

### Publicly-funded research in the era of Big Deals Publishers and Data Surveillance

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#### Key Insights

**The products of publicly-funded research are largely in the hands of commercial publishers.**

The oligopolistic publishers have increased subscription fees and/or article-processing charges (APCs) at rates much higher than inflation, which has implications for information access, global justice of knowledge production, as well as preservation of scholarly records.

**Some products embedded in the research infrastructure are tracking and spying on research activities and the data are then re-packaged and sold.**

However, it is not transparent as to who are the customers, how these data are or will be used, and whether they are linked to individual researchers.

It has been reported that RELX, the parent company of Elsevier, has sold data to the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement to identify and locate persons targeted for deportation. Data surveillance has implications for academic freedom and research practices.

#### Why is this issue important?

Scholarly publications are the records of research and scholarship, documenting discoveries, innovations, and critical thoughts. They are the medium by which researchers communicate with each other, and they are often counted in the evaluation of research performance of individuals, institutions, and countries. In Ireland and in most other countries, the majority of scholarly publications are the products of publicly-funded research.

These publications are largely in the hands of commercial companies. The Big Deals publishers have grown to the extent that they can limit the development and growth of emerging and smaller publishers. The largest publishers tend to charge a higher per article fee than the smaller publishers (see Table 1).

At the same time, some are expanding their businesses to data analytics and products. It has been reported that some publishers and their products are tracking research activities including location, devices and data used (DFG 2021; Wood, 2015).

Publisher	Journals	Articles	% No-fee	\$/article
Largest: 600+	299	405,094	8%	\$2,070
Large: 150-599	989	212,389	22%	\$1,328
Medium: 60-149	2,980	204,847	55%	\$537
Small: 20-59	7,962	210,220	75%	\$204
Smallest: 0-19	2,968	28,706	82%	\$125

**Table 1** Average price per article (APC) of OA journals by publisher size (Source CC BY: Crawford, 2021)

However, researchers, university management, funding agencies, and libraries are ‘locked-in’ in the sense that they have little power in negotiating subscription fees and/or article-processing charges (APCs).

It is seemingly impossible to move to alternative platforms because publications and research metrics such as CiteScore and Journal Impact Factor (JIF) are crucial in research assessments.

The situation raises questions regarding transfer of publicly-funded research into private hands—not only that researchers and research institutions are not compensated for their products (i.e. publications), most often their affiliated university libraries must pay to provide access.

Meanwhile, data analytics are produced based on research activities, which are often sold right back to research institutions for monitoring and tracking research performance.

Moreover, data collection and tracking of research activities violate privacy and confidentiality and potentially academic freedom.

## Policy Recommendations

The predominance of the Big Deals publishers and locked-in situation, to a large extent, originates from the over-reliance on research metrics.

*Research assessment reform* will lead to less emphasis on the number of publications and citations and more diverse and inclusive evaluation methods. Consequently, governments (national and supranational), research institutions, and researchers will be less reliant on commercial data providers. In addition, research assessment reform has been proposed by [DORA](#), [CoARA](#), and others because of the abuses and misuses of research metrics and their negative consequences on research culture.

Reallocating resources to support smaller publishers (e.g. learned society, scholar-led, and library publishers) can limit the power and control by the Big Deals and data analytics companies.

*It should be mandatory that a percentage of the research/library budget is set aside to foster healthy competitions.*

Emerging, fringe and new publications are essential for countering conservatism and dogmatic approaches, but they require subscriptions to survive. Contributions to these publications should be recognised in research assessments.

Investment in public research infrastructure will lead to innovative approaches for documenting diverse types of scholarly outputs and contributions, from research data and archival materials to public engagement, exhibitions and performance.

*The development of public research infrastructure is pertinent to research-for-policy*, involving important considerations as to how the infrastructures can be interoperable, extendable and scaled to incorporate a research-for-policy interface.

Many commercial publishers require the transfer of copyright or the granting of exclusive licences to publish, meaning that while authors retain moral rights, the outputs/products will no longer be in the public domain and that the fruits of publicly-funded research findings are transferred to private hands.

***Changes in copyright law and rights retention can retain the products of publicly-funded research as public goods.***

A related issue is the preservation of scholarly records. Publishers have no obligations to store and preserve their publications, meaning that scholarly records can be out-of-print and/or disappear altogether when a publisher decides so or ceases to operate. A public research infrastructure, combined with changes in copyright law and/or rights retention, can ensure that all publications are deposited and preserved as public goods.



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