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Editorial

The open access tsunami hits France



For decades, the business model of scientific journals, run by scientific societies and brought out by a handful of publishers, was simplicity itself: readers and libraries paid their dues and all was for the best, or at least nearly.

Since the late 20th century, this “paterfamilias” model has suffered a number of earthquakes and tsunamis [1]. The first was the exponential increase in publication volume, not unrelated to the importance given by funders and research assessment bodies to the quantity (rather than quality) of published studies. The second was the soaring price of subscriptions, well above inflation. And the third was the advent of “open access”, as proclaimed by the 2002 Budapest Initiative (www.budapestopenaccessinitiative.org/read) of the Open Society Institute (now known as the Open Society Foundations) of Hungarian-American billionaire philanthropist George Soros: “An old tradition and a new technology have converged to make possible an unprecedented public good. The old tradition is the willingness of scientists and scholars to publish the fruits of their research in scholarly journals without payment, for the sake of inquiry and knowledge. The new technology is the Internet. The public good they make possible is the worldwide electronic distribution of the peer-reviewed journal literature and completely free and unrestricted access to it by all scientists, scholars, teachers, students, and other curious minds. Removing access barriers to this literature will accelerate research, enrich education, share the learning of the rich with the poor and the poor with the rich, make this literature as useful as it can be, and lay the foundation for uniting humanity in a common intellectual conversation and quest for knowledge . . . We invite governments, universities, libraries, journal editors, publishers, foundations, learned societies, professional associations, and individual scholars who share our vision to join us in the task of removing the barriers to open access and building a future in which research and education in every part of the world are that much more free to flourish” [1].

These successive shocks have created a conflict between publishing houses, defending their business, and funding bodies (governments and governmental structures) wishing to have publicly funded research published at the lowest possible cost – and into this skirmish sailed pirate websites such as Sci-Hub, that put tens of millions of articles online without charge [1]. In France, the challenge of steeply increasing prices for online scientific journals was met by a non-profit association, the “Consortium Universitaire de Publications Numériques”, better known as “COUPERIN” (no relation to the harpsichord composer of the same name. . .), set up

in the early 2000s. This consortium (www.couperin.org) is a partner of the French Bibliographic and Higher Education Agency’s user network association, and brings together more than 250 universities and research and health structures. In 2010, the setting up of the Scientific Digital Library (bibliothèque scientifique numérique) provided a boost to COUPERIN, which, like other European consortiums, had for several years been negotiating with the big scientific publishing houses. These negotiations are difficult and, over the last 10 years, 4 ended in failure and the university libraries did not renew their subscriptions [1,2].

Two recent measures will accelerate the process of open access in France. The “Digital Republic” law of October 7, 2016 [3] requires French researchers to ensure open access to any research receiving at least 50% public funding; Article L 533-4 specifies that “When a scientific article resulting from research at least half of the funding of which came from the State, local authorities or public establishments or subsidies from national funding agencies or the European Union is published in a journal with at least one edition per year, the author has the right, even if exclusivity has been granted to the publisher, to make the final version, accepted for publication, available free of charge in an open format, online, with the agreement of any co-authors, as soon as the publisher makes it available free of charge online, or else at the end of a certain period running from the date of first publication. This period shall be at most 6 months for publications in the fields of science, technique and medicine and 12 months in human and social sciences” [3]. With this law, France comes into line with the US, UK and EU. To stay in the race, private funders such as the health products industry or foundations such as Bill & Melinda Gates’ no longer have any choice: they must publish in open access or perish! The second measure was the announcement by the French Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation of its National Open Science Plan, at the annual conference of the Consortium of European Research Libraries, on March 4, 2018, 16 years after the Budapest Initiative [4]. With a budget of €5.4 m the first year and €3.4 m thereafter, the plan has 3 main lines: generalizing open access to publications, structuring and opening access to research data, and integrating a sustainable European and international dynamic [4].

The open access train has a full head of steam, and nothing can stop it now. This creative destruction means that researchers all have to plan, from the outset of their research, the kind of open access they are going to adopt: Green or Gold – while avoiding giving any succor to predatory journals [5].

Disclosure of interest

The authors declare that they have no competing interest.

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