From the Editor

The Many Challenges of Open Access

Nathan S. Blow, Ph.D. Editor-in-Chief

BioTechniques

It was nothing if not a tumultuous October for the staff of *The Scientist*. The start of the month brought news that the October issue (the 25th anniversary issue) would be the publication's last. However, by mid-October the news had changed, and it was announced that a tentative deal with a new publisher had been struck to purchase the magazine and continue the publication.

Personally, I have been a loyal reader of *The Scientist* since graduate school, enjoying the well-written features and news content the magazine regularly provides. Not to mention the fact that a large number of very fine science writers got their starts at *The Scientist*. So, I was quite pleased to learn that another publisher decided to step in with support.

The elimination of *The Scientist* would definitely have been a blow to the life science community; not just from the loss of a respected science news outlet, but as yet another signal of the many challenges currently facing open access titles. According to reports, *The Scientist* was having financial difficulties as advertising dollars (their main revenue stream) became scarcer due to the difficult economic environment. This begs the question: with so much interest in growing the number of open access publications, how can the open access model best thrive in the future?

Several open access models exist today. The author pay model — first championed in large measure by the Public Library of Science journals and now a common option with a growing number of publications — works by putting the financial onus for open access on the author, with the reader benefiting. Although a reasonable model in strong economic times, and thus far by many accounts successful, I question what happens if funding levels continue to go down and money becomes harder to come by. Will a greater number of authors seek payment waivers to publish in these journals? Or worse still, avoid them completely due to a lack of funds?

Another model is one wherein neither the authors nor the readers pay for content — support comes from other sources. Advertising (such as in the case of *The Scientist*) can be one such source. *BioTechniques* and a few other journals

and magazines use this model. The difficulty here is that, given the uncertainty surrounding print advertising, models based on advertising revenues require significant effort, support, and innovation to sustain and build. By now you are probably wondering about *BioTechniques*; thus far we have been successful at adapting to the changing economic climate while maintaining our open access founding principle. Admittedly, it has not been easy. But we are committed to delivering our print issue freely to readers every month, publishing those high-quality methods and techniques articles most needed by researchers working at the lab bench.

The near closing of *The Scientist* should serve as a wake-up call to everyone in the life science community. As our economy starts to rebuild, it is important not to take for granted the high-quality content provided by various magazines and journals working to keep the open access concept alive through whatever model. While the financial health of scientific journals and magazine should not be at the forefront of a researcher's mind, it is important that everyone appreciate the challenges that come with providing an open access title and support such publications in any way possible. Readers should pass along issues to their colleagues, authors should continue to champion open access publications by publishing their articles in them, and advertisers and funding agencies should maintain support for this critical means of delivering science to the masses. At its core, open access is based on the concept of creating a community, but only through community support will it continue to grow. Please share your thoughts with us by posting at our Molecular Biology Forums under "To the Editor" (<http://molecularbiology.forums.biotechniques.com>) or sending an email directly to the editors (bioeditor@biotechniques.com).

BioTechniques 51:291 (November 2011) doi
10.2144/000113755

To purchase reprints of this article, contact: biotechniques@fosterprinting.com

At its core, open access is based on the concept of creating a community, but only through community support will it continue to grow