

# Funder open access platforms – a welcome innovation?



*Funding organisations commissioning their own open access publishing platforms is a relatively recent development in the OA environment, with the European Commission following the Wellcome Trust and the Gates Foundation in financing such an initiative. But in what ways, for better or worse, do these new platforms disrupt or complement the scholarly communications landscape? **Tony Ross-Hellauer, Birgit Schmidt and Bianca Kramer** examine the ethical, organisational, and economic strengths and weaknesses of funder OA platforms to scope the opportunities and threats they present in the transition to OA. While they may help to increase OA uptake, control costs, and lower the administrative burden on researchers, possible unintended consequences include conflicts of interest, difficulties of scale, or potential vendor lock-in.*

In the age of open access (OA), research funding organisations have taken a more active interest in academic publishing. They are increasingly mandating their beneficiaries to publish OA, supporting infrastructures and directly funding publishing (via article processing charges).

A step-change in this engagement is the recent phenomenon of OA publishing platforms commissioned by funding organisations. Examples include those of the Wellcome Trust and the Gates Foundation, as well as recently announced initiatives from public funders like the Irish Health Research Board and the European Commission. As the number of such platforms increases, it becomes critical to assess in which ways, for better or worse, this emergent phenomenon complements or disrupts the scholarly communication landscape.

Our recent [preprint](#) examines ethical, organisational, and economic strengths and weaknesses of such platforms, as well as usage and uptake to date, to scope the opportunities and threats presented by funder OA platforms in the ongoing transition to open access.

## How to accelerate OA implementation?

The relationship between research funding organisations and scholarly publishing seems to have entered a new, more active phase of engagement in the age of OA. This commitment brings an increasing need for funders to engage with the economics and politics of the provision of awareness-raising and support measures, publication funds, and repository infrastructures.

The barriers to OA are diverse, but top-line factors include [lack of funding for gold publications through article processing charges \(APCs\)](#), [perceptions of lower quality of OA journals](#), and [the complexities of embargo and licensing policies](#). Faced with high APC costs, and at the same time trying to foster change to a sustainable OA ecology, the idea of funder OA platforms has come to the fore. We can discern the following purposes funder OA platforms aim to serve: increase OA uptake; control costs of OA; lower administrative burden on researchers (including for post-grant publications); demonstrate commitment to fostering open practices; and increase funder branding of research.

## Current funder OA platforms

For the Wellcome Trust, one of the world's largest biomedical charitable foundations and traditionally at the forefront of debates around OA and data-sharing, their July 2016 announcement of a plan to launch an OA publishing platform represented a radical change in engagement in publishing. The platform, titled [Wellcome Open Research](#) (further indicated as WOR) and based on the F1000Research platform, was welcomed as such by OA advocates like arXiv founder Paul Ginsparg: "[This really is a potential game changer for a major funder to be taking control of the research output](#)". Robert Kiley explained Wellcome's motivation for the platform as stemming from a wish to increase speed, transparency, and reproducibility in scholarly communications, by offering a venue with no author-facing charges and relative cost-effectiveness for the funder, that would allow its researchers to publish all their research outputs (from articles and datasets to case reports, protocols, to null and negative results). All Wellcome researchers would be able to use the platform but could still publish wherever else they wished. The platform opened for submissions in October 2016, with the first group of articles published a month later.

Our [analysis](#) of the outputs from WOR's first year suggests that WOR cannot be regarded a full success yet. The overall uptake is arguably modest compared to the investment made by the Wellcome Trust. The 142 publications on WOR amount to a share of about 2% of all publications deriving from Wellcome Trust funding in that period (estimate based on yearly average number of publications indexed by Europe PMC in 2013-2016 – overall over 27,000 publications). Kiley points out that [WOR has been the fifth most popular publication venue for Wellcome-funded researchers during this first year of operation](#), after *Scientific Reports*, *PLoS ONE*, *Nature Communications* and *eLife*.

