The Publishing World is Changing

In my March “Reflections” column I shared information about the change of HortTechnology to open access (OA), and Chair Carl Sams shared earlier this month that the ASHS Board of Directors, after much study and discussion, decided to also move the Journal and HortScience to OA at the start of 2020.

There is no question that the dissemination of scientific research results has changed drastically over the past several years, and is continuing to change at an accelerating pace. The model of the “three-legged stool” (member subscriptions, institutional subscriptions, publishing fees) of funding that ASHS and most all science societies and publishers followed for decades is rapidly approaching its end. There are myriad reasons at play here—declining library acquisition funding, web-based information access, expectations to access of funders of the research results, backlash concerning for-profit publisher consortia, etc.—all contributing to a changing worldview of information sharing.

Prior to online publishing nearly 20 years ago, the only way anyone could get access to the scientific research published by ASHS was to become a member of the Society and subscribe to printed copies of the journal(s) or go to the university library to browse through their hard copies. Today, information is expected to be a few mouse clicks away, and younger generations have a hard time fathoming physically going to a library and delving into the “stacks” looking for literature.

Obviously, the old models will no longer work in today’s world. ASHS (and all publishers) continue to see declining member and institutional subscriptions. The market for hard copies of journals has substantially dwindled over the years and is accelerating—i.e., ASHS in the 1980s and 90s printed around 6000 copies of HortScience each issue; this year fewer than 600 copies of each issue are printed. While many members and institutions transitioned to online access only when that became available in the early 2000s, those subscription numbers are continuing to decline also.

Your Society has been reactive to the marketplace expectations over the years—ASHS was an early adopter of taking historical back content to open access by having only the current volume year and the previous two behind the “paywall”. This is a “hybrid” model of OA publishing. ASHS for several years has offered an “OA option” for an additional cost to immediately have an article OA, and we’ve seen increases in authors taking this option each year.

One of the most important realities studied by the Board has been the expectations of research funders on how (and when) research will be disseminated. You may be familiar with “Plan S”—a Europe-backed program that mandates immediate OA by major European funders. Since this announcement last fall, major funders in Africa, and most notably, China, have expressed strong support for this initiative. Many others around the world are considering whether to sign on. Domestically, NSF and NIH require funded research to be OA within 12 months, the Gates Foundation and others expect (and only fund) immediate OA, and USDA continues work on plans to increase public access of results of funded research. Whether Plan S, or some iteration of it or similar mandates occur, is only a matter of when, not if.

ASHS is being proactive to this new reality instead of waiting, perhaps too long, and being forced to react. Comments we have received from members and authors have been nearly universally positive.
Carl Sams has mentioned the many benefits to authors, and readers, in previous columns on ASHS and OA. He will be sharing the financial details of the new ASHS OA publishing world in an upcoming column in the ASHS E-News.

I welcome any comments and thoughts you may have as ASHS moves forward!