

Access to Research (A2R) in Public Libraries

What is it, who uses it and how can it be promoted?

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What have traditional scholarly publishers and public libraries got in common? More than you might think.

Technology and [Open Access](#) have had a massive impact on the business models and reputation of subscription publishers. They have been characterised as '[knowledge monopoly racketeers](#)' who have been '[milking the taxpayer for decades](#)': there's even [a website devoted to boycotting Elsevier](#).

Public libraries, too, are widely considered to have outlived their use: the [Sieghart Report](#) suggests they have 'a negative image of being old-fashioned places that have little relevance in today's society'. Deep budget cuts are hollowing out the sector, and local authority models are being replaced with [mutuals and non-profit trusts](#).

So that's changing economic models, perceived obsolescence and reputational problems. And there's another thing: **Access to Research**.

What is it?

[Access to Research](#) (A2R) provides free online access to licensed academic journals in public libraries: neither libraries nor users pay anything for the service. 11,000+ journals are now available in more than 90% of UK libraries. You can use the [A2R search engine](#) to look at abstracts and save searches from home - but you can only see the full text in a public library.

When did this happen?

A2R is the brainchild of Publishers Association representatives on the Finch Group. The 2012 [Finch Report](#) included a surprise recommendation that 'walk-in access to the majority of journals in public libraries should be pursued with vigour'. A two-year pilot was launched by the Publishers' Licensing Society (PLS) and the Society of Chief Librarians (SCL) in early 2014. Shared Intelligence carried out a [pilot review](#) at the end of 2015 and A2R has now been extended indefinitely as part of the SCL's 'Learning Offer'.

So it's part of the whole Open Access thing?

Well yes, and no. A2R is included in CILIP's 2014 [Open Access Briefing](#) but isn't mentioned in the recent UKeIG White Paper on [Open Science, Open Data, and Open Access](#). A2R does not meet the [widely accepted definition of Open Access](#) because, although there is no financial charge for access (Gratis OA), permissions for reuse (Libre OA) have been retained by publishers.

A2R was greeted with derision by OA advocates at its launch (see blogs from [Cameron Neylon](#) and [Mike Taylor](#)). Their primary target is publisher motivation. Conversely, A2R provides access to licensed content to people who don't have a computer or Internet access, let alone any kind of institutional affiliation. Public library staff may be more likely to agree with [Ian Anstice](#): 'Of course the publishers have an agenda but, at this juncture, their agenda tallies with ours - getting people in through the door and not disappointing them.'

Why don't I know more about it?

Never heard of it? Surprised it exists? Don't worry, you're not alone. The pilot review concluded, diplomatically, that low take-up is the main challenge and that increasing use is 'urgent'.

There was significant publicity when A2R was launched - but few local authorities were signed up and some libraries report having to turn away interested customers. Six months later, Ian Anstice was puzzled by the continued lack of take-up but concluded that 'many authorities may be concentrating on more pressing things (like keeping the doors open) than on an online academic resource'. Since then things have only got harder for public libraries and, while most now offer A2R, promotional activities are rarely top of the agenda.

My research focused on users, but suggests that many library staff don't know much about A2R either.

Who's using it?

That's what I wanted to know. When I started my research the pilot review had not yet been commissioned and only quantitative information was available on A2R use. To help me recruit A2R users for in-depth interviews, Bristol and Somerset library services kindly allowed me to email an online survey to their customers.

A mail-out to 10,000 customers yielded 181 valid survey responses. Of these, 36 people (20%) claimed to have used A2R. Unfortunately their responses to further questions suggested that most, in fact, had not. Responses from self-identified users include: 'Not sure what you mean by Access to Research. Yes, I have used the computers, scanner, and printers ...' and 'I can't say I've heard the phrase Access to Research' ... but I was aware that I could access journals and research documents through my library'.

That was the first thing I learned: 'Access to Research' sounds like a simple, sensible name but it's actually far too vague. Something like 'Free Online Journals' might grab the attention of target markets more effectively.

I estimate that only about fifteen ‘probable users’ responded to my survey. These respondents identified specific A2R uses, including independent MPhil research; references for dentistry and hypnosis presentations; supporting sixth form students’ EPQ/IB essays and, from a trainee nurse, researching communication in the health care profession.

Given the stats on A2R use I was probably lucky to reach even this number of users. In Bristol, for instance, hits on the A2R site from public libraries average 124 per month. This is very few indeed in the context of Bristol’s 58,000 active borrowers who made more than 1.8 million library visits last year - but it places Bristol third in the UK A2R league table.

So ... who might like to use it?

Many survey respondents were indignant that they hadn’t heard about A2R:

‘I wish I had known about it earlier as I often run into problems trying to get access to scientific papers.’

‘I know nothing about it ... however I have been involved in research in the past and it would have been useful to know!’

