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Open Access 2018: A Year of Funders and Universities Drawing Lines in the Sand

Posted January 17, 2019 by [Hilda Bastian](#) in [Annual open access roundup](#), [Science Communication](#)

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This is the sixth year I've rounded up the year in open access – and it was the most remarkable. When the year began, the world's largest academic publisher, Elsevier, had increased their annual profits, with an operating profit approaching US\$1.2 billion in science, technology, and medicine – a profit margin of over 36%. [\[PDF\]](#) By year's end, a hefty chunk of the world's research community was walking away from big subscription deals with Elsevier and others.

That was a last resort after years of hard bargaining. While we could never be sure one or other side wouldn't blink before it came to this, this didn't seem to come out of the blue. What did, was a dramatic announcement from Europe in September that could usher in immediate open access to much publicly-funded research – not just after a one-year embargo. George Monbiot [summarized](#) the response:

The publishers have gone ballistic. Springer Nature [argues that](#) this plan “potentially undermines the whole research publishing system”. Yes, that's the point. The publishers of the Science series [maintain that](#) it would “disrupt scholarly communications, be a disservice to researchers, and impinge academic freedom”. Elsevier says, “If you think information shouldn't cost anything, go to Wikipedia”, inadvertently reminding us of what happened to the commercial encyclopedias.

The last half of 2018 was an exciting time for many of us who have been wanting to see major progress in access. It's not only publishers for whom a major shift in publication culture is confronting, though. The profit- and prestige-based journal system has served many in academia well. But with major funders and universities getting serious about lines in the sand, whether academia is ready or not, the rate of change has speeded up.



Here are my month-by-month highlights of an action-packed year in open access to the scientific literature.

January...

Australia's National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) updated its [open access policy](#), updating it with recommendations about accessibility of data in the research they fund. Not mandatory or monitored, though.

The open access science preprint server, [arXiv](#), passed [a billion](#) downloads – and more than a 1 paper was being added every second.

February...

Heather Piwowar and colleagues [estimated](#) that 28% of the literature indexed in Web of Science was open access in 2015. It's growing: in 2015 itself, 45% was open access.

The proportion in Austria could have gotten a boost from a deal announced by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF) [in February](#). The deal covers subscriptions and open access charges for all FWF-funded authors in 22 participating universities in all Wiley journals:

Eligible authors will be automatically identified and informed about the possibility of free open-access publication.

Meanwhile, 110 libraries in the UK published [an open letter](#) objecting to a change in licensing terms by Taylor & Francis. The change? Charging extra for digital access to content more than 20 years old. The libraries wrote:

Diminishing this coverage is opportunistic and potentially profiteering within a sector which is recognised to enjoy substantial profit margins as it greatly monetises the outputs and inputs of publicly-funded research.

Soon after, Taylor & Francis [backtracked](#).



The UK's 7 research councils [signed](#) onto [DORA](#) – the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment. That is a commitment to not using journal metrics (like a journal's "impact factor") as a

surrogate for assessing the quality of research or a person's work.


March...

The Association of Universities in the Netherlands (VSNU) posted their **5-point strategy** for reaching their goal of 100% open access by 2020 for the nation's academics. How are they going? They **wrote**:

[T]wo years of executive negotiations have increased the total percentage of open-access articles in the Netherlands from 20% in 2014 to 42% in 2016.

Alberto Martín-Martín and colleagues **analyzed** Google Scholar for 2009 and 2014: 55% of articles had a free version, but with big differences at the country and subject level. Brazil, the Netherlands, and Switzerland were at the top of the high-output countries (70%+), and China, Iran, and Russia were the lowest of them.


And a reminder that some universities are opting out rather than paying publishers' asking price for "big deal" packages:

**Todd Vision**
@tjvision

Is that the death rattle of a business model that I hear? @UNCLibrary exited a Big Deal with one of the STM top 5 last year (to surprisingly muted faculty pushback) and may find itself having to do the same with another (even bigger one) this year. twitter.com/micahvandegrif...

