Letter to *Times Higher Education Supplement* for publication concerning:

Laura Barnett and Hanna Hindstrom, All research to go online, *Times Higher Education Supplement*, September 23, 2004
http://www.thes.co.uk/search/story.aspx?story_id=2024710

The Research Councils UK have proposed to mandate that all RCUK fundees make their articles openly accessible online by self-archiving them on the web. In disappointingly inaccurate *THES* article (“All research to go online” Sep 23), the authors get most of the important details wrong. They write: “[A] benefit of online open access publishing [italics mine] would be that academics and researchers would no longer have to rely on their institutions to provide access to articles published in subscription-only journals.” Not only is it *not* open access publishing but *open access self-archiving* (of their articles published in subscription-only journals) that the RCUK is mandating for their researchers, but this does *not* mean that their researchers will no longer rely on their institutions to provide access to the journals they subscribe to: How could my giving away my own published articles online provide me with access to the articles in the journals my institution subscribes to? I give my articles away so other researchers worldwide whose institutions cannot afford to subscribe to the journals my articles were published in can nevertheless access and use them. That is how it (1) maximises my own research impact, and, far more important, also (2) maximizes the return on the British public’s yearly £3.5 billion investment in research.

But the *THES* article misquotes me on (1) “if citations rose by 50 to 250 per cent because of online open-access publishing [sic, again: italics mine, but not the words] researchers could gain more than £2.5 million a year in potential salary increases, grants and funding renewals” and simply leaves out completely (2) the far more important loss of £1.5 billion in returns (in the form of at least 50% more citations) on the British public’s yearly £3.5 billion pound investment in research. Nor is this an if/then pipe-dream: The projections are based on objective, published measurements of the degree to which self-archiving increases research impact.

But by far the worst inaccuracy in the *THES* article – and it really does a disservice to those who pin their hopes on the RCUK policy for maximising British research impact -- is the gratuitous exaggeration of what is currently a real but remediable flaw in the wording of the RCUK proposal. The current draft says “Deposit should take place at the earliest opportunity, wherever possible at or around the time of publication.” But the *THES* article instead says: “Under the proposals from Research Councils UK, published work would not necessarily go online immediately. Academics and publishers would be allowed a grace period, which could last anywhere from a few months up to several years. The publisher would determine the exclusion period…” This is utter nonsense, and it would make a nonsense of the RCUK policy, if this were indeed the form it took. The RCUK’s current language simply needs to be made more precise: “Deposit must take place immediately upon acceptance for publication, and access should be made open at the earliest opportunity.” (In the meanwhile, the article is visible, and the authors can email e-prints of it to all those e-print-requesters whose institutions cannot access it,
thereby still maximising its impact, but with more keystrokes than would be most efficient.)

The 8 co-signatories of the open letter in support of the RCUK policy, including the inventor of the web, Sir Tim Berners-Lee, are quoted correctly on this, but the THES authors don’t seem notice that what they said is contradicted by the letter: “We believe the RCUK should go ahead and implement its immediate [italics mine] self-archiving mandate, without delay.” (More trivially, the THES authors name 4 universities, corresponding to one each of 4 of the 8 co-signatories, but omit Southampton, the university of all 4 of the remaining co-signatories, including Sir Tim!)

The last piece of nonsense is this: “Universities are not obliged to implement a repository system, which costs about £80,000 to set up and about £40,000 a year in maintenance.” This too is based on a flaw in the current wording of the policy, which actually says that the articles “should be deposited in an appropriate e-print repository (either institutional or subject-based) wherever such a repository is available to the award-holder.” But the cost of creating and maintaining a repository is in reality less than 10% of the arbitrary and inflated figures cited by THES.

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