


Rather than simply moving from “paying to read” to “paying to publish”, it’s time for a European Open Access Platform

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*Open access is here to stay. Massive support from academic institutions and research funders makes it the likeliest future scenario for scholarly publications, leaving only the question of how the transition is made. **Benedikt Fecher, Sascha Friesike, Isabella Peters and Gert G. Wagner** argue that current policy efforts do not go far enough. Scholarly publishing in a digital age would benefit if European research infrastructure providers pooled their collective efforts into a public publication infrastructure. This post makes the case for a European Open Access Platform.*



A version of this post is available as a [Google Doc](#). This is intended to be a living document and so the authors invite you to contribute to this endeavour by making your own comments and suggestions. Thanks!

UPDATE: This post was updated on 4 May 2017, based on comments added to the [Google Doc](#) or sent by email. The authors thank Alberto Corsin Jimenez, Andrew Dunning, Elizabeth Yates, David Nicols, Douglas Carnall, David Mellor, Ilaria Fava, Marta Teperek, Peter Suber, Rogier van Reekum, Stephen Eglon, and Tanja Milotic for their comments, which greatly improved the post.

Many national initiatives have been launched to establish open access as the default way of publishing scholarly articles. In Europe, the key strategy to achieve this has been offsetting agreements and [big deals with commercial publishers to adapt their business models to open access](#).

In essence, this strategy intends to transform the traditional publishing model—in which libraries pay for journal subscriptions—to models whereby researchers and their institutions pay for the publication of their results. One could say that instead of “paying to read” academia now heads for a solution in which it pays to be published. The economic argument for this transition is offered by the Max Planck Digital Library, which shows that [moving to “paying to be published” could be cost-effective](#).

Disruption of the journal-based business model?

As much as a fundamental change in scholarly publishing is desperately longed for by the academic community, the current directive might not be exactly what was hoped for. Instead, the large-scale support for gold open access (paying to be published) comes with severe adverse effects.

- Firstly, this strategy reproduces **the dependence of science and humanities on commercial publishers**. Academia has long suffered from the oligopolistic market structure in scholarly publishing, where a handful of dominant publishers and their questionable pricing policies have led to severe [financial strains on the budgets of public libraries](#). This dependency is intensified by arrangements between publishers and learned societies, many of which receive significant royalties from publishers. The current strategy will simply relocate the costs from libraries to research institutions and funding agencies while the market power remains with the same commercial publishers. The DEAL negotiations, in which [German research organisations have repeatedly failed to come to an acceptable agreement with big commercial publishers](#), illustrate the limited negotiating power of the academic players. Sustaining this imbalance will not lead to an efficient and fair market for scientific outputs
- Secondly, the large-scale gold open access strategy **reproduces the dependence on an outdated publishing format: the academic article**. There is an elephant in the room: scholars publish far too many articles and [only a fraction of these have academic impact, let alone economic, political, or societal impact](#).

Current endeavours offer virtually no effective incentive to cut down on articles and focus more on valuable alternative scientific products, such as data, software, science transfer services, and — especially in the humanities — editions and translations of primary sources. Moreover, if commercial publishers are paid for each article published, they become incentivised to further increase their number of publications. Instead of capitalising on the potential of multimediality and hypertext to improve knowledge dissemination and acquisition, we will likely still work with a highly inflexible format, the article PDF. Who assumes we still need the look and feel of paper?

In summary, the hoped-for “[disruption of the journal-based business model](#)” has, in fact, been a predictable disappointment, unable to seize the unique opportunity to reclaim control of the management and distribution of academic content. The political efforts are well-meaning but will inevitably [perpetuate an outdated, costly, and thus ineffective and inefficient distribution system](#).

An innovate public open access platform

One idea to [recently gain momentum](#)—which would at least be a viable supplement to the current Open Access strategy—is large-scale investment by funders and policymakers in an innovative public information infrastructure that meets the challenges of an increasingly digitised research environment (similar to the [Open Library of Humanities](#)). One way to realise this would be a **European Open Access Platform**. The “Europe” of the name stands exclusively for the funding sources and, of course, not the scope of researchers and communities using it.

Such a platform could be built on a “diamond open access” model, in which individual journals are [layered on top of a system of public repositories](#) (see Figure 1), while remaining under the control of research communities (including the peer review process; community layer) similar to most current journals. An author can assign his article to one of the overlay journals when he uploads it as a preprint to the green repository (product layer). From there, the article follows the traditional publishing path from peer review to publication (journal layer). The journals would then essentially exist as a list of links to the revised articles (and could later even be generated on the fly by convention of topics and metadata).