Micah Vandegrift @micahvandegrift
Looks like @floridastate faculty senate just voted in unanimous support of FSU Libraries walking away from our Big Deal with you know who. About to get REALLY interesting to do scholcomm work at FSU... as I head off to NSCU Libraries. Good luck @devinsope!

♡ 10 10:58 PM - Mar 22, 2018 ⓘ

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The **Couperin consortium** – more than 250 universities and other research institutions in France – **ended their deal** with Springer in a dispute over terms and price. (SPARC tracks cancellations of subscription deals [here](#).)

April...

Swiss universities **set 2024** as the year by which all publicly funded research should be open access.

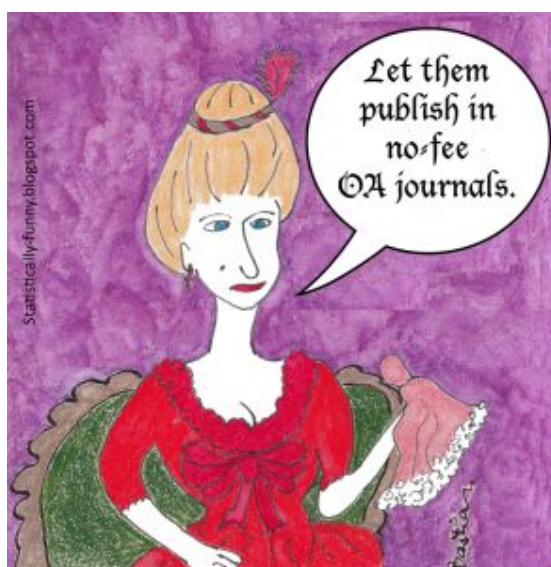


In Denmark, the **goal is 2025**. They **announced** they had reached 36% – 42% for science.

The British Library **announced a tender** for the establishment of an open access repository service for themselves and their partners.

The European Commission issued **a revised recommendation** to member countries for national policies and infrastructure for access to scientific information.

That month, **I tackled** the often-quoted statistic that most open access journals don't charge author fees. Turns out, this only a restricted, small-scale option, at least not yet. Author charges remain a barrier to open access publication.



May...

The EU Ministers **approved plans** for a European Open Science Cloud to provide “a trusted environment for hosting and processing research data”.



Sweden canceled its national subscription deal with Elsevier.

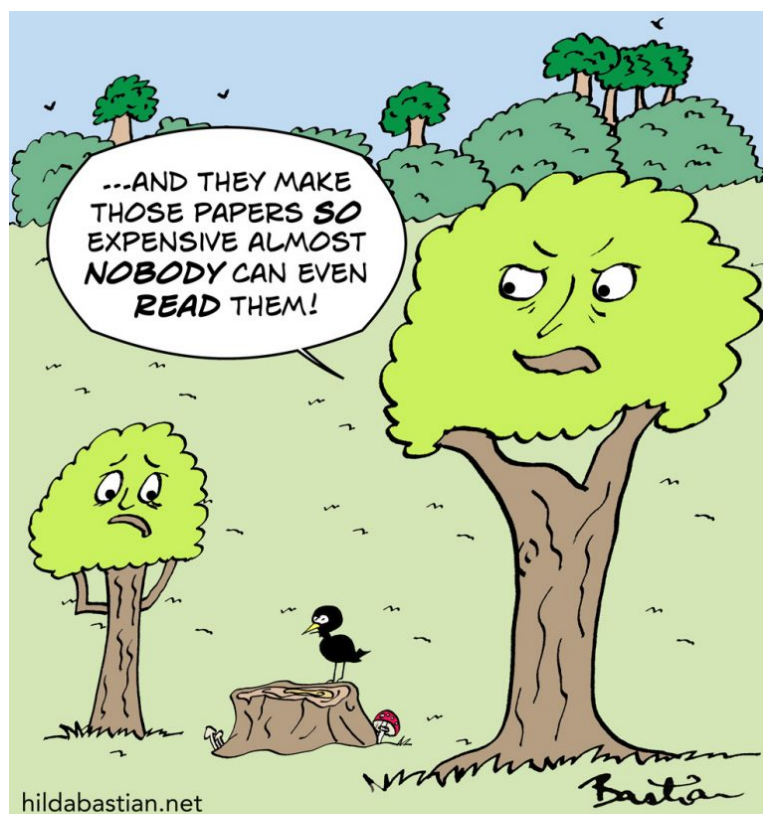
Iony Ross-Hellauer and colleagues **looked at** the potential for good and bad from funders' own journals – one of the themes for my open access roundup **last year**.

