



Talking Points on “Usage Half-Life” and Embargo Periods

SPARC, a membership organization of more than 200 research and academic libraries in the U.S., supports the objectives of the White House Directive on Public Access to Federally Funded Research, which seek to ensure, for the first time, free public access and full use of articles reporting on the results of publicly funded research. SPARC also supports the use of objective data and metrics to evaluate the appropriateness of criteria set out in the Directive.

The recent “*Journal Usage Half-Life*” study¹, funded by the American Association of Publishers (AAP) and conducted by Phil Davis, examines the time it takes for a group of articles to reach half their number of downloads across a variety of academic disciplines. The study concludes that this number varies both within and among research disciplines. Recently, some have suggested that this metric should be used by funders to determine the length of embargo restrictions placed on articles reporting the results of publicly funded research.

While the “Usage Half-Life” of articles is an interesting data point, *it does not represent a viable metric for determining the appropriate length of embargo periods* for federal agencies seeking to effectively implement the White House Directive on Public Access to Federally Funded Research.

Key Talking Points

- **It is not surprising that the “Usage Half-Life” data on article usage varies widely both within and among disciplines.** While it is interesting and potentially useful to have more granular information on this variation, it has never been in dispute, and has never been a factor in determining the proven, effective embargo terms already in wide use by research funders in the U.S. and around the world.
- **The “Usage Half-Life” statistic tells us something about usage, but nothing about the question of embargoes.** Publishers’ main objective in lobbying for the inclusion of embargo periods in federal public access policies is to prevent journal subscription cancellations. There is no connection between the notion of article usage half-life and journal cancellations; it is a big – and unsubstantiated – leap from saying that a journal retains some level of usefulness for “X” number of years to saying that an embargo shorter than “X” will lead to cancelled subscriptions.
- **Library subscriptions constitute the vast majority of journal publishers’ revenue – and libraries do not use the “Usage Half-Life” metric to determine journal subscription cancellations.** SPARC member libraries represent a significant portion of journal publishers’ U.S. customer base, and it is inaccurate and misleading to suggest that this subscription revenue is at risk simply because the length of time that articles are

¹ http://www.publishers.org/_attachments/docs/journalusagehalflife.pdf

downloaded varies over time.

- **The most accurate data on the effectiveness of embargo periods comes from funders' experience.** In the U.S., the National Institutes of Health has had a required public access policy with a maximum allowed embargo period of 12 months in place for nearly six years. Hundreds of thousands of articles in a wide variety of disciplines (including those that the Davis study indicates have quite long “Usage Half-Lives”) have been made publicly accessible during this time frame, yet **no publisher has reported any loss of subscriptions** due to this policy.
- **Research funders around the world – including those funding European Union research – have similar data about the effectiveness of embargo periods.** In fact, the European Commission recently extended its policy of requiring public access to its annual investment of 80 billion Euros in funded research across 100% of its research and research disciplines. Based on the data collected from a five-year pilot project testing embargos across diverse discipline, the Commission set maximum embargo periods of six months for life and physical sciences, and 12 months for all other disciplines – including the social sciences and humanities.²

This has been further supported by numerous other studies/investigations, including a recent extensive review by the UK House of Commons Select Committee on Business, Innovation and Skills, which concluded that "there is no available evidence base to indicate that short or even zero embargoes cause cancellation of subscriptions," and specifically noted that there is an “absence of evidence that short embargo periods harm subscription publishers.”³

The “Usage Half-Life” number is untested, and not well understood. What exactly does measuring the usage of a set of articles – rather than an individual article – tell us? Why measure the median, rather than the average or mean usage number? Are there meaningful differences among those measures? It is important to note that this is a metric arising out of a *non-peer-reviewed, industry-funded* study. Unless and until this measure is better defined and understood, *it should certainly not be used to determine federal policy.* Additionally, relying on such an untested and potentially irrelevant metric in light of the strong UK and EC policies could reduce U.S. competitiveness, slowing innovation, and risking economic harm.

- **The goal of federal public access policies is to maximize the public investment in research by providing the public with access to articles – not to protect publisher business models or maximize publisher profits.** The government invests taxpayer dollars in scientific research with the expectation that those results will be diffused and built upon as widely and as quickly as possible to accelerate discovery, speed innovation, and fuel economic growth. The inclusion of embargo periods in public access policies has been intended to help provide a smoother transition for those publishers who need time to reconfigure effective business models – not to provide a permanent publisher protection program.

² http://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/data/ref/h2020/grants_manual/hi/oa_pilot/h2020-hi-oa-pilot-guide_en.pdf

³ <http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/business-innovation-and-skills/news/on-publ-open-access/>