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The Red Route to Open Access?

Scholarly Publishing and the Politics of National Identity in Post-Soviet Ukraine

Abstract: Ukraine has adopted a distinctive approach to open access, in which the full text of all journals published in the country is added to a national repository. We analyze this initiative and its underlying legal mandate, placing them in cultural and historical context and comparing them with existing models of open access.

Résumé : L'Ukraine a adopté une approche distincte au libre-accès : les articles de tous les journaux du pays sont intégralement versés dans un dépôt national. Nous avons analysé cette initiative et ses implications juridiques dans un contexte culturel et historique et mis en comparaison à d'autres modèles de liber-accès.

This paper explores a unique national approach to open access publication of scientific journals recently adopted by Ukraine, dubbed here the “red route” to open access, and places the policy in cultural and historical context. It is based on analysis of a variety of Ukrainian language sources, examination of Ukrainian online resources, and interviews with project leaders, research funders and library directors carried out in Ukraine during 2010. Our research is exploratory, using perspectives from the science studies field to document an emerging national practice and explain its unique features as a result of the conjunction of a particular national history with the universal challenges of modern electronic scholarly publishing.

Open access is one of the most discussed topics today in the world of library policy, and has drawn increasing interest from researchers in recent years (Richardson 2001; Antelman 2004; Björk 2006; Charles W. Bailey 2010). The concept can be applied in many contexts, including access to archival collections and scholarly books, but most attention has been focused on the scholarly publishing industry. Publication of traditional journals is increasingly concentrated among a handful of major international publishers. Subscription costs have risen far above the rate of inflation, even though editors and contributors are not paid for their work and may even be required to subsidize the cost of publishing their research. Academic libraries are forced to cut more journals every year. At the same time, users have switched to reading articles online, via web interfaces to full text database systems such as Project Muse. Open source software, coupled with rapid declines in the price of bandwidth and hardware, makes it easy to take the alternative route of placing articles online without access restrictions, bypassing traditional publishers, eliminating access charges, and potentially opening access to a much broader base of users.

Ukraine’s policy is grounded in a 2007 law setting out the “Main Principles of the Information Society in Ukraine 2007-2015” including “generation of national information resources....paying particular attention to the organization of Ukrainian linguistic system and the Ukrainian

linguistic portal on the Internet” and “comprehensive development of public information infrastructure.” One provision of the law concerned open access to journals, requiring “mandatory storage in a single electronic format of the results of scientific activity and provision of free access to the results of research funded by the state Budget of Ukraine.” (Supreme Council of Ukraine 2007).

This provision was used to impose open access on all journals published in the country. The Vernadsky National Technical Library, which receives copies all Ukrainian journals, created an online full text repository giving open access to the complete contents of these journals as a national scientific portal. Two main forms of open access provision been identified: the so-called “green route” whereby authors place copies of articles in open repositories while continuing to publish in conventional journals and the “gold route” where work is published in a new breed of online journals where it can be read without charge (though authors may in some cases be required to contribute toward the cost of maintaining the journal) (Stevan, Brody et al. 2008). Ukraine’s policy is a national decision to apply open access to the contents of all Ukrainian scholarly periodicals, rather than leaving the choice to individual publishers (as in the gold route) or authors (as in the green route). Like the green route it is built around a repository, but as in the gold route the contents of entire journals are being placed online.

By analogy I refer to Ukraine’s path as the “red route,” not because it flows directly from Marxist or socialist thinking but rather because it leads from Ukraine’s seven decades of communist rule. The approach is shaped by the conjunction of its present day politics of language and national identity, the institutions and culture it inherited from the Soviet Union, and its commitment to participation in the “information age.”

Until late 1991 Ukraine was a central part of the Soviet Union, seemingly inseparable from Russia. Since abruptly receiving legal independence it has moved slowly and rather erratically toward cultural and economic independence. Promotion of the Ukrainian language has been a crucial part of this process of nation building (Haigh 2009). Local tongues such as Ukrainian were accepted for local use during much of the Soviet era, but Russian was the language of the Soviet elite in every sphere. Scientific journals were published in Russian, universities educated scientists in Russian, and young people interested in pursuing professional careers would learn Russian. The state had a monopoly on the dissemination of scientific information, and journals were controlled and edited by scientific institutes to be distributed at nominal cost. Access to information was controlled in many ways, but rarely by price.

Since independence Ukraine has embraced the Internet. Its scientific institutes continue to publish journals, but Ukrainian has replaced Russian as the language of these journals. Researchers must shift tongues as part of the push to establish Ukrainian as what Benedict Anderson would call the “print language” of its national infosphere. (Toffler 1980; Anderson 2006). Promotion of Ukrainian scholarship has been at least partially conflated with promotion of scholarship in Ukrainian. (Kuzio 2001) Thus the push for a national scientific portal is also a

means of strengthening national identity and strengthening the position of Ukrainian as a scientific language.

The red route has some parallels with measures adopted in the West, most notably a requirement of the US National Institutes of Health that researchers receiving NIH grants take the “green” route of archiving their papers in an open access repository. But it is fundamentally incompatible with the traditional Western model of subscription-funded journal publication by professional societies, university presses or commercial publishers. However Ukraine had no established independent scholarly publishing sector in Soviet times and neither international publishers nor local entrepreneurs have entered the limited market for Ukrainian language scholarly publications.

The red route may thus be a justifiable course for Ukraine, however poorly received such a proposal might be in the West by lobbyists for traditional publishers. Ukraine’s position as a country eager to strengthen its national scientific research community and unconstrained by a significant commercial or independent scientific journal publishing industry is by no means unique. If successful, its model may prove attractive to emerging nations such as China or Brazil. Thus it may be the nations with an entrenched independent publishing industry that find themselves the eventual global outliers.

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