June...

No **“read and publish” deal** reached between the Netherlands and the Royal Society of Chemistry. But there was reportedly the first one for North America – **with MIT**.

The **EU announced** its open science monitor...sub-contracted to Elsevier and its metrics. Backlash ensued.

Stockholm University **announced** it would use the funds previously spent on Elsevier's big deal for open access fees for staff.



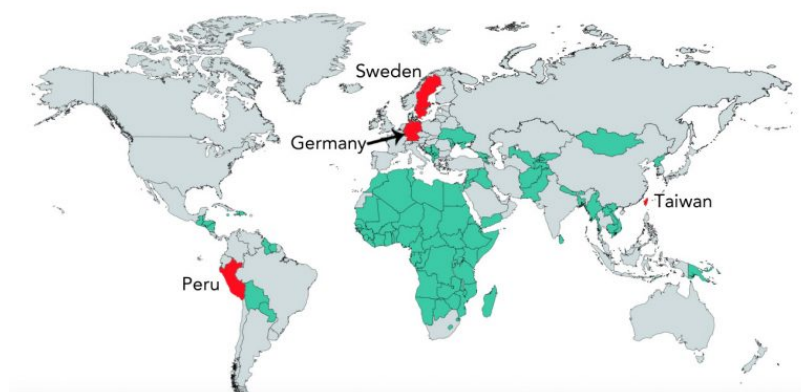
ON THE ORIGIN OF SCIENCE PUBLISHING.
(CHAPTER 4)

July...

Germany suspended on negotiations with Elsevier for its national subscription and open access deal: Elsevier's demands, the universities' spokesperson said, were:

[U]nacceptable for the academic community...What we want is to bring an end to the pricing trend for academic journals that has the potential to prove disastrous for libraries as it stands. We are also working to promote open access, with a view to essentially making the results of publicly funded research freely accessible.

That brought the proportion of the world's research now done in the “no Elsevier deal” zone to around 9%, according to calculations [in my post](#).



My map of the “No Elsevier” deal zone: red are “no deal”. Institutions in turquoise countries don’t need them, those marked gray have to subscribe.

France’s [new open science plan](#) for its university supported mandatory open access publication for government-funded research articles, books, and data.

In an unusual example of transparency, the [Dutch universities published](#) 2 of their contracts with publishers.

The Gates Foundation’s open access arrangement with the *Science* journals [ended](#).

The draft criteria for UK’s Research Excellence Framework [2021 was released](#) – still trying to end the use of the journal of publication to judge research excellence.

The Italian universities [struck a deal](#) with Elsevier.

August...

Finland upped the stakes in financial transparency, [publishing all](#) its academic publishing agreements for 2017:

Notably, these price data releases have been triggered by the initial freedom of information (FOI) requests and a 2014 court appeal by Finnish open science advocates, coordinated by Open Science work group of the Open Knowledge Finland.

California [passed a bill](#) that would require all research funded by the state be free to read within a year of publication.

[Serbia](#) released a national open access policy.

September...





Plan S – “Making full and immediate Open Access a reality” – was launched:

After 1 January 2020 scientific publications on the results from research funded by public grants provided by national and European research councils and funding bodies, must be published in compliant Open Access Journals or on compliant Open Access Platforms.

The Plan’s 10 **principles** are wide-ranging and powerful, including calling for sanctions. Hybrid publication – paid-for access to a paper in a subscription journal – “is not compliant”, although details are still needed about how this will be interpreted and acted on. By the end of the year, a dozen national funders in Europe had signed up, as well as 3 charitable foundations (Wellcome Trust, the Gates Foundation, and the Swedish Foundation for Humanities and Social Sciences). Some other funders indicated support, but with some divergence.

