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Open Access Publishing Negotiations in Europe

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This observation was written by Kimberly Silk.

At a glance:

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For several years, higher education institutions around the globe have struggled to address the unsustainable scholarly publishing model. As publisher pricing for journal subscriptions continues to rise, academic library budgets stagnate or are stretched to the point where difficult choices must be made as to which scholarly journals to drop, and which to keep. Often, resources to support the STEM disciplines are prioritized over those for Humanities and Social Sciences, due to the fact that STEM disciplines historically attract more funding and higher student enrolment. Across all disciplines, university libraries

are under a great deal of pressure from faculty to maintain the scholarly collections that are crucial for research. While consortial purchasing efforts have helped address escalating subscription costs in the short term, more sustainable approaches are required for the long term.

In Europe, where publisher negotiations are often done at the national rather than the institutional level, universities are pushing for scholarly journals to become open access, in part due to the E.U.'s mandate to make all scientific articles freely available by 2020 (European Commission 2017). Institutions are putting significant pressure on publishers to agree to nationwide licensing agreements, on threat of exiting the license altogether. In July 2017, four major Berlin institutions announced they would not renew their licenses with Elsevier and allowed the license to lapse at the end of 2017 (Mehta 2018). Germany's Project Deal consortia has re-entered negotiations with Elsevier, after discussions broke down in December. In February, negotiations between Springer Nature and France's Couperin Consortium broke down, and researchers expect to lose access to those journals soon (Matthews 2018). In May, a consortia of 85 higher education and research institutions in Sweden announced that it would not renew its agreement with Elsevier which is due to expire in June 2018 (Havergal 2018). Interestingly, despite warnings from the publishers that access would be cut off, in many cases, researchers continue to have access to the scholarly articles.

These negotiations with publishers are at an impasse primarily due to publishers refusing to budge on Open Access, since they believe their article processing charge (APC) model – where authors (or their institutions, on their behalf) pay a fee to make their article Open Access – is a reasonable solution. The institutions disagree, citing that charging institutional subscription fees on top of APCs is a non-starter because the cost to make the article open has already been covered by the author or the author's institution.

Institutions in North America, who are under the same budget pressures as their counterparts in Europe, are also exiting their licensing agreements: as reported by Rick Anderson last year, and as tracked by SPARC, over 20 institutions have cancelled their big deals to date, and the momentum is expected to build (SPARC 2018; Anderson 2017; McKenzie 2018).

Canadian institutions face the additional disadvantage of a weak Canadian dollar. University libraries in Canada are examining their journal usage and citation data to determine the titles essential to research needs; this methodology, first used at the Université de Montréal in 2015 and by 28 Canadian university libraries in 2017, provides additional data to inform decision-making regarding unbundling or exiting consortium-lead deals (Canadian Research Knowledge Network 2018).

Despite statements from the U15 Group of Canadian Research Universities, the Ontario Council of University Libraries and the Canadian Association of Research Libraries, all warning publishers that the economics of the current scholarly journal situation are unsustainable (Ontario Council of University Libraries 2015; Shearer 2018; Brin 2016; U15 Group of Canadian Research Universities 2017, 15), publishers are not responding with new solutions. INKE Partnership member the Canadian Association of Research Libraries, in a recent report, made several recommendations including continuing to support libraries and library consortia in their stance against price increases, continuing to raise awareness about this unsustainable model both within and outside the scholarly community, and to invest in alternative, sustainable publishing models. Based on the difficult decisions being made by institutions globally, it may be that we have finally reached a tipping point where change will occur.

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