

Academic publishing empires need to go

In response to the editorial “Open access and academic imperialism” by Burgman (2018) and signed by a large group of editors, we wish to express our disappointment with such a narrow and misleading interpretations of the recent attempts to make academic publishing more open, and what consequences this might have for the global conservation community. We highlight that the current guidelines of Plan S are open for comment until Feb 1st 2019 (see <https://www.coalition-s.org/feedback>). Instead of calling for a more nuanced approach - something that has been done for the past 20 years - we encourage everyone to actively participate in factoring in the nuances.

1 **Academic publishing empires need to go**

2 Response to editorial “Open access and academic imperialism” in Conservation Biology by Burgman

3 (2018)

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15 In response to the editorial “Open access and academic imperialism” by Burgman (2018) and signed by a
16 large group of editors, we wish to express our disappointment with such a narrow and misleading
17 interpretations of the recent attempts to make academic publishing more open, and what consequences
18 this might have for the global conservation community.

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20 What Burgman refers to as the “European initiative”, we assume is the Plan S open access initiative
21 (<https://www.coalition-s.org>). For readers not familiar with Plan S, it mandates that “from 2020, scientific
22 publications that result from research funded by public grants must be published in compliant Open
23 Access journals or platforms”. More specifically, “public grants” means grants from an international
24 consortium currently consisting of 13 national funders and three charitable foundations from 13
25 countries. The consortium is likely to expand in the future as for example major Chinese funders have
26 recently expressed support for Plan S (Schiermeier 2018). We encourage the reader to have a closer look
27 at the Plan S principles (<https://www.coalition-s.org/10-principles>) and the implementation plan ([https://](https://www.coalition-s.org/feedback)
28 www.coalition-s.org/feedback). Plan S is primarily about open access to scientific results (both articles
29 and their content through permissive licenses) produced with public funding and less about money. Since
30 Burgman concentrates on the issue of who pays and for what, we will do the same here. We want to
31 point out that i) the current “reader-pays” model including the hybrid option advocated by Burgman is
32 expensive and unfair, ii) Plan S partly addresses the author fee issue Burgman flags, and iii) Plan S is likely
33 to have many additional positive effects for authors coming from the Global South.

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35 The “author-pays” model described by Burgman is only one way of being compliant with Plan S
36 principles, which state no single preferred open access model. Nevertheless, as Burgman states,

37 implementation of Plan S will most likely “precipitate a long-term gradual shift toward author-pays
38 models”. If implemented with care, this change has the potential to be positive for the whole scientific
39 community. The current reader-pays model – and the hybrid model as part of it – is extremely expensive
40 (Van Noorden 2013; Tennant et al. 2016; Schönfelder 2018). As an example, in 2017 Finnish universities,
41 universities of applied sciences, research institutes and public libraries paid \$37.3 million for subscription
42 and other fees on scientific publishing (Lahti 2018) excluding costs for open access. The average yearly
43 increase in these fees has been ~10% in 2010-2017. At the same time, the hybrid model has become
44 increasingly popular (Laakso & Björk 2016; Piwowar et al. 2018). Researchers seem to have favored the
45 hybrid option because it ensures open access to their scientific work without giving up publishing in
46 traditional journals with high prestige and impact factors. This means that not only do we pay more for
47 access to journals, but also for open access publishing in the very same (hybrid) journals. This effect,
48 known as double-dipping, makes the hybrid model a gold mine for the publishers and wholly
49 unsustainable – and indeed unjustifiable – as far as public expenditure is concerned. Unfortunately, all
50 this is seldom visible for individual researchers who only see the author fees, and as all major publishers
51 routinely prevent publishing such information to protect their business interests. The cost information for
52 Finland (Lahti 2018) was made public only after a court order triggered by a Freedom of Information
53 request originating from the research community.

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55 The current academic publishing market lacks competition and is dominated by relatively few large
56 publishers, which means that author fees are mostly decided by the publishers. Wiley, the publisher of
57 Conservation Biology, currently charges \$3000 for a fully open access (OpenOnline) article in
58 Conservation Biology. This is a huge sum for researchers with limited funding, both in the Global South

59 but also elsewhere. How exactly this figure is constituted is a mystery to many, us included. The price
60 most likely has very little to do with the actual cost of academic publishing and in hybrid journals does
61 not even reflect journal's perceived impact (Schönfelder 2018). Burgman correctly points out, that it costs
62 money to publish scientific articles, but mostly we do not know how much. What we do know is that in
63 2017, Wiley reportedly made \$252 million in profit with a profit margin of 29.6% (Matthews 2018). It is
64 fair to be concerned over individual researchers' ability to cover the author fees in the Global South, but
65 this cannot be used as a justification for sustaining the current flow of research funding to shareholder
66 value. Plan S aims both to place caps on the author fees as well as to establish full transparency and
67 monitoring of open access publication costs and fees.

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69 Burgman concentrates particularly on the potentially negative consequences Plan S might have on
70 researchers in the Global South due to open access author fees. This is a real issue (Tennant et al. 2016),
71 which we do not want to downplay. A Plan S compliant journal or platform must provide automatic
72 author fee waivers for authors from low-income countries and discounts for authors from middle-income
73 countries. Given the anticipated "long-term gradual shift toward [Plan S compliant] author-pays models",
74 waiver programs are likely to become more widely available and consistent across journals. Much will
75 depend on the implementation details, of course, but the effects on authors from low and middle-income
76 countries should be manageable.

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78 Lofty as its ideals may be, we believe Plan S can in fact have very positive effects in the Global South and
79 the world over. Open access initiatives attempt to make scientific literature available for everyone
80 regardless of economics and geographies hence making science more inclusive (Tennant et al. 2016).

85 Burgman does not consider accessing research even in “top” journals as problematic for those without
86 subscription and presents options like reprints and emailing the authors as solutions to gaining access to
87 published knowledge. As we know, however, email addresses change, authors might not respond and
88 most publisher do not allow or at least prolong the archiving of some version of the article. Instead, Plan
89 S, and other open access initiatives, aim to create a world of science where everyone has equal access to
90 information. This ideal should not be discarded in fear of author fees. Instead, we need to vocally speak
91 for reasonable caps for author fees and waiver programs that create equity between scientists in
92 different economic conditions. Wiley has already demonstrated successful waiver programmes for
93 researchers from countries with limited funding for research. These mechanisms need to be
94 implemented broadly, taking into account the varying research conditions also in middle income
95 countries.

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97 In conclusion, we fear the approach advocated by Burgman will only bolster the current publishing
98 system where all researchers and national science funders, irrespective of geographies, are being
99 exploited by a few publishing empires. To us, Plan S appears as a much needed initiative with
100 transformative potential that could be highly beneficial and empowering for the global conservation
101 science community, and science at large. Plan S is not perfect and much remains to be done. We will
102 need to make sure that the resources currently used in the “reader-pays” system are transferred to
103 support the “author-pays” system and reduced to a more reasonable level. We will need to continue
104 demanding that fair and transparent waiver programs are in place and that author fees are kept
105 reasonable to allow scientific communication for all. Instead of sticking with the current publishing
106 system as Burgman suggests, we can already influence the transition towards a more open and fair

107 publishing system by choosing to publish and review in journals with fair and equitable open access
108 policies. We end by highlighting that the current guidelines of Plan S are open for comment until Feb 1st
109 2019 (see <https://www.coalition-s.org/feedback>). Instead of calling for a more nuanced approach –
110 something that has been done for the past 20 years – we encourage everyone to actively participate in
111 factoring in the nuances.

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