


IDEA

A central white laptop with a black keyboard is open. The screen displays the text "Content for free" in a bold, green, sans-serif font. The laptop is surrounded by several 3D-rendered books of various colors (green, orange, red, blue, pink) floating in the air around it. The background is a light green color.

Content  
for free



*Librarians and pirates the world over have started a controversial movement to make access to academic research free. **Veronica Stivala** heads underground to find out more.*

The paywall behind digital libraries for academic texts could soon become a thing of the past. The change is controversial to say the least. Currently, universities and individuals have to pay huge sums if they wish to access academic content such as research papers and journals. Furthermore, researchers and academics themselves, who have often contributed the content, need subscriptions to access their own work.


But this story is about more than just subscription fees. It is one about how a private industry has taken over the institutions of science, and consequently, how librarians as well as academics are fighting to regain control.

Firstly, it is important to note that it is not just the academic texts that are being made available for free, but also the months and years of research material, unpublished data, raw data, and so on, often referred to as open access. Think of the endless possibilities for collaboration and progress that this can open up, not to mention the time saved.

## THE GOOD FIGHT

The University of Malta (UM), particularly Kevin Ellul, Director Library Services, has been fighting strong since 2014 when UM launched its own institutional depository – OAR&UM (Open Access Repository for University of Malta) – where UM academics and researchers can upload their research content and peer-reviewed journal articles. Essentially, the University of Malta decided it didn't want knowledge hidden behind paywalls, taking a stand against the cost of academic publishing, which has gotten out of control.

Take publishing company Elsevier, which owns some 3,000 academic journals. Its articles account for a whopping 18 percent of the world's research output. Elsevier therefore generates billions of dollars from its journals.

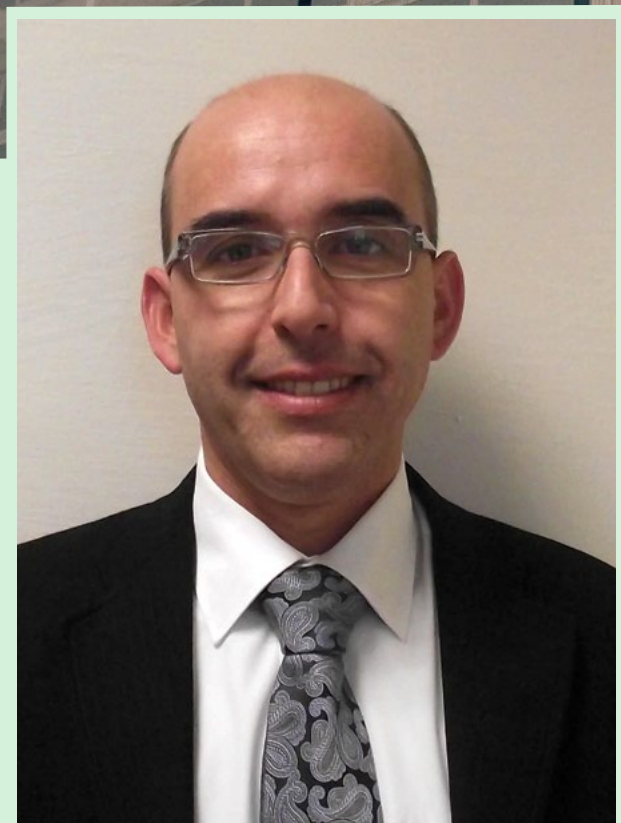
Ellul does not mince his words when he says, 'We are against publishing houses.' In this new format, the universities are becoming the publishers. In Ellul's words: 'We are escorting our academics to publish. It is their 



duty to do so.' The system therefore creates a fairer distribution of finances in that the money remains in-house as it were, rather than going to an external entity.

How so? In addition to salaries, universities use the taxpayer money they receive to provide support, library offices, labs, and so on. The research is done by its scholars, who then compile academic articles and forward them to publishers, without any remuneration going to the author. Companies such as Elsevier and Springer Nature have succeeded in becoming immensely profitable by receiving taxpayer-funded, highly skilled labour for free, while charging a premium for access to it. Not only that, but the academics themselves as well as the university that provided the support and infrastructure for the research to be carried out would also have to pay exorbitant licence fees for work written by its very own writers. And this is precisely what new open access systems, such as OAR&UM, are fighting against.

How does the OAR&UM platform work? The content is openly available, and anyone who uses the research is obliged to acknowledge the author. The content is available to anyone with an internet connection, in academia or not, further opening up important research and potential collaboration with a wider public. Content is king, and this



**Kevin Ellul**

*Content is king, and this service would naturally be nothing without the academic material.*



service would naturally be nothing without the academic material. So subsequent to its implementation, the library also set up an open access policy and is now encouraging its academics to upload their papers, dissertations, and theses to their repository. To date 56,000 items, which include peer reviewed articles, have been submitted.

### **THE DEVIL IN THE DETAILS**

Quality control is vital. As content becomes free, the divide between the World Wide Web, where everybody and anybody is a publisher, as opposed to quality-driven, peer-reviewed, publisher-approved academic material could theoretically and worryingly narrow. While still in inception, an open peer reviewing system is being introduced, whereby experts in the field will take on the role of peer reviewers.

Speaking further about maintaining quality levels, Ellul is keen to stress that the platform they are using – Dspace – maintains the highest EU research standards. The open access software is being used by prominent universities to set up their own repositories.

An interesting question that arises is how the content will be found now that it is not being hosted in better known digital libraries. To this, Ellul answers confidently that all the university's content is being harvested by prominent

Open Archive Initiatives (OAI) providers, including Base and Core, as well as Google. This means that the material will show up in these searches. The system therefore enhances not just research, but also leadership and visibility, which play a central role in universities' cutthroat competition to score high in their rankings and attract students.

### **DAVID VS GOLIATH**

Universities the world over are essentially all in the open access race, all at different stages. So, where does Malta stand? 'Somewhere in the middle,' reveals Ellul.

It comes as no surprise that publishers are against all of this, but they are struggling to adapt their business models and come up with transformative agreements, which they need to do quickly. It is generally agreed that the future is open access, and universities still have a lot of work ahead of them when it comes to protecting things like copyright. Also, universities alone are not strong enough to overcome the open access battle. There still exist a lot of incentives for academics to work with publishers; their careers are highly dependent on the number of publications they have in high-profile journals. So as long as these incentives exist, open access journals will not stand a chance. The success of open access lies heavily in the hands of the academic. **T**