‘Why isn’t it more widely publicised? I use the reference Library when I want to look something up.’

When asked whether they planned to use A2R in the future, 81% of respondents said that they would and, while theoretical intentions should be taken with a large pinch of salt, several provided specific details to back up their intentions:

‘I am a freelance artist, writer and arts advocate and the A2R would be incredibly helpful for both personal and professional research (for essays, articles and my own development)’

Potential users included independent researchers (in geography, history and education for example) with no institutional affiliation. More surprisingly, several were current students: while one student cited institutional affiliation as a reason why he wouldn’t use A2R, another suggested that her institution didn’t provide access to all the journals she needed.

Interviewees

I interviewed four people who started using A2R as a result of my survey - and two people who had tried to use it but failed, due to lack of information at their local library.

Of my six interviewees, three were connected to healthcare professions: a brain injury case manager, a psychotherapist and a therapy supervisor/writer. Two are independent practitioners and the third works in the charitable sector. All are interested in accessing journals for CPD or for specific clients/projects but can’t afford to subscribe to those they would like to read.

My fourth interviewee was a freelance researcher focusing on interpersonal violence and services for vulnerable people. She can still access print resources through her former

employer (a university) but also needs access to up-to-date online research to inform her work.

The fifth interviewee plans to retrain as a teacher and uses A2R to read education journals: he sees A2R as a great resource for people hoping to change careers, or stay up to date in their field while looking for a job.

My final interviewee had more general interests: he regularly visits the library to read magazines and enjoys browsing A2R in much the same way. However he also envisages using medical journals to support his volunteer work for a Patient Public Involvement project.

Why aren't more people using it?

The most obvious reason is that they don't know that it exists. Most people who responded to my survey (72%) found out about A2R by 'email'; 42% specified the survey email, 30% didn't specify the source, so it may have been the survey email or, possibly, an earlier library publicity campaign.

Almost no one found out about A2R online, or through visiting the library. Information about A2R is usually lurking deep in the library website silos criticised in the recent [Bibliocommons](#) report, and rarely on public display. Several interviewees also commented on the need for more guidance on how to use A2R on both [People's Network](#) and on external library websites.

The two interviewees who tried, and failed, to use A2R **did** find out about A2R online - but when they visited a library were told (wrongly) that it was unavailable. It is impossible to say if this is a common experience but it has obvious implications for staff training (also highlighted in the pilot review).

The review reports a strong sense from publishers that A2R has not been well promoted in libraries: it is possible that the partnership will not be continued unless take-up improves.

How can A2R be promoted?

A2R is often considered a 'niche' resource by both librarians and publishers - but it has potential value for many more people than it has reached to date. Crucially, it also has the potential to increase visits to public libraries.

Given the lack of public library resources, promotion needs to be as targeted as possible:

- Everyone I interviewed was surprised, and pleased, to find that they could access A2R abstracts and save searches from home, shortlisting articles to look at in the library later - though all felt that more guidance was needed on how to do this. Most were not regular library computer users. **Highlighting out-of-library functionality and improving guidance on use is likely to create interest in A2R from existing and prospective customers.**

- Although full-text A2R articles can only be read in a public library, the service can be offered on Wi-Fi. **Making A2R available on customers' own devices is likely to be more attractive to potential users, particularly those who are not library computer users.**
- Customers who already use the library for research are interested in A2R - but it is not necessarily promoted to customers using inter-library loans or other reference materials. **Marketing should focus on non-fiction and reference customers (rather than library computer users) and cross-promote A2R with other library research offers (both digital and print).**
- Three of my interviewees heard about A2R through a peer-to-peer professional forum. **Embedding information about A2R in existing channels (for example, social media and professional fora) and at events (for example, open days) is resource-effective and more likely to generate interest than targeting existing library users.**
- User groups identified in my survey include self-employed professionals, independent researchers, teachers and students. In the latter category, those studying on MOOCs, those at less-well-resourced FE colleges and those studying for EPQ/IB are likely target markets. **Targeting educational institutions (for example, sixth form and FE colleges) and professional associations (for example, The British Association for Counselling and Therapy) with A2R publicity is likely to be more effective than general mail-outs.**

The future

The pilot review estimates that out of '8 million active library borrowers ... up to 5.3 million may not know that A2R exists, and 1.4 million might be interested'. My findings also suggest untapped interest from both expected and unexpected client groups.

A2R may not meet Open Access criteria - but it does provide access to publically funded research that is currently behind paywalls. For those interested in research, but outside conventional academic circles, it's undoubtedly a good thing.

At a time when [fewer people are using public libraries](#) A2R could also be a cost-effective way of increasing visits - while simultaneously raising awareness of both existing Open Access resources and other library resources. Why wouldn't we want to promote it?