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Elsevier journal editors ‘may be asked to resign’ in open access row

Institutions pressure Elsevier to permit all Dutch papers to be freely available online by 2024

By Paul Jump

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Universities in the Netherlands are preparing to ask their researchers to resign from editorial positions with Elsevier journals amid deadlock over a new subscription deal with the publisher.

The universities have been in dispute with the Amsterdam-based publisher [since late last year](#) after they refused to renew their “big deal”, via which they get access to all of Elsevier’s subscription journals, unless it permitted, without significant price rises, 60 per cent of the country’s scientific output to be open access by 2019 and 100 per cent by 2024.

The universities’ previous big deal ran out at the end of last year, but the contract stipulated that it should roll over for one more year in the event of deadlock in order to allow time for further negotiation.

The Association of Universities in the Netherlands (VSNU) has surveyed Dutch editors-in-chief of Elsevier journals to assess their willingness to resign their positions in order to impose further pressure on the publisher. If this does not work, it will reportedly go on to ask Dutch researchers to stop reviewing for Elsevier journals, and may, as a last resort, ask them to stop publishing their papers in the publisher’s titles.

A [newsletter](#) produced last month by VSNU says Elsevier’s most recent proposal “is based on an increased number of open access publications, but comes with exponential price increases, requiring double payment from academia to both publish work and to read Elsevier articles”.

A spokesman for Elsevier said it was in “a constructive dialogue with the VSNU” and was “optimistic that we can find a solution that meets VSNU’s objectives and that supports the interests of Dutch research”.

“We have submitted a number of proposals to the VSNU that reflect our commitment to open

access: it has multiple open access options. Both parties have a very similar goal in mind: an agreement including open access that benefits Dutch science. So our dialogue is much more about how that goal can be achieved via a responsible and sustainable transition," he said.

“What we are hearing from Elsevier’s editors in the Netherlands is that their commitment to our high-quality journals remains high.”

Several other publishers, such as Springer, [Sage](#) and Wiley, have recently agreed new big deals that conform with the VSNU’s terms.

Universities have threatened to cancel big deals with Elsevier before – [including British universities in 2011](#) – but compromise agreements have always been reached. However, unusually, the Dutch negotiations are being led by university presidents, rather than less powerful figures at university libraries.

Reader's comments (2)

[Jeffrey Beall](#) | 06 Jul 2015 16:50PM

I think the publishers of predatory and low-quality journals are popping the champagne corks right now in response to this decision. It means they will get more business from researchers in the Netherlands.

The open-access movement seems like a collective fetish to topple the publisher Elsevier rather than a movement to provide open-access. The result will be a world dominated by meager and predatory publishers.

Be careful what you ask for; you might get it.

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[Stevan Harnad](#) | 07 Jul 2015 23:13PM

BOYCOTTING TO SUSTAIN BLOAT

<http://openaccess.eprints.org/index.php?/archives/1160-.html>

Sander Dekker, Netherlands’ State Secretary for the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science wants Open Access and has set some deadlines for how soon he wants it for Netherlands. That’s fine.

But the Netherlands' Sander Dekker, like the UK's Finch Committee, wants Gold Open Access.

That means Universities must pay Elsevier’s asking price for Gold OA.

Elsevier’s asking price is a price per article that will maintain Elsevier's current total net subscription revenue.

Elsevier’s current total net subscription revenue is enormously bloated — not only by huge profit margins (c. 40%) but by obsolete product and service costs forcibly co-bundled into the

price (print edition, online edition, access-provision, archiving).

The Association of Universities in the Netherlands (VSNU) has a consortial Big Deal subscription with Elsevier, and they have said they will continue to pay it if Netherlands authors can have Gold OA for their articles at no extra charge.

This is basically trying to transform a bloated subscription deal into a bloated Gold OA membership deal, rather like SCOAP3.

The reasons this transformation cannot work globally are many, but locally it can be made to work, for a while, by fiat, if VSNU collaborate and Elsevier agrees.

