

# 5 YEARS PLAN S: STAY THE COURSE !



## 01 PLAN S, a game changer:

On 4 September it is exactly 5 years ago that a group of twelve European funding agencies supported by the European Commission presented a radical plan - PLAN S - to accelerate the transition to full and immediate Open Access to scientific publications. For more than 30 years, researchers and science policy makers had agreed to the idea of making research results 'Open Access', but progress had been slow. The plan was founded on the principles that scientific publications resulting from research funded by public grants MUST be published immediately and in fully compliant Open Access journals or platforms for all to read. The rationale for these funders to take action was crystal clear: knowledge generated with the support of the public purse should be accessible to society at large and not be locked behind paywalls for the happy few to have access to. Furthermore, the system of subscription based journals was costing the tax payer a fortune each year, notably through the high subscription fees that academic libraries had to pay to a small group of large commercial publishers.

The case for Open Access became utterly clear when the COVID-19 virus spread rapidly across the globe and the science community was mobilized to look for medication and vaccines. From day one, research results and data were shared and made available in real time by both academia and industry to win the race against the clock. And the commercial publishers took their responsibility by joining in and abolishing their paywalls. It would have even been unethical if they would not have done so, with certainly a public outcry as a result. When the pandemic was over, there was therefore every reason to make Open Access the new normal and not return to the old situation. As I often said myself in those days: if we had Open Access to help beat the virus, why not use it to tackle the other grand societal challenges we are facing, from climate change to food security and from the energy transition to social inequality. Although at that time no one really disagreed with this, it proved once again that old habits die hard.

## 02 The good news

So where do we stand with Open Access since the launch of PLAN S now 5 years ago? What has been accomplished? Well, let's start with the good news. First of all the group of Funders - which calls itself cOAlition S - has grown over the years. Today some 25 science funding agencies and charities have joined the coalition and signed up to the principles of PLAN S or declared to adhere to most of these. And these include some very prestigious organizations such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Howard Hughes Medical Institute. And the icing on the Open Access cake came on 25 August 2022 when the White House Office of Science and Technology (OSTP) issued a new Open Access policy which is almost identical to the principles of PLAN S: 'Make Federally Funded Research Freely Available Without Delay'. Secondly, in many countries so-called 'transformative agreements' were signed between groups of academic institutions and publishers to facilitate and accelerate the transition to full and immediate Open Access. In most of the cases these include 'hybrid journals' which contain both subscription based and Open Access articles whereby over an agreed period of time the share of subscriptions is phased out to the benefit of the Open Access part. Third, new Open Access publishers and platforms have entered the market and as such increased the landscape of services and enhanced competition. And last but not least, the large commercial publishers have declared to become fully committed to Open Access.

## 03 The concerns

Now when you read all this, you might think that things are going well and that the journey towards a world in which immediate and full Open Access is the norm, is around the corner. Well, nothing could be less true. Let's look at some data. Out of the 4 million scientific papers that are published each year, some 61% are still behind subscription paywalls. Notably in the medical field, progress has been utterly slow. Only 31% of all cancer related publications are in Open Access. For cardiovascular diseases and respiratory diseases these figures are respectively 20% and 16%. And also in the field of climate change which is such a big challenge for our planet, only 40% of all publications are in Open Access.

Now why has there not been more progress? I see several reasons for this. First of all, there are still some people out there who believe that Open Access is tantamount to predatory journals with little quality oversight and there are others who deliberately keep this myth alive. Secondly, many academic libraries are locked by subscription budgets and cannot afford to liberate funds for Open Access. In other words, the flip from 'pay to read' to 'pay to publish' is complex. Third, there is much criticism on both the side of the science community and of the Funders that the costs of publishing an article in Open Access - Article Processing Costs (APC) - are just too high. Also this is a kind of myth since for example Gold Open Access provides much better value for money than subscription. While the costs of subscription range between €4.000 to €9.500 per article, the costs of Open Access publishing (APC) is on average €2.500 per article, although there are of course exceptional cases whereby APCs of almost €9.000 are charged. Yet it has to be acknowledged that over recent years there has been an inflation of APCs. And fourth and perhaps most importantly, the Transformative Agreements, mentioned above, have not yet delivered and in many cases are not really 'transformative'.

## 04 Stay the Course!

So what to do? My point of view is to stay on course and adhere to the principles of PLAN S. This means to be ruthless about the 2024 deadline for the transformative agreements to have delivered, meaning to have facilitated and accelerated the transition to full and immediate Open Access by that time. In case of an alignment between Europe's OA policy with the new OSTP guidelines, for which I make a strong plea, the deadline could exceptionally be postponed to 2025. In this context it is essential to stay robust and demanding on the quality of Open Access journals and platforms through the Directory of Open Access (DOAJ). And if the bottleneck is the increasing price of the APC's, just put a cap on them, as was foreseen under the original draft of PLAN S. It's in any case essential that more transparency is provided on the costs of academic publishing, be it subscription or Open Access based. The last thing to do is to change course and this is exactly what I am afraid is happening. It was therefore very disappointing that in the Council Conclusions of 23 May, Europe's science ministers, while being unambiguous about their support to Open Access, hardly mention PLAN S, but call for the support of 'not-for-profit open access publishing platforms and models'. With this, they take a 'left turn'. I write this, not because such outlets, such as Diamond Open Access and ORE (Open Access Europe platform), are not laudable and should not be supported. No, I write this because these will not be the game changers which are desperately needed to arrive in due course at full and immediate Open Access. The often-heard claim that Diamond Open Access is 'free' to all stakeholders distracts from the reality that there is always a price to be paid for quality Open Access publishing, be it through the Funder, the academic institution or the individual researcher (through his or her grant or salary). Furthermore, 86% of Diamond Open Access journals publish fewer than 50 articles per year and therefore lack the necessary scale to make the difference. It was also surprising that the science ministers gave the impression with their conclusions to wish to exclude the large commercial publishers, which provide quality service to the science community. These key players in the world of scientific publishing just need to be forced to change their business model and embrace Open Access at a fair price. And this is what PLAN S is all about.

**By Robert-Jan Smits**

Europe's former 'Open Access Envoy'



**MY PLEA** to the science community, science Funders, including the members of cOAlition S, and science policy makers is to stick to the principles of PLAN S and stay the course. Taking a new path won't speed things up. As a famous artist once said: 'There's no reason to have plan B, because it distracts you from plan A'. He probably meant PLAN S.

**By Robert-Jan Smits**