

The expansion of open access is being driven by commercialisation, where private benefit is adopting the mantle of public value



*Plan S is the latest initiative to propose that all publicly funded science should be available in open access formats from the day of first publication. However, **John Holmwood** argues it is important to recognise that open access is itself being promoted in the name of commercial interests, including new, for-profit disrupters but also the large publishing conglomerates capturing the production and distribution of open access platforms. Open access mandates risk excluding authors unable to pay article processing charges, and also pose a threat to the learned societies and not-for-profit publishers which have done much to support their epistemological communities, particularly in the humanities and social sciences.*

Open access is advocated as a means of securing research as a public good. However, its dominant logic is that of commercialisation. Notwithstanding the hostility toward large publishing conglomerates, other for-profit interests are circling with new threats to the scholarly research ecosystem.

Open access proceeds in starts and stops, promising a fundamental disruption of existing publishing models that never quite seems to happen. In the humanities and social sciences, things have settled around a “hybrid” where many journals combine articles made immediately freely available following payment of an article processing charge (APC) (“Gold OA”), with other articles available through subscription and freely available only in pre-published version and after an embargo period (“Green OA”).

These arrangements were mandated by Research Councils and [HEFCE for REF2021](#). Most universities have not separately provided funding for APCs for Gold OA, while the Research Councils’ block grant will end in 2019-20. A [UK Scholarly Communications Licence](#) has been promoted to abolish embargo periods, but universities have been slow to require it of their staff. The availability of material in university depositories had led some to predict that libraries would be able to unsubscribe from journals, but [a tipping point seemed distant](#).

Normal academic life resumed. Until, that is, last month when a new initiative – cOAlitionS of Science Europe – [announced Plan S](#). This proposed that all publicly funded science should be available in OA formats from the day of first publication and that publication could not be in hybrid journals. It also extends OA to monographs and sets a two-year period for compliance (September 2020). Robert-Jan Smits, the European Commission’s special envoy for open access, has declared that the “S” in Plan S, stands for “[science, speed, solution, shock](#)”. STM interests dominate, but among 11 national signatories so far, UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) has adopted it across all subject areas.

The proposal sets out “principles”, inviting the academic community and its publishers to find viable business models. The [HEFCE Monographs and Open Access project](#) (under Geoffrey Crossick) found no easily adoptable models and warned of the threat to the diverse ecosystem of long-form publishing (declaration of interest: I was ESRC-nominated representative on the project).

Many colleagues in humanities and social science have a [somewhat utopian view of OA](#). They believe that paywalls are an obstacle to the dissemination of knowledge as a public good and resent the inflated subscriptions and pricing policies of some multinational knowledge corporations, like Springer Nature, Elsevier, and SAGE. This resentment is largely a consequence of the [big deal on subscriptions](#), seen as a means of [price gouging markets](#). In Europe, this has given rise to the idea of an “[Elsevier no-deal zone](#)”, promoting OA.

According to the President of Science Europe, Marc Schiltz, “[monetising the access to new and existing research results is profoundly at odds with the ethos of science](#)”. Notwithstanding, it is important to recognise that OA is itself being promoted in the name of commercial interests. This includes new, for-profit disrupters, but also involves the big conglomerates entering to capture production and distribution of open access platforms (as, for example, in [Elsevier’s takeover of bepress](#)). Academic publishing – especially journals – may have been held hostage by large conglomerates, but the mode in which OA is being proposed does nothing to alter that. It merely shifts the focus of their operations.

The main target of OA policies from a public policy point of view in the UK is the commercialisation of research in line with the impact agenda. For example, the [Finch Report](#) (2012) argued for OA in order to make research readily available to small and medium enterprises and to facilitate commercial data mining. The copyright licences that are mandated include unrestricted commercial use and “mixing”. The aim is to shorten the time from “idea” to “income” in the creation of new commercial opportunities.

Ownership rights of STM academics are protected by Intellectual Property claims, rather than by author copyright. Their pious incantations against the idea of a paywall for research publications go alongside a claim to any commercial returns which can be realised from extending access. In fact, the idea of commercial benefit is so built-in to the process that Research England’s [consultation and survey](#) of the extension of OA to monographs is being conducted by a for-profit company, fullstopp GmbH, which sells its consulting services to [start-ups disrupting the market](#). Research England is, apparently, uncomprehending both of the conflict of interest this represents and the way in which it provides the consultancy a commercial advantage. This is something that would breach normal standards of research governance and integrity applied to academic research (have they [learned nothing from the Cambridge Analytica scandal?](#)).

