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Plan S and academic publishing empires : response to Burgman et al. 2018

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Academic publishing empires need to go

Response to editorial “Open access and academic imperialism” by Burgman (2018)

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 interpretation of the recent attempts to make academic literature more openly accessible and what consequences this might have for the global conservation community.

What Burgman refers to as the “European initiative”, we assume is the Plan S open access initiative (<https://www.coalition-s.org>). For readers not familiar with Plan S, it mandates that “from 2020, scientific publications that result from research funded by public grants must be published in compliant Open Access journals or platforms”. More specifically, “public grants” means grants from an international consortium currently consisting of 14 national funders and three charitable foundations from 13 countries. The consortium is likely to expand in the future as for example major Chinese funders have recently expressed support for Plan S (Schiermeier 2018). We encourage the reader to have a closer look at the Plan S principles (<https://www.coalition-s.org/10-principles>) and the implementation plan (<https://www.coalition-s.org/implementation>). Plan S is primarily about open access to scientific results (both articles and their content through permissive licenses) produced with public funding and less about money. However, much of the discussion around Plan S revolves around the costs of either getting published or accessing research results, both covered largely by public funds. We want to point out that i) the current “reader-pays” model including the hybrid option advocated by Burgman is expensive and unfair, ii) Plan S partly addresses the equity issue Burgman flags, and iii) at its best Plan S can act as a catalyst for a transformation towards a more equal and inclusive publication system, both for researchers coming from different geographical areas as well as financial and career-stage settings.

The “author-pays” model described by Burgman is only one way of being compliant with the Plan S principles, which state no single preferred open access model. Bosman and Kramer (2018) have identified nine possible

routes to Plan S compliance out of which four are based on the “author-pays” model. For example, authors can meet Plan S requirements by depositing the accepted author manuscript (with copyright retained and an open license) on publication at no charge into a subject or institutional repository. Nevertheless, as Burgman states, implementation of Plan S will most likely “precipitate a long-term gradual shift toward author-pays models”. If implemented with care, can also precipitate a more fundamental transformation in scientific publishing which is what we should really be striving for.

The current “reader-pays” model – and the hybrid model as part of it – is extremely expensive and unfair (Van Noorden 2013; Tennant et al. 2016; Schönfelder 2018). As an example, in 2017 a consortium of Finnish universities, universities of applied sciences, research institutes and public libraries paid \$37.3 million for subscription and other fees just to gain reading rights for academic publications (Lahti 2018). The average yearly increase in the subscription fees has been ~10% in 2010-2017 (Lahti 2018). The access to subscribed journals is limited to researchers affiliated with the institutional members of the consortium, who also pay the subscription fees. Consequently, we think that “subscription model” would be more accurate description than “reader-pays”, as it is most often institutional libraries, not the readers, who pay the subscription fees. Such fees are a considerable national investment that many countries e.g. in the Global South are not able to make.

The hybrid model has become increasingly popular (Laakso & Björk 2016; Piwowar et al. 2018) as researchers seem to favour the hybrid option because it enables open access to their publications without giving up publishing in traditional journals with high prestige and impact factors. This means that not only do we pay more for access to journals, but also for open access publishing in the very same (hybrid) journals. This effect, known as double-dipping, makes the hybrid model very lucrative for publishers and wholly unsustainable – and indeed unjustifiable – as far as public expenditure is concerned. Unfortunately, double-dipping is seldom visible for individual researchers unlike “author-pays” open access fees. All major publishers routinely prevent publishing cost (how much publishing costs to publishers) and price (how much authors and readers pay) information to protect their business interests. The information on how much is spent on journal subscriptions

in Finland (Lahti 2018) was made public only after a court order triggered by a Freedom of Information request originating from the research community.

