Promoting Open Access to librarians and researchers by the international information platform open-access.net

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Open access has become an important publication form but the concept behind is not as well known as the public discussion makes us believe sometimes. Still today open access is equalized with electronic publication and often mixed with offers like google books. Researchers feel unsure when faced with open access and as a consequence often react conservatively.

A German Research Foundation (DFG) funded project (2006-2010) attempts to structure and describe the concept of and the discussion about open access. With the libraries of the Universities of Bielefeld, Goettingen und Konstanz and the Institute of Qualitative Research in Berlin, four German experts in the area of open access took the initiative to create a now well known information platform www.open-access.net.

Main features of the information platform

Open-access.net is a central online platform providing information on open access in German and English language. There is a general part explaining the open access movement and presenting knowledge for everyone who wants to inform himself about open access. Additionally, it presents convincing arguments for the use of open access for researchers and other groups. The core objective was to build up group specific offers that satisfy the particular interests of researchers and research institutions of single scholarly disciplines, professional associations, the university management, repository operators, libraries and publishing houses.

Besides the setup of web pages there was realized the importance of further offerings like a network of experts, workshops on various open access themes and the implementation of an annual conference on open access. An evaluation of the platform and its additional services highlights the achievements and the potential of further offerings.

Specific information for groups like authors

One of the most important areas of the platform are the group specific prepared information pages, for they contain central facts and arguments and are oriented towards the scientist or administrative officer who wants rapid, short and precise information. The doctoral student for example may assign himself to the category 'author' and will find information that will help him estimating the usefulness of publishing electronically. He will learn about the different kinds of repositories, the existing connections between institutional and subject repositories in several disciplines and the visibility of his electronic dissertation in catalogues, search engines and disciplinary databases worldwide. The situation is different depending on the discipline and the recommendation whether to publish electronically will be also different. But the doctoral student also gets hints to bargain with a professional publisher about new

concepts of hybrid publication forms or keeping the copyright to publish open access besides a professional book publishing.

Target group specific information has been proved to be very successful. It had been a challenge to build up a structure of the information platform that is both valuable for the directed user and not repetitive. The great advantage is that users of the platform don´t have to pick out relevant information from a huge range of web pages but are directed easy to the information relevant for them. This had been definitely a worthwhile investment. Besides the various roles of the users within the publication process there has been build up also specific information for various scholarly disciplines. The area FAQs within the platform impressively shows the matrix structure of the platform.

Different publishing cultures require subject specific information on open access

Scholarly disciplines differ a lot in their working conditions and their research activities and also in the manner they publish. As a logical consequence open access is seen very diverse in different disciplines. This has been recognized as a central challenge by the project partners from the beginning and as a result the information platform offers a discipline-specific access, informing about subject-based repositories and databases as well as special open access journals. Also well known researchers in their field who are open access advocates are listed and a scientific advisory board is established to carry information on open access into the professional societies. In a growing extent content mentors who are often subject specialists in information retrieval could be acquired to care for high quality content of the subject specific pages.

The usage statistics show that these sole subject pages are used rather intensive and widespread among all existing subjects. They are not only very attractive for researchers, but also to open access advocates who use the pages to find subject specific examples and arguments in preparation to inform researchers.

Evaluation points out that subject specific information is of fundamental importance. But it also shows that passive information must be accompanied by a broad and recurring active information policy within the scientific community. So the project was active in presenting open access at conferences of professional societies as exhibitors and speakers. Recurrent information activities within the scientific community seem to be the most important und successful activities, thereby important to close a gap between researchers and libraries. No less important is a directed information policy to the university management.

Special information on open access for the university management

Competitions on excellence and raising relevance of third party funding lead to an increasing engagement of the university management concerning the quality and visibility of the publication output of their own institutions. Open access can help to demonstrate university research of excellence and the information platform accomplishes this in presenting special information for the university management. But obviously for this target group passive information alone is of limited help.

Looking for example at the University of Konstanz, there are professors who got highly involved in open access and university executives who are sympathizing with the open access

idea and actively promote open access within the university and beyond. But within strategic planning the university executives are interested in conjoint policies in a network of renowned national or international institutions. The University of Konstanz would likely be willing to drive a more rigorous policy on open access if there is a joint policy with several other institutions.

Establishing a network of repository operators and open access experts

As a consequence of this presumption the project decided to build up not only an information platform but also a structure to establish networks of open access experts with the librarian community and beyond. It became obviously that besides specific information on open access a network of people responsible for implementing open access in institutions is of great importance to foster open access.

During the second phase of the project a network of repository operators and open access experts has been built up. Repository operators are informed in their group specific area about developments concerning repository software, best practice examples to recruit content, legal issues and technical standards. But also newcomers find basic information about building up a repository. One target of the project is to bring together the group of repository operators beyond the group of pure technical developers to learn from each other.

The network seeks to merge people at institutions responsible for operative policies and strategic decision making to foster local, national and international open access policies. Members are mainly repository operators, managers of open access journals and open access project managers. Several workshops to specific topics have been organized from 2008 on. The network is naturally open for new members and wants to integrate newcomers in an existing knowledge base on open access strategies and policies. There also exists an internal wiki to prepare joint meetings and workshops, to develop and collect advertising material on open access and to give an exchange.

Conferences and workshops on open access for interested librarians and researchers

Whereas the forum of experts has the nature of a working group, there exists a mailing list to communicate news and themes interesting to discuss open to everybody interested in open access. In addition an annual conference on open access has been established:

Starting in 2007 the German Open Access Days have been organized. They were launched by the operators of the information platform open-access.net in order to give scientists an opportunity to obtain on-the-spot information about open access and to enhance the activities of the open access community. The Open Access Days took place in Konstanz twice and once in Berlin, in 2010 Goettingen will be the local organizer. Organised in close cooperation with universities and research organisations, the Open Access Days intend to create direct contact with scholars and scientists and promote open access in the various science sectors. Further goals are increased networking activities within the open access community and to foster the discussion of topics relevant to different target groups by offering specialised conference sessions. Another activity is the international Open Access Week, which German activities are coordinated by the information platform.

Unifying the open access community in Germany assisted by open-access.net

It is evident that there is a strong cooperation with other existing groups and networks in the area of open access and repositories. Whereas open-access.net has established a network on persons working actually in their institutions with filling repositories with content and persuading scientists of the advantages of open access and on persons who formulate strategies bringing forward open access, there exists with OA-Network a more technical network in Germany. OA-Network is also a project funded by the German Research Foundation with some associated projects: OA-Statistics, OA-Subject Repositories and DOARC. These more technically oriented networks are working on an efficient integration of different types of repositories and promoting the visibility of institutional repositories by clustering isolated offers. Open-access.net contributes to the constitution of a German-wide powerful open access community. For a powerful national open access strategy it cannot be overestimated to have a joint network of open access contributors.