Dutch boycott of Elsevier – a game changer?

A long running dispute between Dutch universities and Elsevier has taken an interesting turn. Yesterday Koen Becking, chairman of the Executive Board of Tilburg University who has been negotiating with scientific publishers about an open access policy on behalf of Dutch universities with his colleague Gerard Meijer, announced a plan to start boycotting Elsevier.

As a first step in boycotting the publisher, the Association of Universities in the Netherlands (VSNU) has asked all scientists that are editor in chief of a journal published by Elsevier to give up their post. If this way of putting pressure on the publishers does not work, the next step would be to ask reviewers to stop working for Elsevier. After that, scientists could be asked to stop publishing in Elsevier journals.

The Netherlands has a clear position on Open Access. Sander Dekker, the State Secretary of Education has taken a strong position on Open Access, stating at the opening of the 2014 academic year in Leiden that 'Science is not a goal in itself. Just as art is only art once it is seen, knowledge only becomes knowledge once it is shared.'

Dekker has set two Open Access targets: 40% of scientific publications should be made available through Open Access by 2016, and 100% by 2024. The preferred route is through gold Open Access – where the work is 'born Open Access'. This means there is no cost for readers – and no subscriptions.

However Gerard Meijer, who handles the negotiations with Elsevier, says that the parties have not been able to come close to an agreement.

Why is this boycott different?

It is true that boycotts have had different levels of success. In 2001, the Public Library of Science started as a non-profit organization of scientists 'committed to making the world's scientific and medical literature freely accessible to both scientists and to the public'. In 2001 PLoS (as it was then) published an open letter asking signatories to pledge to boycott toll-access publishers unless they become open-access publishers. The links to that original pledge are no longer available. Over 30,000 people signed , but did not act on their pledge. In response, PLOS became an open access publisher themselves, launching *PLOS Biology* in October 2003.

In 2012 a Cambridge academic Tim Gowers started the Cost of Knowledge boycott of Elsevier which now has over 15,000 signatures of researchers agreeing not to write for, review for, or edit for Elsevier. In 2014 Gowers used a series of Freedom of Information requests to find out how much Elsevier is charging different universities for licence subscriptions. Usually this information is a tightly held secret, as individual universities pay considerably different

amounts for access to the same material.

The 2015 Dutch boycott is significant. Typically negotiations with publishers occur at an institutional level and with representatives from the university libraries. This makes sense as libraries have long standing relationships with publishers and understand the minutiae of the licencing processes . However the Dutch negotiations have been led by the Vice Chancellors of the universities. It is a country-wide negotiation at the highest level. And Vice Chancellors have the ability to request behaviour change of their research communities.

This boycott has the potential to be a significant game changer in the relationship between the research community and the world's largest academic publisher. The remainder of this blog looks at some of the facts and figures relating to expenditure on Open Access in the UK. It underlines the importance of the Dutch position.

UK Open Access policies mean MORE publisher profit

There have also been difficulties in the UK in relation to negotiations over payment for Open Access. Elsevier has consistently resisted efforts by Jisc to negotiate an offsetting deal – where a publisher provides some sort of concession for the fact that universities in the UK are paying unprecedented amounts in Article Processing Charges on top of their subscriptions because of the RCUK open access policy.

Elsevier is the world's largest academic publisher. According to their Annual Report the 2014 STM revenue was £2,048 million, with an operating profit of £762 million. This is a profit margin of 37%. That means if we pay an Article Processing Charge of $3000 then $1,170 of that (taxpayers') money goes directly to the shareholders of Elsevier.

The numbers involved in this space are staggering. The Wellcome Trust stated in their report on 3 March 2015 The Reckoning: An Analysis of Wellcome Trust Open Access Spend 2013 – 14: 'The two traditional, subscription-based publishers (Elsevier and Wiley) represent some 40% of our total APC spend'.

And the RCUK has had similar results, as described in a *Times Higher Education* article on 16 April 2015 Publishers share £10m in APC payments: "Publishers Elsevier and Wiley have each received about £2 million in article processing charges from 55 institutions as a result of RCUK's open access policy".

Hybrid open access – more expensive and often not compliant

Another factor is the considerably higher cost of Article Processing Charges for making an individual article Open Access within an otherwise subscription journal (called 'hybrid' publishing) compared to the Article Processing Charges for articles in fully Open Access journals.

In The Reckoning: An Analysis of Wellcome Trust Open Access Spend 2013 – 14, the conclusion was that the average Article Processing Charge levied by hybrid journals is 64% higher than the average Article Processing Charge of a fully Open Access title. The March 2015 Review of the implementation of the RCUK Policy on Open Access concluded the Article Processing Charges for hybrid Open Access were 'significantly more expensive' than fully OA journals, 'despite the fact that hybrid journals still enjoyed a revenue stream through

subscriptions'.

Elsevier has [stated] that in 2013 they published 330,000 subscription articles and 6,000 author paid articles. There is no breakdown of how many of those 6,000 were in fully open access journals and how many were hybrid. However in 2014 Elsevier had 1600 journals offering their hybrid option, and 100 journals that were fully open access (6%). Note that the RCUK open access policy came into force in April 2013. It would be interesting to compare these figures with the 2014 ones, however I have been unable to find them.

While the higher cost for hybrid Article Processing Charges is in itself is an issue, there is a further problem. Articles in hybrid journals for which an Article Processing Charge has been paid are not always made available at all, or are available but not under the correct licence as required by the fund paying the fee. Here at Cambridge, the five most problematic publishers with whom we have paid more than 10 Article Processing Charges have a non compliance rate from 11-25%. With this group of publishers we are having to chase up between three and 31 articles per publisher. This takes considerable time and significantly adds to the cost of compliance with the RCUK and [COAF] policies.

According to the March 2015 [Review of the implementation of the RCUK Policy on Open Access], 'Elsevier stated that around 40% of the articles from RCUK funding that they had published gold were not under the CC-BY licence and are therefore not compliant with the policy' (p19).

We support our Dutch colleagues

In summary, the work happening in The Netherlands to break the stranglehold Elsevier have on the research community is important. We need to stand by and support our Dutch colleagues.

Published 3 July 2015
Written by Dr Danny Kingsley

Unlocking Research

University of Cambridge Office of Scholarly Communication

Cambridge University