

# Chinese state censorship of COVID-19 research represents a looming crisis for academic publishers

*Issues of censorship surrounding the publication of scholarly research in China have been prominent since a series of press reports and publisher statements revealed that works had been removed from circulation that were deemed sensitive by Chinese buyers. As **George Cooper** observes, evidence that Chinese authorities are conducting pre-publication vetting of COVID-19 related research, raises new challenges for publishers seeking to distribute open access research papers on this subject, as there is little ground for publishers to remove these papers from their platforms. As publisher commitments to openness collide with their obligations to operate within the legal frameworks of the countries they operate in, it is argued that COVID-19 presages an overdue discussion on the limits of openness in publishing.*

Earlier this month, the websites of Fudan University and the China University of Geosciences in Wuhan briefly revealed a system of [pre-publication vetting of COVID-19 research](#). If accurate, these regulations could have far-reaching consequences, both for research communities in China, and for the global scholarly communications industry. The university notices, now removed, revealed requirements for China-based researchers to seek approval from China's Ministry of Science and Technology before publishing research on the novel coronavirus, with a special emphasis on articles that pinpoint its origins. Publications will be vetted by government officials, who will assess [both their 'academic value' and whether the 'timing for publishing is right.'](#) raising the spectre of scholarly censorship that routinely shrouds research activities in China.

For now, China's restrictions on COVID-19 research apply only to domestic scholarship. But research in China on COVID-19 is published widely, often in high-impact, English-language journals. Given recent precedents, pre-publication restrictions could signal a shift in focus regarding the post-publication distribution of journal articles by non-Chinese scholarly publishers. In recent years, journal articles on topics such as persecution of the Uighur Muslim ethnic group in Xinjiang, civil unrest in Hong Kong, and the 'three Ts' – Tiananmen, Tibet and Taiwan – have come under intense scrutiny by Chinese state authorities. [Cambridge University Press](#), [Springer Nature](#), [Sage](#) and [Taylor & Francis](#), in 2017 and 2018, were forced to navigate the demands of the General Administration of Press and Publications, rendering the distribution of research containing sensitive keywords, such as 'Xinjiang' and 'Cultural Revolution', [illegal in China](#). These events led to accusations of censorship complicity, as some publishers took steps to remove or restrict access to sensitive articles on their Chinese-language platforms; whilst others had entire journals removed from circulation by Chinese research importers for refusing to ['bowdlerize'](#) their online collections.

As has been [reported elsewhere](#), China's state censors have already used keyword-based targeting to remove posts related to COVID-19 on WeChat, and other social media platforms, including the combinations 'unknown Wuhan pneumonia', 'Wuhan seafood market' and 'Sars variation.' If similar methods are used to target 'illegal' COVID-19 research, they will extend beyond the typical targets of state censorship. [All the main research publishers](#) are fast-tracking COVID-19 research for publication and distribution on a free-access basis. Unlike previous red-flag topics, [concentrated predominantly in Asia area studies and political science](#), the growing body of COVID-19 research cuts across disciplines in the behavioural and medical sciences. Few scientific outputs focus solely on 'non-sensitive' aspects of the pandemic, as illustrated by [recent medical studies](#) that necessarily pinpoint the origins of COVID-19 in Wuhan to give a full picture of its epidemiology.

These consequences should be explored and planned for now, before they become a stark reality. Restrictions on the publication and dissemination of research on the COVID-19 outbreak would risk significant financial penalties for publishers that resist, and severe reputational penalties for those that don't

Whilst COVID-19 research circulates freely, seemingly without restriction, this is not solely due to publishers' philanthropic efforts to serve scholarly communities tackling the global pandemic. Most COVID-19 research outputs are published fully Open Access under Creative Commons licenses. As a [document search in Scopus shows](#), of the 1,799 documents indexed (to-date) that feature the term 'COVID-19' in their title, abstract and/or text, 1,454 are Open Access. A significant subset of this research has been funded by bodies such as the Wellcome Trust, the Economic and Social Research Council, the European Commission, and the US's National Science Foundation, that have mandated full, unrestricted, global access to the published version of record. Of the authors listed against these articles, the largest number (577) are affiliated with Chinese research institutions, followed by the US (379) and the UK (223). Approximately 30% of authors would have been subject to the new pre-publication checks in China, had they published their research after the new regulations came into force.



The censorship demands that publishers faced in 2017 and 2018 concerned scholarship in the social sciences, in paywalled, subscription-access form. Many of the implicated publishers argued, rightly, that they were forced to find routes to comply with China's censorship demands, as they have no influence over the legal frameworks regarding the sale of publications, [or over the purchasing decisions of Chinese research importers](#). It remains to be seen whether Open Access articles will escape these restrictions, as they're disseminated freely and therefore not subject to laws, in China, restricting the sale of publications. But equally, state authorities such as the General Administration of Press and Publications could threaten publishers, as they have before, with a ban on the import of their entire output in China, unless suitable amendments are made to their Chinese-language platforms. An unexplored consequence of forcing publishers to comply with censorship demands in the case of Open Access research is that the less censorious route – refusing to make amendments to the content of journals, prompting importers to remove journals from circulation instead – would not be available. Publishers would be confronted with a binary choice: remove 'sensitive' Open Access articles from their Chinese platforms, or risk huge losses of revenues and access for their entire published output.

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These consequences should be explored and planned for now, before they become a stark reality. Restrictions on the publication and dissemination of research on the COVID-19 outbreak would risk significant financial penalties for publishers that resist, and severe reputational penalties for those that don't. They would represent an apparent conflict between the academic interests of 'openness' and transparency that publishers aspire towards (and are in some cases mandated to fulfil), whilst operating in increasingly 'closed' legal frameworks regarding research dissemination. If publishers are again faced with the [99% vs. 1% dilemma](#) by government agencies in China, a response should be coordinated across the industry, via trade bodies such as the STM Association, the Association of University Presses, the International Publishers' Association, and the Committee on Publication Ethics.

The difficulties inherent in balancing principles of Open Access with the reality of China's legal framework are shared across the scholarly communications industry. As is a shared commitment to the rapid, open dissemination of peer-reviewed research on COVID-19. These shared challenges and objectives could be an organising principle for a set of industry standards regarding research censorship, ensuring that all amendments to journal platforms are clear and transparent – as is already the case for retractions, errata and corrigenda. If full, unrestricted, global Open Access is not possible, full disclosure and transparency, where obstacles exist, allows for a better-informed debate on the limits of 'openness', which ought to continue beyond the current crisis. The origins of COVID-19 will not be the last 'sensitive' research topic that faces the sorts of restrictions that have been announced.

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*Note: George Cooper is an employee of the academic publisher, Taylor & Francis. This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of Taylor & Francis, the LSE Impact Blog, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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