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Radical open-access proposal needs to succeed

Evidence supports Plan S call to end publication fees, say Daniel Spichtinger and Elena Šimukovič (opinion piece). Available online at: <https://www.researchprofessionalnews.com/rr-news-europe-views-of-europe-2023-11-radical-open-access-proposal-needs-to-succeed/>

Evidence supports plans to move beyond fee-based open access

Towards Responsible Publishing, the proposal published on 31 October by Coalition S, the alliance of funders pushing for full and immediate open access, is a vivid illustration of academics' and policymakers' dissatisfaction with the current state of scholarly publishing.

The proposal, which is out for consultation, advocates reshaping the publishing system, with publishers becoming third-party service providers who supply publishing tools but do not set the rules. Whether it succeeds will depend on whether researchers, research institutions and funders are willing to support such a change.

So far, “Gold” open access, where publishers levy article processing charges to free publications from journal subscription paywalls, has been criticised for its expense, and for moving the financial barriers in academic publishing from readers to authors. This is a hurdle not only in the Global South, but also for less affluent countries and research institutions within the European Union.

A recent study estimated that the five major commercial publishers—Elsevier, Sage, Springer-Nature, Taylor and Francis, and Wiley—collected a billion euros from open access publishing charges between 2015 and 2018 alone.

The other main instrument for open access publishing are so-called transformative agreements, also known as transitional or ‘read and publish’ agreements. These are large deals between research institutions, or consortia thereof, and major academic publishers that aim to transition payments from journal subscriptions to full open access.

In these, publishers receive a bulk prepayment for a certain quota of open access articles that can be used by members of the consortia. Authors affiliated with participating organisations can then publish open access in selected journals at no extra cost.

These deals have been part of the landscape for long enough for their long-term effects to begin emerging. One of us (E.S.) studied a pioneering agreement of this kind between the association of Dutch research universities (VSNU, now Universiteiten van Nederland) and Elsevier covering 2016-2018.

Interviews with stakeholders, open access monitoring statistics and policy documents showed that, despite the deal being officially portrayed as a success story, the response from the Dutch research community was more mixed—even among those who negotiated it.

Many researchers saw it as a poor investment of public money. For instance, one professor described the agreement as “one big betrayal”.

Despite this, the agreement has been renewed until end of 2024 and expanded to include "Open Science Platform Products and Services". Other countries have also adopted the same approach; Elsevier alone has now struck dozens of similar open access agreements with institutions and consortia on six continents.

The lessons of the VSNU-Elsevier agreement show that research institutions need to move away from both paying article processing charges and read and publish agreements, towards publishing models more in line with their goals and missions.

The quest for alternatives is gathering speed. In May, the conclusions from the Swedish presidency of the European Council called on the Commission and member states to support policies towards a scholarly publishing model that is not-for-profit, open access and multi-format, with no costs for authors or readers. In October, the first global summit on diamond open access, which aims to make publishing free for both readers and authors, took place in Mexico.

The \$19bn-dollar question (the annual revenue of the scientific publishing sector) is how to implement these policy declarations.

The Commission is already funding Open Research Europe, a publishing venue for EU-funded researchers across all disciplines with no fees for authors. As the latest Council conclusions propose, one avenue could be for national funders to join this platform. However, so far ORE only publishes a handful of articles each day. Open access megajournals, admittedly with a global reach, publish more than 1,000 each month.

Towards Responsible Publishing gives a more radical answer. Describing both read and publish agreements and article processing charges as “highly inequitable”, it advocates a publish-review-curate model, where peer review and curation are seen as distinct but integral processes managed by the academic community. In this, all research outputs, including preprints and peer review reports, would be shared openly and “all content-related elements...controlled by, and responsive to, the scholarly community”.

The proposal’s scope and breadth is groundbreaking in its attempt to move to a more equitable open science system fit for the 21st century. Whether the envisioned scholar-led publishing ecosystem can be achieved will ultimately depend on the scientific community’s response.