

German researchers resign from Elsevier journals in push for nationwide open access

By **Gretchen Vogel** [www.sciencemag.org] Oct. 13, 2017 , 3:30 PM

Five leading German scientists have resigned from their editorial positions at journals published by Elsevier, the latest step in a battle over open-access and subscription policies between the Dutch publishing giant and a consortium of German libraries, universities, and research institutes.

The researchers want Elsevier to accept a new payment model that would make all papers authored by Germany-based researchers open access. The five are only the first of many ready to step down, warn leaders of the consortium, called Projekt DEAL.

Instead of having individual libraries pay subscriptions for individual journals, Projekt DEAL **wants to set up nationwide “publish and read” agreements** [www.sciencemag.org] with publishers. DEAL would pay publishers a lump sum to cover publication costs of papers authored by researchers in Germany. Then all such papers would be open access, and DEAL members would receive electronic access to all the publisher’s journals.

Negotiations with Elsevier began in 2016, but **stalled late last year** [www.sciencemag.org]. In August a spokesperson for Elsevier told ScienceInsider that the company fully supports open-access initiatives but that the proposed publish and read model isn’t realistic. Paying for German-authored articles to be open access doesn’t cover the cost for access to papers from the rest of the world, the spokesperson noted, adding that the company “is working diligently to find a mutually acceptable solution” with DEAL. Elsevier has not commented on the wave of resignations.

DEAL representatives say they won’t accept any changes to their proposed model. To increase pressure on the company, almost 200 DEAL member institutions have said they won’t renew their subscriptions to Elsevier journals. Elsevier **cut off online access for a few weeks** [science.sciencemag.org] in January to institutions whose subscriptions ran out at the end of 2016. But the company **restored**

access [www.sciencemag.org], it said, “while good-faith discussions about a nationwide contract carry on.” It isn’t clear whether that policy will extend to institutions whose subscriptions run out at the end of this year.

DEAL started negotiations with SpringerNature and Wiley earlier this year, and consortium leaders say those talks have been productive. DEAL has reached a basic agreement with both publishers and is working on the details, according to consortium leaders. In the meantime, subscriptions with both publishers have been extended until the end of 2018.

Kurt Mehlhorn, a computer scientist at the Max Planck Institute for Informatics in Saarbrücken, Germany, resigned Thursday as editor-in-chief of Computational Geometry Theory and Applications. He didn’t take the step lightly, and believes that resigning as editor is one of the few concrete things individual researchers can do to help pressure the publisher. “I was happy to serve as editor. It was a way to be of service to the field.”

Others have followed his lead. A Swiss member of the journal’s editorial board has also resigned in response to Mehlhorn’s announcement. Mehlhorn says he will decide on a case-by-case basis whether to continue to review papers for Elsevier journals.

Mehlhorn, who led the Max Planck Society’s negotiations with Elsevier in 2006, says scientists and publishers have “a symbiotic relationship, and the parties have to treat each other fairly. DEAL is making a fair offer. It’s up to Elsevier to make the next move.”

Four other German scientists announced their resignations yesterday as well. Wolfgang Marquardt, a systems engineer and head of the Forschungszentrum Jülich, served on the editorial boards of two Elsevier journals. Cell biologist Marino Zerial of the Max Planck Institute of Molecular Cell Biology and Genetics in Dresden, had been on Cell’s editorial board. Jörg Raisch is a computer engineer at the TU Berlin who was on the editorial board of Automatica, and materials engineer Anton Möslang of the Karlsruhe Institute of Technology had served on the board of Nuclear Materials and Energy.

Horst Hippler, president of the German Rectors’ Conference in Bonn and lead negotiator for DEAL, expects the number to grow. He says

the group plans weekly announcements of scientists who have joined the protest.