

<https://www.scienceguide.nl/2018/07/elsevier-is-trying-to-co-opt-the-open-science-movement-and-we-shouldnt-let-them/>

Open Science Guide

“Elsevier is trying to co-opt the open science space, and we shouldn’t let them”

Interview of Sicco de Knecht

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"Elsevier has a history of being incredibly anti-open." Open science advocate and palaeontologist Jon Tennant criticises the European Commission's decision to involve Elsevier as their sole commercial contractor in the Open Science Monitor and is considering filing a formal complaint to the EU market authority. "You really have to wonder what the European Commission was thinking when they did this."

European Commissioner of Research and Innovation Carlos Moedas at the first meeting of the Open Science Policy Platform – Photo: European Union, 2016

Should one of the major publishing houses be the sole involved private party in monitoring open science in Europe? No, according to palaeontologist and Open Science advocate Jon

Tennant. In an [opinion piece in The Guardian](#) on June 29th Tennant criticized the European Commission for subcontracting of Elsevier in the so called Open Science Monitor. The latter means aims to provide data and insights, and gather relevant indicators for the development of open science in Europe.

[A decisive week for open science](#)

In response to Tennant’s publication Elsevier and the Lisbon Council – a think tank leading the consortium behind the Open Science Monitor – have responded. In a [response to Tennant Elsevier](#) asks “why would anyone seek to exclude commercial players like Elsevier from their vision of open science?” In a [press release addressed at science editor Ian Sample at the The Guardian](#) Paul Hofheinz, president and co-founder of the Lisbon Council, calls the

opinion piece “aggressive and misinformed”.

Both responses have led to a heated debate on social media between open science advocates on one side, and Elsevier and the Lisbon Council on the other. In two detailed blog posts Tennant has provided a point-by-point rebuttal of the stated arguments of both [Elsevier](#) and [Paul Hofheinz](#) whilst simultaneously filing a [formal complaint to the European Ombudsman](#). As of now the complaint has 867 co-signatories, and a response by the ombudsman is due in a little under four weeks.

That being the short history the question remains what is to happen next. As to delve deeper into the subject matter ScienceGuide sought out Jon Tennant to ask him a couple of questions.

So let's get right down to it. Why is Elsevier's involvement in the Open Science Monitor problematic in your opinion?

“Just to clarify, nobody is saying that Elsevier can't be involved in this evaluation. It's just that having them as the sole independent contractor working on this, coupled to the huge bias in the monitoring that they already have, that is a problem. If they wanted to come aboard together with someone from say Springer Nature, F1000 and a bunch of independent bibliometric experts that would be fine. It's having them in a sole position of power, which is inevitable if you only have one subcontractor, that is problematic.

Elsevier has a history of being incredibly anti-open. The open science movement basically started because Elsevier were destroying the research communication system. And now they are saying ‘hey, let us monitor that for you. Are you kidding? Frankly this situation is just insulting. You really have to wonder what the European Commission and the Lisbon Council were thinking when they did this.’”

So then what is the fundamental aspect of the complaint to the EU ombudsman?

“One of the fundamental complaints is that you have Elsevier, a publishing house, dictating which metrics are going to be used to evaluate open science. And using that to shape future policy. This is a process that is riddled with conflicts of interest and data biases and Elsevier is just not a reliable partner. What Elsevier is trying to do is to co-opt the open space.”

What do you mean by trying to co-opt the open space?

“If you look at either the practices or the principles that Elsevier enables or follows you'll see that they have nothing to do with the open science principles. They don't promote equality, transparency, fairness or rigour, justice or anything like this. They do the exact opposite. What Elsevier are doing is twisting the statistics in their favour and then calling it open science.

They do it now under the guides of openness. But still 90% of the articles they publish are paywalled. They are objectively the biggest barrier-based publisher that exists. Their overall model is to create monocultures of publishing that are exclusive and detrimental to research communities. So to call yourselves the biggest ally to open science is fairly insulting, incorrect and it highlights where they are moving in their business model.”

That business model would that be?

“They are in the middle of a huge structural reorganisation. If you look at their activities over the past ten years [Elsevier has acquired some 340 businesses](#), from [Mendeley](#) to [Plum Analytics](#), all related to the research workflow which they’ve stitched together. Underneath this are these corporate articles that function as a way to ‘lock in’ researchers as soon as they come in. Elsevier basically mines their data and then sells it back to them.”

So do you think keeping score of metrics and selling this information back to for example governments or research institutes is going to be the future business model of publishers like Elsevier?

“I think it already is, and one has to think about what that means for a second. You have a publisher that is selling publication metrics as evaluation materials to the same people who provided them the material to publish. It’s just such a huge cycle of conflicts of interest... It’s just obscene.

And just take the encryption of the Mendeley database as an example of what will happen. In the latest update they’ve encrypted their entire database, and everyone was like ‘are you actually kidding me?’ Now if people want to access their database, for data mining for example, they actually have to grant Elsevier access to all of your data, and only then you can pull it out yourselves. That is the definition of lock in.

Elsevier has stated that this was done to conform to the [GDPR](#) standards, but were unable to explain which article of the GDPR they are actually conforming to. Without there being any good reason for it they’ve basically encrypted 5 million users worth of data. You’d better provide some justification for it.”

Now back to the European Commission, they surely are a party that holds open science in high regard, why would they have involved Elsevier?

“Indeed the European Commission has had open science on their agenda for a while now, but the main objectives have always been for economic growth and innovation and development. If you look at the [statement of the president of the Lisbon Council](#) he seems to reaffirm those aims. He states that open science needs to be monitored for research and innovation. But open science can never really purely be about that.”

As of today the European Commission itself hasn’t issued a response to either your opinion piece or to Elsevier’s response but the Lisbon Council has. Why them?

“They are the leader of the consortium behind the Open Science Monitor issued by the European Commission. I checked the out the other day and they are a think tank with an enormous [lobbying arm](#), twice the size as [RELX](#) [parent company of Elsevier, red]. They lobby on similar issues as Elsevier.”

So what do you make of the overall tone of the Lisbon Council’s response?

“I don’t want to comment on it too much but I read it a few times and I just thought: this is inappropriate. This is not the sort of professional conduct you’d expect from an apparently well-respected body. And that’s why [I stated in my response](#) that I wasn’t going to respond to that as a matter of professional conduct. But take a step back. If you look at the way the president has responded, and Elsevier themselves have responded, there is nothing intellectual. There was nothing factual. That’s why I didn’t respond to the personal allegations. That I think is the only way you can combat this incredibly Trumpian way of

going about it. “

So what are you going to do next?

“Let me first say this has been a community action from the very beginning and everyone has been extremely supportive. We are currently considering our next options, one of which is to make the complaint to the European Ombudsman into a petition leading up to the response which is due in a couple of weeks.

Another option is to write a formal complaint about Elsevier’s domination of this function and the EU scholarly publishing market place to the European Securities and Markets Authority. This would potentially be very effective if you consider the history. In 2002 a merger between Elsevier and another scientific publisher, Hardcourt, led the UK office for fair trading to investigate their market position.

At the [time it was reported that](#) “if competition fails to improve or should additional significant information come to light, we may consider further action.” I think the time for further action is here.”