# Will Obama Support Open Access?

by Michael Carroll
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Does the Obama Administration believe in the power of the Internet to maximize the value of public investments in scientific research? We are waiting to find out. Each year, the government spends about $60 billion on basic scientific research. About half of this money goes to the National Institutes of Health, which has an Internet-friendly Public Access Policy that requires all grantees to provide a copy of journal articles and other published results of taxpayer-funded research to be posted online within one year after publication. This policy has bipartisan support and has been an unqualified success. So, why not require the other agencies that fund basic research, like the National Science Foundation, NASA and the Department of Energy, to do the same?

The White House is in the process of deciding how to answer this question. Specifically, the Office of Science and Technology Policy asked for public comment on the issue of open access to science journal articles and scientific research data arising from all federally-funded research - twice. The responses to the White House inquiries show that posting scientific research online benefits multiple audiences: (1) researchers working from home or from a place where they do not have access to institutional subscriptions; (2) entrepreneurs who lack the funds to purchase expensive journal subscriptions; (3) students whose schools cannot afford subscriptions to all the relevant journals; (4) patients and their families who want to read the medical research for themselves; and (5) text mining software that can aid all of the above in interpreting the journal literature to make decisions about new research paths and to make new discoveries about patterns and associations that a human reader alone would never see.

The President has the authority to require that researchers who receive federal grants must agree to provide public access on the Internet to copies of research articles arising from this federal support. Such a policy is fully consistent with copyright law because authors of these articles make a choice to allow their articles to be posted online in exchange for the federal funding that allows them to do the research and write these articles. The Administration has delayed in exercising this authority because a group of journal publishers oppose the principle of taxpayer access to taxpayer-funded research even when the evidence is clear that the NIH policy does not impact their subscription revenues.

Frustrated by this delay, three open access allies, Heather Joseph, John Wilbanks, and Mike Rossner, and I lodged a petition on the White House's "We the People" website. The petition asks the Administration to extend the NIH Public Access Policy to all federal agencies that fund scientific research. If a petition gets 25,000 signatures within 30 days, the Administration says that it will issue an official response. We posted our petition on Sunday, May 20th, and started a website, www.access2research.org [2], to explain why researchers, students, librarians, innovators, patients' advocacy organizations, and Internet supporters of all kinds have risen up to meet the challenge, and the petition passed the 25,000 mark in just two weeks.

Now that the Administration has to respond at least to the petition, will it side with the public or with the group of publishers who actively resist the idea that publicly funded research should be available on the public Internet?

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