fees any more. **With one important difference:** all articles would be freely accessible for everybody. Every interested citizen would be able to freely access every piece of publicly funded research -- great isn't it?

Actually it seems as if the idea is not that far away! Discussions have been going on for a while now. The [Berlin Declaration on Open Access](#) from 2003 composes a nice summary. At the 2015 EGU General Assembly a (moderately well visited) [Great Debate on open access publishing](#) was held and all the ideas were there. Open access and its implications were also discussed in a session at this year's [European Forum Alpbach](#) (link in German). The [Vienna Principles](#) from the Open Access Network Austria ([OANA](#)) present a vision for scholarly communication in the future limited not only to open access but also including [open science](#) (link in German).

And finally: The council of the European Union in [May 2016](#) agreed to *further promote the mainstreaming of open access to scientific publications by continuing to support a transition to **immediate open access as the default by 2020***. Some founding agencies ([like the Austrian FWF](#)) already require results to be published as open access articles and, more importantly, supply funding. So there is hope that we are slowly but surely moving towards a system where knowledge which should be free is free.

This text is based on a Blog post from November 2016:

<https://climatefootnotes.com/2016/11/16/this-article-is-open-access/>

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