The Research Communications Strategy project is a JISC-funded activity working to identify current issues in research communications, to generate responses at a strategic level and to develop an understanding of the processes of advocacy for open access within the sector. We welcome feedback from all interested parties.

We are based in the Centre for Research Communications at the University of Nottingham.

http://crc.nottingham.ac.uk

The Research Communications Strategy project is carried out at the Centre for Research Communications, University of Nottingham. The work is funded by JISC to look into the strategic adoption of new forms of communicating research outputs.

Want to know more?

Current Issues in Research Communications 4: Social Networking Sites for Sharing Research

The fourth in our series of discussion papers on academic communications focuses on researchers' use of Web2.0 applications – and in particular, the popularity of sites such as Mendeley that combine bibliographic management tools with social spaces. Are these sites genuine alternatives to more traditional systems?
How do researchers manage their research in a Web2.0 world?

The list of Web2.0 tools that academics and educators are using continues to grow. Significantly, the academic "social research space" service Mendely continues to expand. In March 2010 the site was claiming to make available 16.3M document references or full text articles. Currently (February 2011) that figure stands at over 68M documents, with 772,884 users from 19,007 institutions. Whatever the specifics of these figures, the sheer volume and rapidity of growth is sufficient to warrant attention and give an indication of the popularity of the system.

Reasons for the popularity seem varied: in conversation, academics report using it primarily as a bibliographic tool, none the less this is a strategic concern. As proprietary software systems they are used by individuals and exist outside formal service contracts with institutions. Notice has to be taken of the business drivers and structures of such services if they are to be used as underpinning future research practice.

Social networks and open access

Within the sector, concerns about the emergence of Web2.0 systems are beginning to be expressed and discussed on blogs. Part of the current drive towards Open Access is to free up the research process from the limitations it has adopted by default, through the commercial system of subscriptions, journals, journal brands and impact factors. It would be ironic if at the point of freeing research communications from one set of restrictions, researchers unwittingly tied themselves into another.

The system of Open Access through repositories and OA journals (OAR/J) now finds itself being challenged by some Web2.0 services and can even be seen as being cast into a defensive position. Instead of being seen as a potential liberator, the OAR/J axis may now seem restrictive itself, modelled as it is currently on the traditional publication system. While there is work underway to help repositories in particular to move out of this tradition and start to hold integrated research outputs (articles, data and grey literature), support long-term peer-review etc, the basis of the repository system revolves around articles and formal metadata descriptions.

It's free – but is that enough?

So, as a trend, there is a general move among researchers towards free-text Google-style search from commercial companies as there is a move towards Web2.0-style mounting, sharing of articles and other research information, again, based on commercial company services. The question has to be asked: how suitable are these tools? What controls exist for their modification or for exposure of their mechanics and methodologies?

Current commercial systems, like library-based search services, are typically sold to institutions with a consequent measure of institutional oversight and control being possible. Web2.0-based services typically operate on a more diffuse, commercial model and are adopted by individuals free at the point of use. By taking the commercial base away from a direct institution-to-supplier relationship, there is also lost any idea of service-level agreements, or contract-based assurances of independence from political or commercial influence in the service.

It should be emphasised that we do not seek to denigrate Web2.0-style services from some assumed position of moral high ground; or wish to criticise these services for what they are (or are not). We recognise their excellence and innovation. It is simply that the context of such services is important if we are to adopt them to the extent of replacing traditional service contract.

While we are at a crossroads in the development of new research communications, we have to note there is a risk if such services become embedded in a new standard research practice, even if using open access materials. Research communications could find itself locked into a new commercial paradigm, just as it moves from behind the toll-gates of traditional publishing.

This is an edited version of a fuller report. To see the full report along with associated footnotes and references, please go to http://crc.nottingham.ac.uk/projects/rcs/reports.