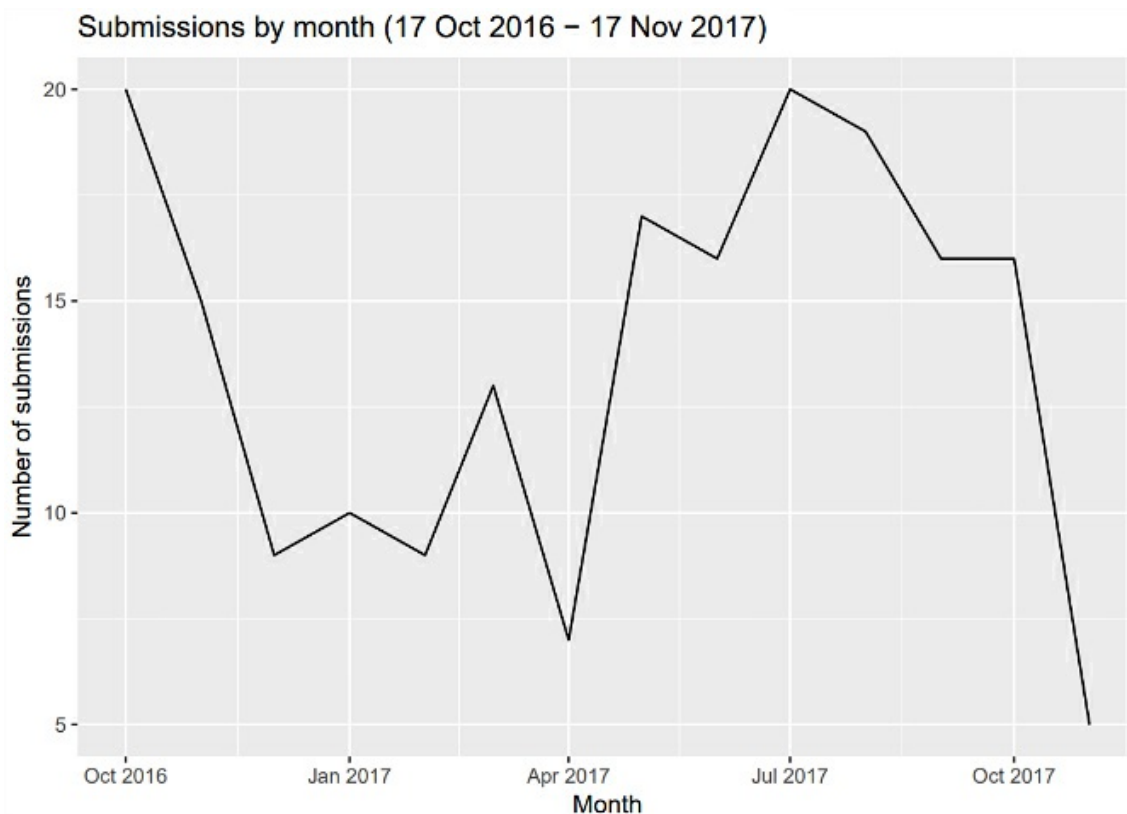


Figure 1: Submissions to Wellcome Open Research by month (17 Nov 2016 – 17 Nov 2017).

Inspired by the Wellcome example, in March 2017 the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, another major philanthropic funder of biomedical research, announced it would also launch a platform based on the F1000 platform. The first [Gates Open Research](#) articles published in November 2017. A growing list of other funders, research organisations, and institutions have since followed the example of Wellcome and Gates, with F1000-powered publishing platforms announced by the Health Research Board Ireland, the African Academy of Sciences, UCL Great Ormond Street Institute of Child Health, and the Montréal Neurological Institute and Hospital. These platforms remain at various stages of development at the time of writing.

In mid-2017 the European Commission (EC) announced its intention to also [provide a publishing platform for researchers funded via its framework programme Horizon 2020](#). The Commission's Information Note published in December 2017 made explicit that the Commission was following the example of Wellcome and Gates in order to raise the level of OA publications stemming from its funded research in a cost-effective manner. The note was also careful to emphasise the voluntary nature of the platform, which would be free to use for Horizon 2020 grantees. It foresaw the benefits of raising OA compliance rates, giving more flexibility to researchers, and demonstrating the EC's position as a leader in open science implementation, as well as enabling competition through transparency regarding costs.

As a public funder, the EC faces different constraints and considerations than private funders, including greater scrutiny and more regulations. Also, its budget and the range of subjects covered by its funding is much larger than the more targeted approach of the Wellcome Trust, the Gates Foundation, and Health Research Board, which are explicitly addressed to health/life sciences. Hence, for the EC to enter this space will be a huge step in legitimising such platforms. Overall, a maximum of €6.4 million will be allocated for the EC platform over a four-year period. The [Open Research Europe tender](#) was published by the EC on 31 March 2018.

## A review of roles and motivations

The primary stated intention of funders in providing their own publishing platforms is to make a larger proportion of research outputs resulting from their funding available in OA. In principle, funders can stimulate researchers to use existing OA publishing venues through a combination of mandates and the provision of financial support. The fact that an increasing number of funders decide to launch their own publishing platforms may have to do with costs, branding, and/or editorial control.

