

Support the Guardian

Available for everyone funded by readers

International
edition

**Political
science**
Open access
scientific
publishing

🕒 This article is more than **2 years**
old

Elsevier are corrupting open science in Europe *Jon Tennant*

Fri 29 Jun 2018 16.00
BST



▲ Carlos Moedas, European Commissioner for Research, Innovation and Science, is a fan of open science. Can the big science publishers be trusted to help him? Photograph: Emmanuel Dunand/AFP/Getty Images

Open Science is all about making science work better so that it can address the world's challenges. It has been at the top of the EU's agenda for some time. The European Commission has the ambitious target of achieving Open Access to all scientific publications by 2020. The development of the [European Open Science Cloud](#) and [Open Science Policy Platform](#) indicate that Open Science has entered the mainstream, shifting the process and governance of scholarly communication.

Now, the European Commission have launched an [Open Science Monitor](#) to help provide data on the development of Open Science in Europe. To their credit, the Commission have been relatively transparent about [the methods and data sources](#) used for this and who is involved. They are also inviting [comments](#) to improve the indicators.

However, a cursory glance at the methodological note reveals something rather odd. The subcontractor for the monitor is Elsevier, the publisher and data analytics provider. Within scholarly communications,

Most viewed



Live UK Covid live: Northern Ireland extends lockdown until 1 April; Sturgeon hails evidence vaccinations are working



Rihanna angers Hindus with 'disrespectful' Ganesha pendant



Covid infections in England fall by two-thirds but spreading fastest among young



Cook, eat, gym, repeat... has left me in need of major repairs



Refugee, 18, blinded in acid attack says Met delay may have cost him sight

Elsevier has perhaps the single worst reputation. With profit margins around 37%, larger than Apple and big oil companies, Elsevier dominate the publishing landscape by selling research back to the same institutes that carried out the work.

It gets worse too. Throughout the methods, you can see that there is an overwhelming bias towards Elsevier products and services, such as Scopus, Mendeley, and Plum Analytics. These services provide metrics for researchers such as citation counts and social media shares, as well as data-sharing and networking platforms. There are now dozens of comments in the note pointing out the clear bias towards Elsevier and the overlooking of alternatives.

It is worth highlighting some of the key issues here that the Commission seems to have ignored in subcontracting to Elsevier.

First, Elsevier has a notorious history of campaigning against openness in order to protect its paywall-based business. In 2004, they submitted [evidence](#) to the UK House of Commons Science and Technology Select Committee on what they saw as the risks associated with Open Access such as threats to

scientific integrity and research quality. In 2007, they were [part of a PR campaign](#) that connected Open Access to government censorship while lobbying the US Congress. In the USA, Elsevier supported a range of anti-open bills, including the Research Works Act (RWA), for which they made [numerous financial contributions](#) to members of the House of Representatives . All of this has stifled the growth of public access to knowledge and slowed the advance of Open Science, benefiting nobody except Elsevier.

Second, many EU member states are currently turning against Elsevier due to its anti-open business practices, high and ever-increasing prices, and dangerously powerful size as a commercial publisher. Research institutes are typically prevented from disclosing details of their ‘big deal’ subscriptions with Elsevier, as this would place downward pressure on journal prices. This profoundly anti-competitive practice has created a dysfunctional scholarly publishing market, and a budget crisis for university libraries. We are seeing national boycotts of Elsevier and rejection of Elsevier journal bundles. Just recently, [Swedish](#) and [German](#) research institutes announced that they

were cancelling all Elsevier subscriptions due to concerns about sustainability, unfair pricing arrangements and a general lack of value.

If this wasn't bad enough, the conflict of interest of having an organisation that stands to benefit from the monitor by using its own services is so blindingly apparent that you have to wonder why Elsevier were subcontracted in the first place. How is it reasonable for a multi-billion dollar publishing corporation to not only produce metrics that evaluate publishing impact, but also to use them to monitor Open Science and help to define its [future direction](#)? Elsevier will be providing data through the monitor that will be used to help facilitate future policy making in the EU that it inevitably will benefit from. That's like having McDonald's monitor the eating habits of a nation and then using that to guide policy decisions.