And on the surface it is not obvious why Elsevier would not agree, since it looks as if the deal would give Elsevier exactly what it wants: current revenue levels per Elsevier article will be maintained, but with the Netherlands paying its share not as subscriptions but as memberships, in exchange for Gold OA for Elsevier articles by Netherlands authors.

But what about the rest of the world? They continue paying subscriptions — not just to Elsevier, but to all other publishers. And VSNU, too, must continue paying subscriptions to all other publishers whose journals Netherlands users need.

Would this local Netherlands solution be stable, sustainable and scalable?

The answer is that it would be none of these -- and Elsevier knows that perfectly well. And that explains why they are not eager to make this local Gold membership deal with VSNU (even though Springer has been trying to encourage the consortial Gold membership model for its subscribers) -- and why VSNU is contemplating asking Elsevier editors at Netherlands institutions (and eventually all Elsevier authors in Netherlands) to boycott Elsevier unless Elsevier makes this transition to Gold

A Gold consortial membership model is unstable, unsustainable and unscalable because memberships, like subscriptions, are locally cancellable -- by an institution or a country -- and because there are other (competing) publishers in the world.

And membership would be unstable and unsustainable even if the scalability problem could be magically surmounted by a global “flip” in which all institutions on the planet and all publishers on the planet solemnly agree jointly to go from their current subscriptions to Gold OA memberships for all their journals with all their publishers at their current subscription price all on the same day.

The very next day the system would destabilize, with cash-strapped institutions cancelling their “memberships” to journals that their users needed to use but in which their authors published little, preferring instead to pay for publishing by the piece for the few articles they publish in them.

This would in turn destabilize the sustainability of yesterday’s subscription revenue streams via memberships, which would mean that membership fees would have to increase for the non-defecting institutions to sustain all publishers’ net revenue, which would in turn mean that institutions would be paying more for memberships than they had been paying for subscriptions.

And the Global Consortial Gold Membership Deal (which is in reality a global producer

oligopoly sustained by a global consumer consortium) would begin unravelling the moment it was “flipped.”

Trying instead to get there more gradually, institution by institution, publisher by publisher, journal by journal rather than via a miraculous global “flip” instead destabilizes the scalability of the Gold membership model rather than just its sustainability. Institutions as well as publishers would be participating in a multi-player prisoner's dilemma, with defection always being the optimal choice.

But this also is the relevant point to recall that there is another way to give and get OA, namely, Green OA self-archiving:

For institutions struggling with bloated, unaffordable journal subscription prices, the far more natural route is to reduce subscriptions to just their users' must-have journals and to mandate Green OA for their own publication output, rather than to lock themselves into increasingly unaffordable subscriptions in the form of membership fees in exchange for Gold OA for their own institutional publication output.

This, of course, is exactly why publishers are trying so hard to embargo Green OA: Not because the survival of refereed journals is at stake but in order to hold publication hostage to either current bloated subscriptions or bloated Gold OA fees that sustain the same net revenue either way they are paid.

That way the bloated asking price will never go down and the costs of the obsolete products and services can continue to be forcibly co-bundled into the asking price.

But publishers know perfectly well that they are fighting a battle that they will ultimately lose, and that all they are doing now is doing whatever they can to sustain their current revenue levels as long as possible, with the vague hope that piece-wise Gold OA fees might continue to sustain the bloat as unstable, unscalable and unsustainable consortial "memberships" could not.

So publishers continue conning the likes of Sander Dekker into believing that today's bloated Fool's Gold OA is the only way to have OA, and that Green OA would destroy journals altogether, so it must be embargoed.

And VSNU thinks it is fighting the good fight by threatening another embargo against Elsevier unless they agree to Fool's Gold consortial OA membership for the Netherlands.

A stable, scalable, sustainable solution, of course, is within reach, through a transition to affordable, unbloated Fair Gold induced by first universally mandating and providing Green OA (there is even an antidote for publishers' embargoes on Green OA) -- but neither Sander Dekker nor VSNU are grasping it.

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