Plan S **set off debate** about whether where to publish is an academic freedom issue. Swiss analysts **recommended** shedding stocks in Elsevier’s company in the wake of the Plan S announcement. Lenny Teytelman **wrote** that the high profit margins for academic publishing are likely to drop, but not crash.

Helsinki University launched its **own open access press**, for monographs and journals. **In Belgium**, a law was passed to give that country’s researchers the right to post their articles in repositories after a maximum of 6 to 12 months after publication (“green open access”).



Google released **Google Dataset Search** – and **Paywall**, the movie, was released.

October...

When funders mandate open access, compliance varies dramatically, according to [an analysis](#) by Vincent Larivière and Cassidy Sugimoto. For 12 funders, it went from around 90% down to only 23%.

With their 2020 target fast approaching, the Dutch universities [announced](#) that half of all research by academics in the Netherlands is now open.

Publishers Elsevier and the American Chemical Society [sued](#) ResearchGate for copyright infringement. At year's end, [ResearchGate's website](#) reported over 15 million members.

November...

The Wellcome Trust [updated](#) their open access policy, to kick in from January 2020. The changes? No more embargo period for articles – full text has to be in PMC (PubMed Central) at the time of publication. They have to have a [CC-BY](#) license. And they won't pay author charges for hybrid journals. (The Wellcome Trust is one of funders signed up to Plan S, and this new policy follows the path already taken by the Gates Foundation.)



The University of California [joined](#) the Elsevier hard bargaining camp, announcing they were willing to opt right out of any deal for 2019. They want to “constrain the runaway costs of journal subscriptions” and make publishing open access more affordable. Their current deal with Elsevier? \$11 million for 1,500 journals. [[PDF](#)]

December...

Hungary [joined](#) the “No Elsevier” deal zone for 2019, and their national electronic information service

(EISZ) **declared** “The time of big deals is over”:

In case the current system remains unchanged, by 2020 the costs of subscriptions would be 10 times higher than the institutions paid in 2012.

The Max Planck Society’s subscription deal with Elsevier expired, and they announced they were not **renewing**. They were one of 26 institutions reaching that point in 2018, pushing the number of higher education and research institutions without Elsevier deals to over 200. (**The total**: 209 institutions, plus 3 regional libraries.)

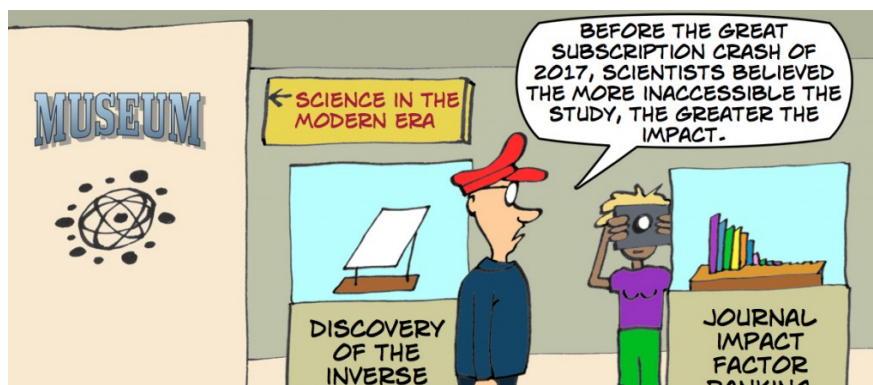
At the OA2020 meeting in Berlin, China’s science funders **announced** they, too, will go down the Plan S road.

And with that, a remarkable year in open access ended – and the countdown to the beginning of the end of the embargo seems to have begun.



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Click [here](#) for my other annual open access roundups:





[Update 18 January 2019] Added Hungary joining the “No Elsevier” zone to December.

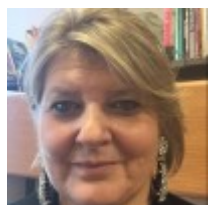
The cartoons are my own ([CC BY-NC-ND license](#)). (More cartoons at [Statistically Funny](#) and on [Tumblr](#).)

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Hilda Bastian



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