Consider Elsevier's CiteScore metric, a measure of the apparent impact of journals that competes with the impact factor based on citation data from Scopus. An [independent analysis](#) showed that titles owned by Springer Nature, perhaps Elsevier's biggest competitor,

scored 40% lower and Elsevier titles 25% higher when using CiteScore rather than previous journal impact factors.

Bianca Kramer, a librarian at Utrecht University, [commented](#) that the monitor should “only include indicators that are themselves open, so data can be reused and results can be reproduced.” This is a fundamental part of [responsible metrics](#) and begs the question of why closed databases like Scopus feature so prominently.

With so many glaring issues, we should ask why the European Commission allowed this. It seems like a profoundly undemocratic practice to have a company with such an anti-open history now with such a powerful position in the future of Open Science in Europe. The risk here is that by using Elsevier services for such a crucial task, it creates a perverse incentive for researchers to use those services, and thus become dependent on them. This very real issue became apparent last week when Mendeley [encrypted its databases](#), making it more difficult for users to access even their own data. Researchers could become trapped in a relationship with Elsevier in which they are the service and

content providers, the product and the consumer.

It is a cruel irony that Elsevier are to be paid to monitor the very system that they have historically fought against. The European Commission should remove Elsevier as sub-contractor and look into better options such as an independent group with no conflicts of interest. It is time to stand up to these ruthless mega-corporations before they corrupt Open Science.

As 2021 unfolds ...

... and you're joining us from France, we have a small favour to ask. Through these turbulent and challenging times, millions rely on the Guardian for independent journalism that stands for truth and integrity. Readers chose to support us financially more than 1.5 million times in 2020, joining existing supporters in 180 countries.

For 2021, we commit to another year of high-impact reporting that can counter misinformation and offer an authoritative, trustworthy source of news for everyone. With no shareholders or billionaire owner, we set our own agenda and provide truth-seeking journalism that's free

from commercial and political influence. When it's never mattered more, we can investigate and challenge without fear or favour.

Unlike many others, we have maintained our choice: to keep Guardian journalism open for all readers, regardless of where they live or what they can afford to pay. We do this because we believe in information equality, where everyone deserves to read accurate news and thoughtful analysis. Greater numbers of people are staying well-informed on world events, and being inspired to take meaningful action.

In the last year alone, we offered readers a comprehensive, international perspective on critical events - from the Black Lives Matter protests, to the US presidential election, Brexit, and the ongoing pandemic. We enhanced our reputation for urgent, powerful reporting on the climate emergency, and made the decision to reject advertising from fossil fuel companies, divest from the oil and gas industries, and set a course to achieve net zero emissions by 2030.

If there were ever a time to join us, it is now. You can power Guardian journalism and help

sustain our future. **Support the Guardian from as little as €1 - it only takes a minute. If you can, please consider supporting us with a regular amount each month. Thank you.**

Support the Guardian →

Remind me in March



Political science

Our team of bloggers write about the politics of science and technology



Why is populism suddenly all the rage?

20 Nov 2018

It's time to burst the biomedical bubble in UK research
Richard Jones and James Wilsdon

12 Jul 2018



From diet pills to driverless cars: why we need to debate the politics of science and technology
James Wilsdon, Jack Stilgoe and Kieron Flanagan

3 Sep 2018 34

Has the tide turned towards responsible metrics in research?
James Wilsdon

10 Jul 2018



A no-deal Brexit will betray British science
Mike Galsworthy

28 Aug 2018 1369

Elsevier are corrupting open science in Europe
Jon Tennant

29 Jun 2018



Is UK science and innovation up for the climate challenge?
Alice Bell

16 Jul 2018

How can climate policy stay on top of a growing mountain of data?
Jan Minx

12 Jun 2018