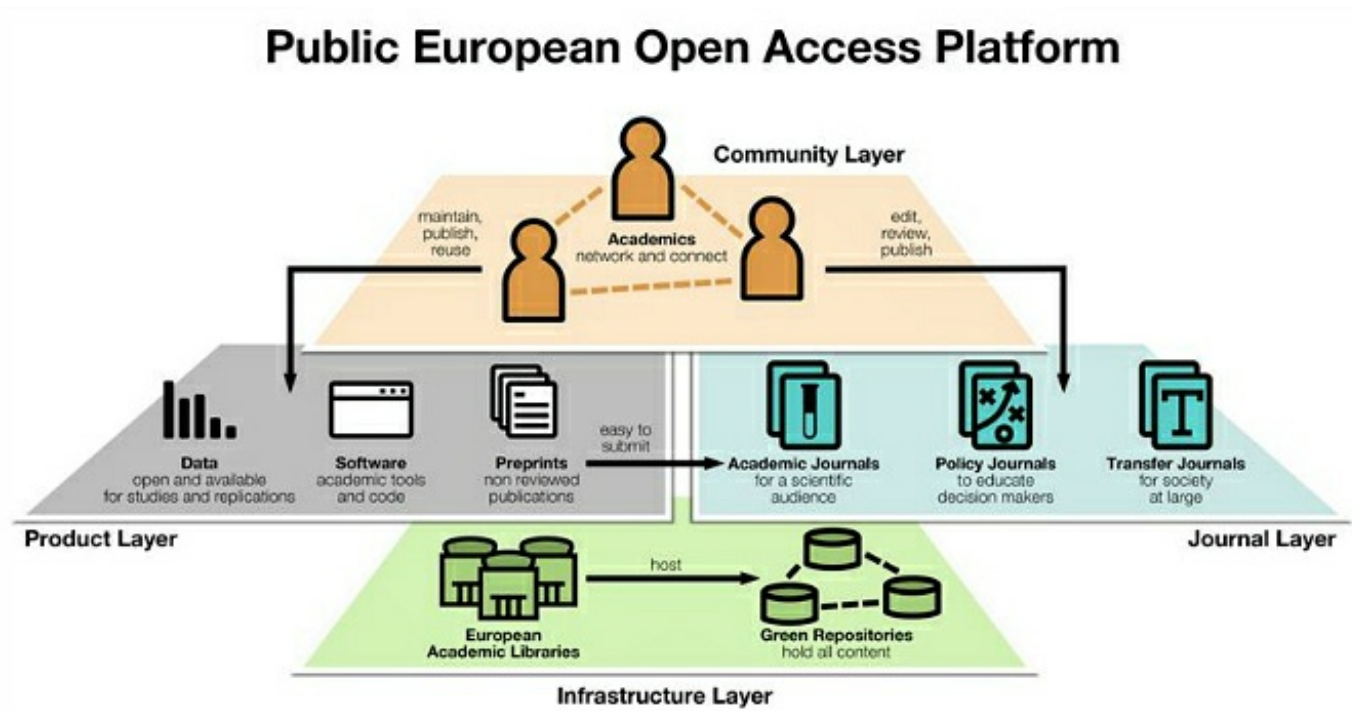


Figure 1: European Open Access Platform using a diamond open access model

Besides disciplinary journals, the platform could host transdisciplinary and policy-oriented journals, to bring scientific results closer to policymakers and transfer outlets, bridging the widening gap between science and society. Here it is worthwhile to combine traditional pre-publication review mechanisms and bibliometric impact scores (e.g. Web of Science) with modern review mechanisms (e.g. open peer review) and new, qualitative community metrics.

This model would not only reduce the submission effort of researchers, it would also minimise the “[cost of knowledge](#)” by cutting out redundant commercial publishers. Diamond open access addresses both the cost and journal quality concerns.

The European Open Access Platform would allow academia to free itself from its self-induced dependency on commercial publishers and push new publication formats and scientific products, for example data and software (product layer). [Well-designed metrics could help measure the academic and, even more, the societal, economic and political impact of academic content](#) (e.g. *who* shares *what* in *which* outlet). This could also be an effective means to reduce the number of articles in favour of alternative scientific products.

More than a collection of journals, the European Open Access Platform could be the central forum for relevant scientific output and a place for researchers to meet and connect. It could be a hub to share any type of research outcome, organise evaluation processes and to connect beyond disciplinary boundaries (community layer).

The good news

To end on a high note, we can offer some good news. Almost everything academia needs to make the European Open Access Platform happen is already in place:

- **Funders and policymakers** could fund the development of the infrastructure (as they already do), e.g. through public-private partnerships. Furthermore they could offer editorial boards a smooth transition from commercial publishers to the public platform, with additional services
- **Research libraries** could host the green repository and manage the technical publication process (as they already do on a small scale)
- **Learned societies** could manage individual journals (as some already do) that are layered on top of the platform and conduct quality checks. Furthermore they could develop quality standards for repositories that are part of the infrastructure layer in close collaboration with existing services that apply quality and standard compliance criteria (e.g. OpenDOAR). Other societies could finance journals as long as they fulfil certain quality standards
- **Professional associations** of scientists like the German Economic Association (VfS) could move their journals (the “brand names”) to the European Open Access Platform
- **Key researchers** in particular fields could engage as editors for the academic journals (as they already do for commercial journals). This is a key point since the success of many journals depends heavily on the renown of the editorial boards and the “brand names” of the journals
- **Thought leaders** could engage as editors for the new transfer and policy journals.

The European publication platform could also offer the [functionalities traditionally provided by journals](#). It allows for:

- **Registration** of and provision of timestamps for scientific results via the repositories of the infrastructure layer
- **Archiving** scientific articles and providing long-term access to the full scholarly record ([metadata, identifier, and full text](#)) via the repositories of the infrastructure layer
- **Certification** and assessment of research quality via peer review of the community layer
- **Dissemination** of research results via the journal layer.

What is more, via the product layer the platform provides similar functionalities for other types of research products, such as software, data, and preprints. As such it is an expansion of the traditional journal-article-paradigm which acknowledges the current changes in scholarly communication and scientific practice. Also, the platform may adopt further journal functionalities (such as [filtration](#) or [retrieval](#)) that would even strengthen its position and increase its value for the research community.

All of that would be possible for a fraction of the money that is currently spent on licensing agreements and that is planned to be spent to smooth the transition to open access.

All it needs to start is determined action and investment by science policymakers. It's about time that academia took back control of its key product: knowledge.

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