Science is being corrupted by governments and publishers; the argument against Plan S

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Imagine walking into your favourite restaurant, and the owner walks up to you, his face full of worry.

What is the matter, my friend? You ask.

It is the government, he says, they have just changed the rules. I am not allowed to charge my customers any more. I can give them food, of course but it’s got to be free.

But that is madness! Why did they say that?

Oh, it is because they are subsidising the farmers. If they are paying for the food, they said, then we should not be allowed to charge for it. It’s all got to be free, from now on.

But, how will you pay your bills?

Oh, I don’t need to pay my staff anymore. The cooks will have to pay me, and that is how I will make ends meet.

While we were talking, the news had gotten out, and everybody began rushing into the restaurant. They had all heard about the free food, and they all liked the idea.

But now it has all being changed, by the stroke of a pen. If your favourite restaurant changes for the worse, what can you do about it? The cooks can start serving anything they want, because they are paying now, and that gives them the power. And if the bad cooks are rich, and buy all the best positions, so as to push out the decent cooks? You cannot do anything about it. And if they start poisoning the food? You cannot do anything about that, either. You cannot withhold your money, because your money is not important anymore.

And the owner cannot do anything, either. The cooks are now in control, quite simply, because they are the ones who are paying.

Oh yes, the owner could carefully check what his cooks are doing, and bring in other cooks to check. A sort of peer-review, if you like. But I doubt this would work. A review can only work when the reviewers are objective. But all the cooks are on the same side now, and it is not the customer’s side…

The only way to change things—or keep them as they used to be, and really ought to be—is through the government. Under this scenario, only the government can control things, by deciding which cooks are allowed to cook, and what type of food they are allowed to serve.

It seems inevitable that government will take over. After all, it was their idea in the first place, and it was a noble idea. They just wanted to give you free food, since they are subsidising the farmers. But like all welfare, there is a sting in the tail. In this case the sting is government control.

Of course, I can hear you saying, this is just a silly story, and could never happen in the real world. Hmmm…I am beginning to think it already has, at least in ‘scientific’ publishing, and at least in Europe.

From January 2020, Science Europe’s ‘Plan S’ comes into law, which decrees that certain European publicly funded scientists can only publish in Open Access journals. That is to say, they cannot use any journal that charges its readers, in the traditional way.

This apparently noble idea—that government-funded science should be free and freely available—is the brainchild of a Brussels Quango (Quango means ‘Quasi Autonomous Non-Governmental Organisation’. That is to say, an organisation that pretends to be independent, and free of government interference, but is actually funded and staffed by government (wholly or partly), and does what government wants it to…). Science Europe is an EU-funded body—one of its founders was the EU Commission—whose remit is to guide European research ‘in a world where scientific communities are less and less shaped by national borders’. As such, it has a political agenda, and this should be borne in mind.

At first sight, however, Plan S does appear to be a revolution. Whether it works, or whether it fails, that depends on who joins the new club. At the time of this writing, cOAlition S includes 16 funders from 13 countries: Norway, Sweden, France, the Netherlands, Austria, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Poland, Slovenia, Finland, the USA and the UK.

But what does Plan S mean to the potential author? It means that if you live and do your research in Europe, research that is funded by your university, or another taxpayer-funded source, you will only be able to publish in Open Access Journals, and you will have to pay them to publish your work! After a transitional period (of 2 years), you will not be allowed to submit to top scientific journals such as Science, Nature and Cell, or in JISAKOS or KSSTA, or the American Journal of Sports Medicine unless they are prepared to change their publishing model.

These journals already offer scientists the chance to make their research reports available online free-of-charge. This is called the hybrid-model. But the purists at Science Europe are rejecting this option, and doing so, I have to say, with rather high-handed language. The cited reason for Plan S, of course, is that publishers are making ‘huge profits’. But do we need to turn the world upside down, just to correct that?

Let us return to the real world, where customers still pay their restaurant, and the restaurant still pays its cooks, and if your restaurant tries to overcharge, you simply go and find another.

Because its customers are paying—that is you and you and you, remember—this gives you control. That is how the market works: it gives us the quality we want, and it keeps the system honest, and does it all through reputation.
he was forced to shut down his blog and website and remove all its content (https://journosdiary.com/2017/06/13/jeffrey-beall-scholarly-open-access/).

It was Beale who concluded, after an extensive analysis, that: ‘the only efficient model, the only way of ensuring that publishing does not become corrupt, is the “traditional publishing model”, where publishers provide an honest service to their readers in return for honest payment.

