

Editorial

Ronald Plasterk

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Whose article is it anyway? *

Downloading music is a nice example of a technological achievement that has led to new standards in social interactions. We see the same happen in science. The new trend of 'open access' publication puts traditional publishers under pressure – I wrote about this before. This is one of the few sectors where my country dominates: Elsevier Publishers is the biggest in the market of international science journals. It is a strange sector. Journals are prohibitively expensive, you may have to pay some 5000€ a year for six unimpressive paperbacks. But you would not pay this amount anyway, while university libraries do - they have no choice. An Institute of Cardiology for example needs to be up to date in cardiological literature, in the patients' interest. And the authors, the world's prominent cardiologists, are not prepared to have the choice of their publication journal determined by a subscription fee. They select the journal with the highest reputation, and the journal can ask for high subscription fees, since every cardiologist wants to read it. So there is no micro-economic balance between price and turnover, which explains the extreme rates. In the last ten years they have risen steeper than inflation, a subscription to Elsevier's *Brain Research* is at 16,000 \$ a year, and the profit margin on ELSEVIER journals now oscillates around 40%. The profit comes from taxes and from the charitable contributions of the citizen to e.g. the cancer fund, the heart trust and the asthma foundation.

When I publish an article, I am requested to sign a copyright form, which cedes all rights of distribution of my own work to Elsevier. My institution does not profit from this. Before publication, my manuscript is corrected and assessed by 'referees' – which are my colleagues, who do this work unpaid. I also review one or two of my colleagues' articles per week – this is part of my job. As a subscriber, I may get an electronic version of my article, a so-called PDF file. Anyone with a computer and a printer can make a pin sharp printout of it, even in colours.

And now I get requests from colleagues who wish to read and perhaps keep my article. If they work in a wealthy institute, they would have an electronic subscription to that journal. So it is mainly colleagues from South America, Asia and Eastern Europe who send me emails with PDF file requests. Officially, I am not allowed to comply. What I may do is order reprints from Elsevier – 5 € a piece – put a stamp on the envelope and mail them. Nobody does that.

To evade the daily requests I would rather place the articles from my group as PDF files on my lab's website. It would be even better if all published articles were accessible through central websites, searchable by keywords and downloadable.

My employer, the Royal Academy of Sciences has recently asked Elsevier whether this is permitted. The answer was negative. I quote from Elsevier's letter: „This is what we have decided: an author may place his version of his article on his laboratory's website, but needs to ask permission for any presentation elsewhere. By „his version" we understand a MSWord or text file, but not a PDF or html file. The author may incorporate the modifications in „his version" as they have been made during the refereeing and correction process. Elsevier's website is the only one to present the formally published version. K.H., Senior Vice President Strategy"

The last thing I want as an author is to have several versions of my article floating around; checking and correcting what has been changed in the galleys (also by myself) is a tremendous

task, and my peers do not want twenty pages of a Word manuscript, they want ist final version as a PDF file of five pages. This is no option. It is picking on authors.

After all, these are my articles, with results obtained thanks to public funding, they have been refereed by my colleagues, I paid thousands of euros for the journal subscription, I have the files on my PC and would love to share them with my peers, it saves me work – and Elsevier makes a lousy proposition that nobody will follow. Who owns the articles anyway?

It will not be too long before the administrations that funded the studies in the USA and Europe will oblige researchers to publish exclusively in Open Access journals. Then the fuss will be over. These are the last skirmishes of a battle; the inertia of publishers like Elsevier to adjust to a changing publication landscape is expensive for science, in terms of money and precious time.

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