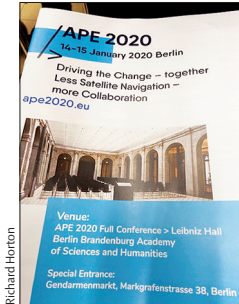




## Offline: Scientific publishing—trust and tribulations



Richard Horton

On Dec 18, 2019, a letter was sent to President Donald Trump from organisations that “represent the leading publishers and non-profit scientific societies in the United States”. The letter argued that a rumour of a proposed plan from the Office of Science and Technology Policy to mandate open access for US Government-funded research “would jeopardize the intellectual property of American organizations engaged in the creation of high-quality peer-reviewed journals and research articles and would potentially delay the publication of new research results”. It framed its message in purely US terms. Signatories wrote about their role “fostering the American leadership in science that drives our economy and global competitiveness”. They suggested that an open access mandate “would significantly harm the system of peer-reviewed scholarly communication that fuels America’s leadership in research and innovation”. They urged the president to oppose this proposal. Many who signed the letter were indeed US-based organisations (such as the American Medical Association and American College of Physicians). But others would probably consider their missions to go beyond “fostering...American leadership in science”. They would almost certainly claim they had a global remit, not one narrowly confined to advancing “American competitiveness”. The letter was signed, for example, by the *New England Journal of Medicine*, Wiley, Wolters Kluwer, and *The Lancet’s* publisher, Elsevier. At last week’s Academic Publishing in Europe annual meeting, held in Berlin, Professor Günter Ziegler (President of the Free University of Berlin) mocked the catastrophist language used by publishers in this letter. “There is no such thing as American science or American publishing”, he said. Science is a truly global enterprise. His reprimand showed how far apart the values of science and science publishing have drifted in recent years.



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Publishers are understandably nervous. Coalition S, a consortium of research funders that includes the Wellcome Trust, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and WHO, has called for the research they pay for to “be published in Open Access Journals, on Open Access Platforms, or made immediately available through Open Access Repositories without embargo”. Their policy will be implemented in 2021. Publishers have held decisive power in shaping the

dissemination of science for over 300 years. That power is now being challenged. It is an uncomfortable reset. But from the funder’s perspective it is entirely reasonable they have a voice in the way the science they support is reported. The result of this accelerating shift in power has been an escalating conflict between traditional scientific publishers and funding bodies. Yet, despite the anomaly of that ill-judged letter to President Trump, there were signs in Berlin that both sides were seeking an accommodation.

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Jean-Claude Burgelman is the Open Access Envoy for the European Commission, one of the leading parties advocating for Plan S. One might have expected his speech in Berlin to be a full-throated defence of Coalition S. He was more cautious. His principal goal was to ensure that “Europe has a leading edge in open science”. But not all European funders were supportive of Plan S. And researchers were still stubbornly in thrall to the journal Impact Factor, thereby slowing the adoption of open access publication. He identified two obstacles. First, the debate about open access had become “too ideological”. All parties displayed “strange obsessions”. Discussions sometimes seemed “completely irrational”. Second, the perspectives of funders and publishers were “too short-term”. Leadership was lacking. Disruption was necessary. The main challenge was transition. Instead of deadlock, publishers and funders needed to join forces, ditch ideologies, and restore trust. Elsevier has a new Chief Executive Officer, Kumsal Bayazit. In a speech to librarians last year, she acknowledged the “reputational challenges” faced by Elsevier. She agreed “that we have made missteps in the past.” And, speaking directly to Elsevier’s critics, she said, “I’m sorry for causing this frustration.” In Berlin, she issued a “call to action” to rebuild trust between publishers and the research community. Funders and publishers seemed in harmony—a moment of opportunity to seize. Still, the landscape of science is not static. Scientific publishers as we know them today remain a threatened species. They will have to do more to prove their added value to science and society. Unless they do so, they may not deserve to survive.

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