Due to the centralisation of the academic publishing market during the past decades, the academic publishing market lacks competition and is dominated by relatively few large publishers, which means that author fees are mostly decided by the publishers. Wiley, the publisher of Conservation Biology, currently charges \$3000 for a fully open access (OpenOnline) article in Conservation Biology. This is a significantly large sum for researchers in all cases, but particularly for those working with limited funding both in the Global South but also elsewhere. How exactly this figure is constituted is a mystery to many, us included. The basic publication costs of an academic article have been estimated to be around 200-500 € (Brembs 2019). The price most likely has very little to do with the actual cost of academic publishing and in hybrid journals does not even reflect journal's perceived impact (i.e. prestige, van Noorden 2013; Schönfelder 2018). Burgman correctly points out, that it costs money to publish scientific articles, but this point would carry more weight if the publishers made the cost structure of publishing an article more transparent. What we do know is that in 2017, Wiley reportedly made \$252 million in profit with a profit margin of 29.6% (Matthews 2018). It is important to be concerned over individual researchers' ability to cover the author fees in the Global South and elsewhere, but this cannot be used as a justification for sustaining the current immense flow of research funding to shareholder value. Catalysts for a profound transformation are needed and we believe Plan S can facilitate such transformation though e.g. the following mechanisms:

- 1) By requiring more transparency in the author fees of OA journals, Plan S can substantially increase our understanding of how much we are paying and for what.
- 2) By capping open access author fees, Plan S can - in principle - regulate what is considered as an acceptable level of such fees and therefore limit the overall costs of academic publishing.
- 3) By enabling authors to retain copyright of their publication with no restrictions, Plan S can act as catalyst on a transformation where the authors, not the publishers, have the initiative in how and where to publish.

Burgman concentrates particularly on the potentially negative consequences Plan S might have on researchers in the Global South due to open access author fees. A Plan S compliant journal or platform must provide automatic author fee waivers for authors from low-income countries and discounts for authors from middle-income countries. Given the anticipated “long-term gradual shift toward [Plan S compliant] author-pays models”, waiver programs are likely to become more widely available and consistent across journals. However, we do acknowledge that this is a real issue (Tennant et al. 2016), requiring attention in the Global South and elsewhere, and that much will depend on the implementation details.

Burgman does not consider accessing research even in “top” journals as problematic for those without subscription and presents options like reprints and emailing the authors as solutions to gaining access to published knowledge. As we know, however, email addresses change, authors might not respond and most publishers do not allow or at least prolong the archiving of some version of the article. Instead, Plan S, and other open access initiatives, aim to create a world of science where everyone has equal access to information. This ideal should not be discarded lightly. Instead, we need to vocally speak for reasonable caps for author fees and waiver programs that create equity between scientists in different economic conditions and strive for a more profound change in how scientific publishing is done and how the results can be shared as widely as possible (see e.g. Stern & O’Shea 2019). We believe such a change is best served by authors retaining the copyright to their intellectual work, which would enable more flexibility in terms of where to publish as well as new opportunities in experimenting how the results of scientific research are equitably shared and re-used. Plan S is a means to an end, not the end itself.

We want to be perfectly clear that we do not think Plan S comes without risks. First and foremost, care needs to be taken so that the resources currently used in the “reader-pays” system are transferred to support the “author-pays” system and reduced to a more reasonable level as simply replacing an old empire with a new one will not do. We will also need to continue demanding that fair and transparent waiver programs are in place and that author fees are kept reasonable to allow scientific communication for all. Currently the proposed timeline for the implementation of Plan S is very ambitious to say the least, and it is unclear how the

implementation is going to be coordinated. Risks associated to both the schedule and coordination are therefore substantial. In early 2019, cOAlition S asked for and received stakeholder feedback on the planned implementation of Plan S. At the time of writing, this feedback is still being processed, but much of the future success of Plan S will depend on to what extent this feedback is actually considered.

In conclusion, we fear the approach advocated by Burgman will only bolster the current publishing system where all researchers and national science funders, irrespective of geographies, are being exploited by a few publishing empires. To us, Plan S appears as a much-needed initiative with transformative potential that could be highly beneficial and empowering for the global conservation science community, and science at large. Instead of sticking with the current publishing system as Burgman suggests, we can already influence the transition towards a more open and fair publishing system by choosing to publish and review in journals with fair and equitable open access policies. Furthermore, 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.

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