Publishers shoulder the risks and the costs of publishing, and they are allowed to choose what they publish, on the assumption that what they choose will pay them back (and give them a reasonable profit).

And if it does not pay them back (because nobody buys what they have chosen) then it is simply their fault, and they will have to judge better next time. Publishers do not quite trust authors, because most authors are rather in love with their work, and incapable to decide whether it is good, or bad or indifferent. But they do trust the experts, the reviewers and the opinion-formers and the consensus—all the people who know enough about what they are reading, to put their hand in their pocket and pay for it.

Traditionally, a customer pays for the publisher’s service, and customers can choose where they spend their money. Their collective choice determines what is ‘good’. That is to say, it is the ultimate judgement on quality. It is really a method of voting.

If you now tell publishers they cannot charge for their product—because all scientific publications have to be ‘Open Access’ (that is to say, available to all free of charge)—then you create a danger, for the people who know enough about what they are reading, to put their hand in their pocket and pay for it. There really is not any alternative.

If the author now has to pay, rather than the customer, then you have ‘vanity publishing’.

At the moment, we put our trust in independent peer review, our system of checking manuscripts before they are published. The system is so well established—and so trusted, it seems, that Fisher and Parisis (Fisher D and Parisis N, 2015. Social influence and peer review EMBO reports 16(12), 1588–1591) have claimed that it is simply ‘synonymous with quality, and hence with reputation’. Although peer review is not above criticism, it is competent enough to judge whether this article is good enough for this journal. But it cannot tell us whether this journal is good or bad.

‘Open Access’ may have been an attractive idea, at least a useful one for scientists, because it saves them time and money. But putting it bluntly, it has fed a monster, the predatory journal.

So, what went wrong? Quite simply, Open Access has coincided with another modern trend, and taken together, they have produced a corruption. There is now a relentless need to publish, to further a scientist’s career. But some work should not be published because it has nothing useful or interesting to say. Nevertheless, predatory journals will publish it without proper peer review. Submitting your work to such a journal is bribery. ‘Bribery’ might be an ugly word for what they were doing. But it is actually the correct word because ‘vanity publishing’ is a polite form of bribery.

But now that every scientist has to pay their publisher, how can you tell which ones are really bribing?

Putting it another way, Open Access publishers have a perverse incentive to publish, regardless of quality. All 10 senior editors of Nutrients, an Open Access journal, resigned last month because their publisher, the Multidisciplinary Digital Publishing Institute, had been pressuring them to accept substandard manuscripts.

Open Access publishers earn a single fee for each published article, regardless of how many people read it, so they need to publish as many articles as possible (https://www.sciencemag.org/news/2018/09/open-access-editors-resign-after-alleged-pressure-publish-mediocre-papers).

And this is where predatory publishers have seen their chance. They have been taking money for substandard work—but they are beginning to look like bona fide publishers, who now expect their cooks to pay. This explains the recent rapid growth of predatory journals: they have simply seized the opportunity!

If Plan S begins to dominate, both Open Access publishers and scientists run the risk of being pressured by politicians and governments. NRC (my country’s leading newspaper) reveals that—despite their professional code, which requires scientists to publish their results, whatever their implications—scientists who perform government research ‘are often being forced by contract to give up their independence and are being subjected to undesirable pressure’ (M Huygen et al. Government regulations limit the freedom of science 4 September 2018 in NRC).

That is what happens, when you meddle with a system that was tried-and-tested and working. Remember, knowledge is not free, and never has been. Somebody always has to pay for it to be dug out, and somebody has to pay for it to be disseminated, and this act of paying—what we call the ‘market’—remains the only reliable means we have to ensure the real quality of what is being offered.

Open Access is already providing camouflage for predatory publishers and their phony-journals, and their corruption-of-science. And Open Access is also risking government interference and control, That is to say, control by scientifically illiterate politicians. Indeed, it makes that control almost inevitable. In fact, Open Access only makes sense if you start as a believer in benign big-brother-government. But are we so naïve, we scientists, after the 20th century?

Plan S clearly has a political agenda. I am not a lawyer, but I suspect that telling a man that he can only speak in a certain place and in a certain way, is effectively the same as telling him he really cannot speak at all.

If common-sense prevails then it becomes a simple question for any scientist. Where do you want to publish your research? Because it is your research, whoever paid for it.

I do not know about you, but I know which sort of restaurant I do prefer to serve my dinner...

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