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Product Review Unpaywall [Chrome & Firefox browser extension]

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PRODUCT REVIEW

Unpaywall [Chrome & Firefox browser extension]

created by Heather Piwowar and Jason Priem

Accessed March 23, 2017 | ImpactStory | Free

Making repository content findable is a major challenge facing libraries. When researchers do find content from open access (OA) institutional repositories, they most likely get there through search engines, specifically Google or Google Scholar (Mirza and Williamson, 2015). Though researchers employ multi-platform, eclectic discovery strategies, most are probably doing their research through a Web browser.

Enter the new, open source browser extension, Unpaywall, available for Chrome and Firefox. Unpaywall is the brainchild of Heather Piwowar and Jason Priem, released under the aegis of their nonprofit ImpactStory.¹ Unpaywall's user experience is smooth. Once I installed it in Chrome, side tabs with lock icons began appearing anytime I encountered a paywall. The tabs are color-coded, indicating if full text is available through an OA repository (green), a journal with an open license (gold), a source lacking a clear license (blue), or not available for free (gray).

Several days after I started using Unpaywall, I noticed the tabs were no longer coming up. I found that another extension running on my computer (Privacy Badger) was blocking Unpaywall. Even after disabling Privacy Badger, there was one Emerald Insights paywall page where a tab never appeared. I emailed the ImpactStory team, as encouraged to do in Unpaywall's FAQs. Within three business days I received a response explaining why the tab hadn't appeared (Emerald's DOIs were in a nonstandard location) and that the issue had been fixed.

¹ <https://impactstory.org/>



Other tools exist that link researchers to OA full text (too many to mention in this brief review). The OA Button² is another browser extension that links users from an index/abstract to the OA full text, but there are differences. The OA Button requires users to actively click on the extension in order to see if the full text is available. The interface is more basic, with none of Unpaywall's educational color coding or tabs. Since I installed both tools, I find that I rely on Unpaywall when it pops up. If it doesn't, I like the ability to click on the OA Button to double-check. Currently, the OA Button offers more features than Unpaywall: the ability to find and request datasets, request non-OA articles directly from authors, and integrate with library catalogs and interlibrary loan. While Unpaywall may offer more features in the future, their current advantage is ease of use, which aligns with their goal (stated in their FAQs) to "bring open access to the masses."

I, like many researchers, use Google Scholar as my primary means of discovering OA full text. Full text comes from OA repositories, but also from academic social networks (ASNs; e.g., Academia.edu and ResearchGate) and non-OA library subscriptions. Unpaywall doesn't provide its own discovery platform, and it doesn't provide links to ASNs or subscription resources. Given the extension's purpose, this is clearly intentional.

Google Scholar's expediency comes at the price of reduced accuracy, transparency, and copyright compliance. Unpaywall's focus is on copyright-compliant, OA full text. And while ASNs are not pirate sites like Sci-Hub, much of the content is not copyright compliant (Jamali, 2017), and therefore subject to takedown notices and link rot. Further, Google's inscrutable proprietary algorithms and metadata requirements make optimization challenging for repository managers (Arlitsch, 2014; Mirza & Williamson, 2015). Others lament that Google Scholar treats all source types equally; its metrics do not distinguish between repositories and journals (Delgado López-Cózar & Robinson-García, 2012). Unpaywall, in contrast, pulls from reputable open data sources such as Pubmed Central, DOAJ, Crossref, DataCite, and Base. Unpaywall's developers make their aggregation tool, oaDOI, open for others to reuse and build on.

Unpaywall's usage data indicates they are able to connect users with full text slightly more than 50% of the time. This jibes with optimistic estimates that OA articles account for perhaps 50% of journal articles (Achambault, 2013). Because of this, Unpaywall will not identify as much "free" full text as less copyright compliant services. This is not the fault of Unpaywall or its developers, but rather an unfortunate reality of the current scholarly ecosystem.

²<https://openaccessbutton.org>

Unpaywall is yet another example of OA advocates finding new ways to make legal full text easily available. It may be particularly useful to researchers whose workflows don't include Google Scholar, those who are concerned about copyright compliance, and those who are not privileged to have access to subscription resources. Researchers may use Unpaywall, the OA Button, and Google Scholar together, as I have been doing the last few weeks. I encourage librarians to recommend Unpaywall to researchers, especially since its color-coding educates users about the different types of OA.

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BIOGRAPHY

Michaela Willi Hooper is the Scholarly Communication Librarian and an assistant professor at Oregon State University Libraries & Press, where she provides copyright education and supports authors who want to make their work open access. In addition to being a reviews editor at JLSC, she is an editor for the new scholarly communication overlay journal, the *Idealis*.