

AN OPEN MIND TOWARDS OPEN ACCESS PUBLISHING-

An interview with Bo-Christer Björk

Turid Hedlund

Introduction

Bo-Christer Björk is since 2000 professor in information systems at the Hanken School of Economics in Helsinki, Finland. Before that he had a career as professor at the Royal Institute of Technology in Stockholm. For the international OA community Bo-Christer Björk is a well known speaker, and he was one of the first advocates of open access in Finland. In this interview Bo-Christer Björk gives his view on open access publishing.

Interview

If you look back at your working experience from both Sweden and Finland, what do you see as the major differences in the university sector in these countries?

During the first few days at KTH in Stockholm I learned a new Swedish term, “förankring”. An organizational change process was under way and it was important that everybody’s voice was heard. In Finland we have a tradition for more authoritarian management from the top. Also Finnish students seem to be shy to ask questions and discuss in class.

During your years in Stockholm you became acquainted with the new ways of publishing on the Internet and you also started an open access journal. Can you tell us how this initiative took place?

The idea occurred to me during a train ride from Turku to Espoo (on the way home to the family, I commuted weekly to my job in Stockholm). I had colleagues in my research field, construction IT, that were very excited about the possibilities offered by the world wide web. I then started to discuss the ideas with them (in particular Prof. Ziga Turk from Slovenia) and the project took off.

Is the field of science that you represent particularly suited for open access publishing, and how was your initiative and journal received among your research community?

Quite well suited since we study how a particular industry could be made more efficient by the use of IT

and Web-connected collaboration tool. Also there are many practitioners who might have an interest in our articles, but who rarely can justify paying expensive subscriptions. After a bit of struggle in the beginning to attract enough high-quality subscriptions the journal took off in 2001 and is currently publishing 30-50 peer-reviewed articles per year.

The journal you started is still an active open access journal, how do you see the future for this type of journals that are published mainly with voluntary human resources?

There is a niche for journals run in this “Open source” mode, but if Open Access is going to become the dominating mode of scholarly publishing, the big existing publishers have to SWAP business model. It will be very interesting to see what happens to BioMedCentral after being acquired by Springer. The initiative from “CERN and friends” to procure the services of the major physics journals for open access distribution is also very interesting.

When you returned to Finland and the Hanken School of Economics your research interests changed and you became an active researcher in the field of scientific publishing. You also became the first advocator of open access in Finland. Can you tell us how this happened?

Together with my colleague from Slovenia, Professor Ziga Turk we managed to get funding from the EC for a project (SciX) which was partly research, partly a pilot of a subject-based repository. We organized a small workshop to present the results of the project for stakeholders in Finland and at this workshop the idea to set up a national work group to promote OA came up. I believe it was Kristiina Hormia from the National Library who suggested this. I suppose they asked me to chair the work group because most of the activists were from the library or publication sector and it was thought to be better to have a scientist as figurehead.

The FinnOA working group that you chaired from the start in 2003 until the end of 2008 has been one of the main actors in promoting the change to open access publishing in Finland. How do you see

this process and what have been the major steps and achievements during these years?

A lot of progress has been made. Awareness is certainly on a higher level now and institutional repositories have been or are being set up in most universities. The first milestone was a very successful national OA conference in 2004, which included many internationally known speakers. We got a full page coverage in Helsingin Sanomat, the main Finnish newspaper. The second milestone consisted of the guidelines published by a committee appointed by the Ministry of Education, of which I was also a member. Perhaps the third milestone is the OA publishing mandate of the University of Helsinki, which will be in effect from the start of 2010.

You recently published an article estimating the prevalence of open access articles. How do you see the future for open access?

Over the years my enthusiasm has been moderated a bit by seeing how complex this change process is. But our studies are showing that about 30 % of all newly founded journals are OA so this helps raise the overall share. I'm currently particularly interested in how existing publishers could swap business model, perhaps with the help of institutional agreements tying "Open Choice" payments on a large scale to big deal subscription licenses. I also see delayed OA as a possible route, since a lot of the most value-adding reading is done based on citations, and here a delay or a year is not so critical.

I'm a bit less optimistic about the green route, and I think proponents of that underestimate the problem involved with versions that differ from the actually published version. I don't really believe in mandates but rather in carrots to make authors upload their manuscripts to repositories.

What will be your future research topic in the field of open access?

In the near future, at least collecting robust data on how common OA is in different disciplines, regions and using gold or green channels. We just received funding from the Nordbib programme to do a study called the OA barometer!

Thank you professor Björk for this interview, and we hope to be able to return to the results of this OA barometer study in a later issue of ScieCom info.

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