

# EDITOR'S CHOICE

## Seizing the telescope

Tony Delamothe *deputy editor, The BMJ*

Earlier this week the BBC showed a documentary on the short life and sad death of Aaron Swartz, a US internet activist who hanged himself two years ago while under federal indictment for data theft. At issue were academic journal articles that Swartz had downloaded in bulk from JSTOR, a digital depository. A few years earlier, in his "Guerilla Open Access Manifesto" (<http://bit.ly/1u1qljq>), Swartz had argued, "The world's entire scientific and cultural heritage, published over centuries in books and journals, is increasingly being digitized and locked up by a handful of private corporations . . . [Scientists need to] ensure their work is published on the Internet, under terms that allow anyone to access it."

At his funeral Tim Berners-Lee, co-creator of the worldwide web, delivered a eulogy, and Swartz was inducted posthumously into the Internet Hall of Fame. His death prompted calls for more open access to scholarly data. (These details are courtesy of Wikipedia.)

Four years after the downloading of the JSTOR articles, the world of scientific publishing looks very different. The pioneering efforts of the Public Library of Science have proved that the "author pays" model not only allows scientists to make the results of their research freely available but is also financially viable. The Directory of Open Access Journals now lists over 10 000 journals, many of them dependent on author fees. *The BMJ* supports open access to its research articles with author fees, and the model underpins *BMJ Open*, an online journal that has published 3000 research articles in its four year existence. The author pays model has become so successful that some 700 bogus or at least highly dubious journals have sprung up to part researchers, desperate to publish, from their money (doi:10.1136/bmj.h210).

The battleground has now shifted to making data freely available, and last month the influential US Institute of Medicine weighed in. While its report recommended only baby steps towards full data sharing, they are baby steps in the right

direction, concludes Harlan Krumholz in his editorial this week (doi:10.1136/bmj.h599). With cheerleaders including the European Medicines Agency, the US National Institutes of Health, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and several forward looking drug companies the ultimate destination is not in doubt. So couldn't we move a little faster? As Krumholz says, "People who continue to caution about the harms of data sharing have yet to provide persuasive examples where data sharing has harmed the public." What happens now, he says, is "akin to a few astronomers with access to the most powerful telescope interpreting for us what they saw without allowing us to look for ourselves."

Providing access to research data could solve other problems as well, claims John Noble in his letter (doi:10.1136/bmj.h437). Like open access, conflicts of interest have long been a preoccupation of *The BMJ*, although agreeing a clear position has not been so straightforward. Enough pussyfooting around, Noble says: the problem of conflict of interests for medical journals will largely go away when they adopt the policy of "publishing the reports of all and sundry, regardless of their commercial interests, subject to the pledge and actual delivery of anonymised raw data on which the report depends for internal and external validity."

From the solution to (just about) everything to *The Theory of Everything*, the much feted biopic of the theoretical physicist Stephen Hawking. Krishna Chinthapalli tells us everything we could want to know about how the actors and production team familiarised themselves with motor neurone disease (doi:10.1136/bmj.h483). But what's missing for me is any explanation of why Hawking has survived decades longer than anyone I've encountered with the condition.

Cite this as: *BMJ* 2015;350:h641

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