By commissioning publishing platforms themselves, funders exercise stronger control over the costs of OA publishing. If funders are able to negotiate a better APC-rate for a branded platform and can then convince researchers to choose their platform ahead of other publication venues with higher APCs, the resulting savings could be used to fund more research. Of course, costs for setting up and maintaining a bespoke publishing platform need to be taken into account as well, but by commissioning a platform themselves funders have more control over the price of the service. Another aspect to consider is a potentially lower administrative burden for researchers (or their institutions) and funders alike for publishing on a funder platform which would not involve the transfer of APCs.

Branding may be as straightforward as funders having the opportunity to display the output of their research in a central place, and use this to increase their visibility and reputation. But branding might also make it easier for a platform to build a reputation as a valuable publication venue to which authors will actually submit their publications. Branding can also provide trust in the technical standards and guarantees for longevity of the platform, and increase the visibility and, by extension, the reach of the research published on it. However, the mere fact that the name attached to a platform could influence its use and standing in the research community is also problematic. Will publications on the Wellcome or Gates platform be valued differently than publications on F1000Research itself, rather than being judged solely on their merits?

Funders may set their own criteria on scope, type of research output, and criteria for peer review, or decide to decouple the preprint functionality and the formal publishing functionality of a platform, so that authors could post their research output as preprints on the funder platform, and either pursue further publication on the same platform, or use other publication venues.

An even more direct form of funder control would arise should funders explicitly require research funded by them to be disseminated on the funder-specific publishing platform, either exclusively or in addition to publication elsewhere. So far, all funders involved have emphasised that their publishing platforms should be seen not as replacements but as complementary to other publication venues for their authors, so this form of control has not yet materialised. Clearly, though, there is potential for a shift in the balance between mandating OA, providing the platforms for such dissemination, and requiring authors to make use of these platforms.

## Issues and open questions

As with any top-down policy intervention, funder platforms bring concomitant concerns about unintended or negative consequences. In this case, we can discern the following areas for concern:

- *Conflict of interest*: the potential control of the funder over the publication process (in the various ways described above) brings to light the possible conflict of interest that may be perceived when funders provide the publishing platform for the research they finance.
- *Scale*: this approach may not be suitable for smaller funders, who may believe they do not have the name-brand recognition to carry such a platform, or be concerned about the costs of operation.
- *Lock-in*: using private-sector infrastructure to support such platforms also brings with it an all-too-familiar concern: how to avoid vendor lock-in?
- *Need to support wider OA initiatives*: to support true innovation, funders should also continue to support wider

initiatives in scholarly communications and seek to integrate them with their existing infrastructure on the basis of interoperability.

## Principles and recommendations

Assuming funders aim to create publishing platforms that remain innovative, responsive to the needs of scientific communities, avoid lock-in to particular providers, and enable research outputs to be assessed on their own terms rather than via proxies like journal brand, we can begin to discern some guiding principles for the future development of funder platforms. Many of these recommendations directly relate to the [Principles of Open Scholarly Infrastructures](#), which can serve as a touchstone guiding decisions and developments:

- *Listen to stakeholders and respect diversity*: uptake from researchers requires platforms to reflect researchers' present needs and expectations, and evolve in response to emergent user needs and attitudes in future. Future co-evolution, however, can still be assured through concrete measures such as stakeholder governance, regular stakeholder feedback and requirements-gathering, and active monitoring of use.
- *Maximise operational transparency and accountability*: given the potential for the appearance of conflicts of interest when a funder directly supports a platform for the dissemination of its research, it is imperative to build trust via openness and transparency of processes.
- *Embrace interoperability*: for maximum reusability, reproducibility, and transparency, such platforms should publish all research objects (including data, software, research protocols), with open standardised metadata to establish the links between them, and apply open licenses to maximise reuse by humans and machines.
- *Prefer open source*: whether from the private or public sector, it is crucial that OA funder platforms avoid becoming bound to specific organisations for technologies or workflows such that the cost of transferring to another platform/organisation becomes prohibitive.
- *Think bigger*: funders could think beyond established standards and technologies for open science publishing platforms, towards distributed platforms based on the [integration of public infrastructures](#), or to platforms which move beyond the article as the gold standard for research dissemination to one based on more iterative communication.

The time for open science to think big is now, with the introduction of large-scale initiatives like the EU's [European Open Science Cloud](#). There is plenty of money within the system, it need only be better directed to sustainably support open, interoperable infrastructure.

*This blog post is based on the authors' article, "[Are funder Open Access platforms a good idea?](#)", a preprint currently available at [PeerJ Preprints](#).*

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