



The geography of Plan S open science

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*Plan S is a grand plan, but the devil is in the detail.*¹

So says Robin Crewe, Chair of the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf)'s Committee on Scholarly Publishing in South Africa. This European-sponsored plan devised by research funders replaces barriers to reading with barriers to authorship. The 13 European funding agencies (cOAlition S) promoting Plan S require research to be published in compliant open access (OA) journals from 2020.

Universities South Africa (USAf) is working with OA2020, an initiative aligned with Plan S, but devised by actual research producers. The global subscription system is argued to contain sufficient funds to transition to OA. OA2020 assumes that scholars publish for impact, not for money. If the 'devil is in the detail', then this assumption is contradicted by the effects of the well-intentioned Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) publishing incentive that has enabled South African universities to position their researchers as relentless rent-seekers.

Academic labour occurs within three interlocking spheres: a scholarly community, a bureaucracy and a corporation. Plan S and OA2020 add further overlays on these often contradictory sites of labour, production and consumption. For example, Plan S requires that academic authors (or their institutions) pay to get published. Plan S aims to 'accelerate the transition to a scholarly publishing system that is characterised by immediate, free online access to, and largely unrestricted use and re-use of scholarly publications'².

The academic world would divide into different research coalitions. These would be (1) the traditional global subscription model, other than (2) the European Plan S enforced silo; and (3) the Open Knowledge for Latin America and the Global South (AmeliCA) university-based communication infrastructure option. Plan S signatories, however, represent only 5% of global research output.

South Africa at 1% has already committed to developing OA, with ASSAf's SciELO SA providing an electronic OA platform for participating journals. But SciELO is not a funding mechanism. OA2020's argument is that the legacy publishers are hoarding and monetising public knowledge, allegedly preventing access to readers. Legacy publishers are thus accused of commoditising a good that should be 'free'. At the social level, says USAf's Ahmed Bawa, there is a 'growing unaffordability even for our research-focused institutions' (Bawa A 2020, written communication, 20 October). The huge inequalities of access in our system and 'the growing disconnect between society and 'science' need to be addressed.

The questions arising, however, are: Is Plan S another Northern imposition on the South? Will Plan S ringfence EU research only for funding, and restrict permission to publish? For Lyn Kamerlin³, the Plan S 'embargo requirements and repository technical requirements ... are so draconian that paid-for gold becomes the easiest way to fulfil them'. Plan S thus simply flips who pays, entrenching the for-profit publishing firms.

The outcome will impoverish the research community by disadvantaging those unable to afford article-processing charges (APCs). It might also discourage cooperation across publishing systems. The funders' aim is to prevent publishers and authors from gaining income from what they seem to implicitly claim as 'their paid-for' research, positioning themselves as the new scholarly oligarchy. The beneficiaries of Plan S will be mainly sponsored researchers able to publish in fully fledged (non-hybrid) OA journals. The DHET incentive would need to be paid immediately on acceptance of an article rather than 18 months after, as is the DHET norm.

The global publishing system could be fractured by Plan S into non-compatible ecosystems of research reporting – what will be legitimate for one system could be declared illegitimate in the other. This is already the case with the way that the DHET incentive, as myopically applied by universities, herds South African authors into particular qualifying lists.

By limiting the legacy publishers with their added values of peer review, plagiarism and libel checks, cross-referencing, copy editing, legal protections, ethical regimes, marketing and so on, further opportunities will be opened to the ever-opportunistic predators. Such kinds of differential access will result in automatic inequality in publishing opportunities based on geographic location and funding availability. This means that the cost of publishing rather than the quality of research will decide where and what research is published.

AmeliCA wants a collaborative, non-commercial, sustainable and non-subordinated system returned to the academy. Under this scenario, DHET would require universities to invest in infrastructure and technology for science communication – i.e. journals – to be located within universities, and to delink from 'legitimation systems' like Scopus and Web of Science. But then the ASSAf-identified problem of 'house journals', and the DHET requirement of 'accreditation', could be exacerbated in an already overprovisioned local environment.

Kamerlin³ further states that 'openness ... needs to be community driven, not funder driven' as OA2020 appears to be. But can a one-size-fits-all model work? In the event of the aligned Plan S and OA2020, the DHET incentive will have to shift from rewarding universities (and their authors) to now awarding APCs to journals for articles approved for publication. South African journals are currently excluded from the DHET funding value chain and *themselves subsidise the publication of research at no or small cost to authors, universities and the state.*

The devil will be in the detail no matter the initiatives adopted: USAf's national approach is to secure broadened access to scientific material and to utilise the current national spend of about ZAR600 million on subscriptions to achieve OA and to eliminate the need for individual researchers to pay APCs.

The question is, in light of the corporatisation of academic labour, production and consumption, who will be supported, and how will under-funded authors be assured of access? That is, which authors, which journals, and which paradigms?



Should not scientists' academic freedom remain at arm's length from state, funders and universities? And, should we not be publishing for impact, not just DHET monetary incentives?

Competing interests

There are no competing interests to declare.

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