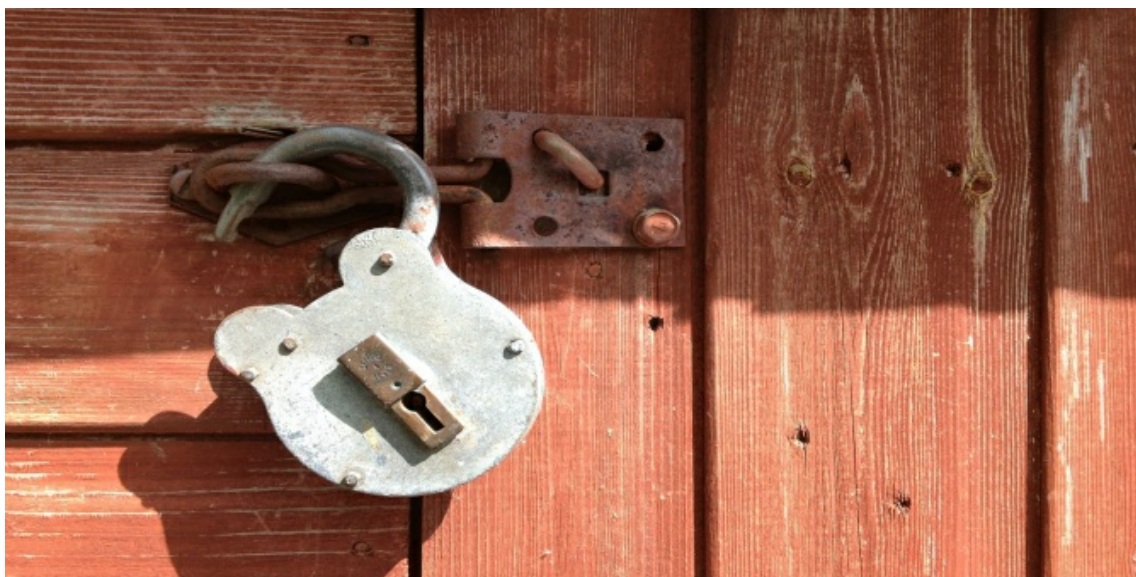


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The incantation that the “public” should have access to what they fund through their taxes is a little hollow in the context that none of the private beneficiaries of publicly funded research are required to repay any of the investment from which that benefit derives (in contrast to the student beneficiaries of higher education in England who are now required to pay full fees). The public good is defined in terms of the general benefit of economic growth, notwithstanding that neoliberal public policy (of which this version of OA is a part) has no commitment to the [inclusivity of that growth](#).

What of publications in which no commercial use resides, such as those in the humanities and social sciences, where there is usually no patentable research involved? And what of the legitimate business interest of existing publishers, many not-for-profit, where revenues have helped construct academic infrastructure (for example, activities associated with university presses and learned societies)? What is at issue is the relation between two academic roles, that of consumer and producer of research, with the former now coming to dominate over the latter. The wider public is not, in fact, a major consumer of OA research, [George Monbiot notwithstanding](#). OA may have benefits from the point of view of the consumption of knowledge, but it is less clear that it has equivalent benefits from the perspective of the production of knowledge and, more importantly, the ecology of that production (which includes publishers aligned with academic interests and our learned societies and associations).

First, there is the matter of APCs. How will they be funded? OA material will have global reach, but producers outside the currently-dominant centres of academic production are unlikely to have access to publish their research. We are moving from a system of *global open access to publish* to one of *global open access to read*, without paying attention to the new forms of exclusion that will entail for the production of knowledge.

There is likely to be a demand management process for APC funding, with a consequent tendency toward the reinforcement of “normal” science. Some colleagues – and early-career and recent graduating doctoral students in particular – will find it difficult to get funding through internal processes. Australian research, for example, has indicated how such peer review [disadvantages early-career researchers](#). Moreover, the funding will increasingly be directed toward university research strategies (more properly: revenue strategies), in which topics of research and vehicles for disseminating it are managerially directed. This replaces academic autonomy – an integral part of academic freedom – with managerial autonomy.

STM subjects (and some social sciences) tend to have a high degree of “epistemological consensus”, while the humanities and social sciences are more likely to have multiple and conflicting epistemological communities. These different communities are served by different journals and book series. The underlying constraint of print sets a limit on numbers of articles that can be published and, in consequence, there is a diversity of journal titles reflecting the diversity of disciplines and interdisciplinary areas. This diversity is served by editors and peer review processes associated with the different epistemological standards, producing an effective evaluation and validation of knowledge claims despite diversity.

In OA, there is no constraint on publication, which takes the form of a stream, where each platform maximises its revenue by maximising the number of papers it publishes. We understand “[predatory publishing](#)” in the context of print journals and their standards of peer review associated with selectivity. It is far from clear that epistemological diversity can be maintained in the new context. Plan S also proposes to cap APCs, putting further pressure on the peer review process, as platforms seek to reduce costs. One [response has been to suggest “submission charges”](#) in order that successful publications do not subsidise unsuccessful ones, a proposal which would further disadvantage early-career colleagues and those from less wealthy countries.

Some learned societies have participated in the leveraging of journal revenue in association with multinational publishers, thereby contributing to the problem for which OA is offered as a solution. However, it remains the case that the revenue they have generated is ploughed back into the infrastructure of disciplines and collegial association. The university system as a whole benefits from the activities of learned societies and their members, but individual universities are unwilling to support it financially. For example, most academics pay their professional subscriptions from their own pocket. Indeed, universities are increasingly competitive and brand-conscious. Work for a professional association is no longer directly aligned with the commercial interests of individual universities which seek exclusive benefit from the activities of their “employees”.

It seems evident that, finally, the tipping point may have been reached. There is a major threat to the revenues of learned societies and of not-for-profit publishers that have supported our activities. There is also a threat to major journal titles which have sustained the reputations of our subjects and have contributed to their international reach. OA can provide benefits, but we need to broaden the debate and articulate principles of collegiality and professional organisation that are integral to public value. At present, private benefit is adopting the mantle of public value and, if the advocates of commercialisation succeed, the loss will be that of the public in whose name it is taking place.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Impact Blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [comments policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

About the author

John Holmwood is Professor of Sociology at the University of Nottingham. He is a former President of the British Sociological Association (2012-2014) and was member of the Expert Reference Group for the HEFCE Report on Open Access and the Monograph (January 2015). He is co-founder of the Campaign for the Public University and co-founder and joint managing editor of *Discover Society* (a free online magazine of social research, commentary and policy analysis). His ORCID is [0000-0002-3440-3524](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3440-3524).