

## Call for action: Academic publishers and surveillance practices at RUG

### Background

Scientific publishers play a key role in the transition to open science and the dissemination of knowledge. Yet, in contrast to the universities that facilitate the production of scientific knowledge, they are profit-oriented organizations that follow a commercial logic. In fact, scientific publishing is dominated by a few large, highly profitable commercial publishers. The industry is [exceptionally profitable](#), with profit margins above 20 percent, rivaling those of leading tech firms such as Google/Alphabet or Apple, which enables them to hand out hundreds of millions of euros to shareholders and top executives every year. Directly or indirectly, substantial parts of these profits stem from public investments in higher education. In its annual report of 2021, for instance, RELX/Elsevier declared revenues from university library subscription fees to its journals or open access “read and publish” agreements of close to 2 billion euros.

More recently, following in the footsteps of large tech companies such as Facebook, Amazon, Netflix, or Google, scientific publishers have further expanded their business models towards data analytics. As part of that strategy, publishers have gained control over large parts of the research infrastructure of universities. Over the past years, they have acquired various companies that play crucial roles in various parts of the research cycle. RELX/Elsevier is a case in point. As shown below, this multinational owns search engines (*Scopus*), reference management systems (*Mendeley*) as well as online repositories (*Pure*), allowing it to track (i.e. record and store) valuable user data, which can subsequently be sold to commercial parties.

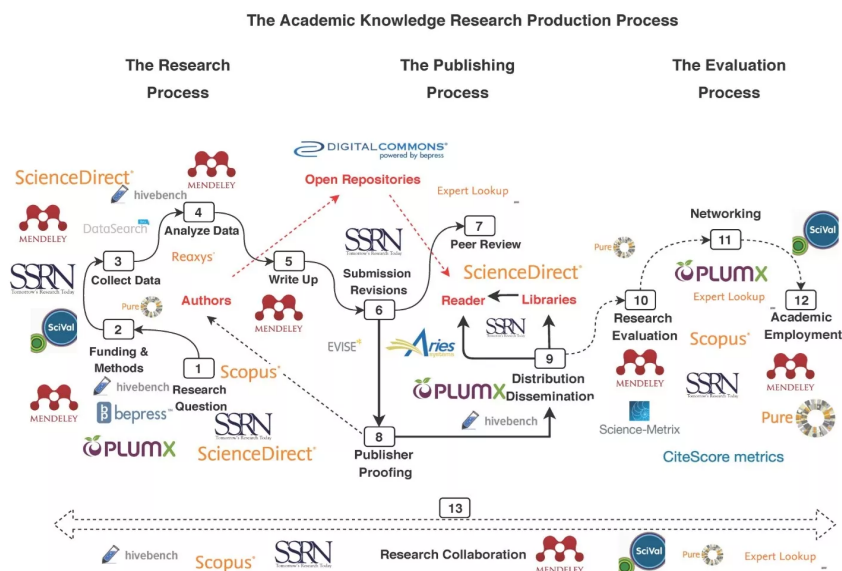
### Risks

Outsourcing the research infrastructure to commercial parties carries significant risks. First and foremost, these risks pertain to privacy and data protection. Publishers are incessantly [mining data](#) of university researchers; platforms such as *Pure* facilitate not just the collection of download numbers of research publications, but also the recording of personal information or even [behavioral data](#) - at times even through spyware. Beyond the potential security risks that users are exposed to e.g. fraud, hacking or identity theft, ‘[surveillance publishing](#)’ could carry detrimental consequences for the academic community. For instance, it could legitimize existing biases in publishing, such as male scholars’ [propensity for self-citation](#). Second, universities’ reliance on these publishers comes with important financial risks. For example, this reliance puts companies like RELX/Elsevier in a position to use a ‘vendor lock-in strategy’ to drive up the prices for services such as *Pure* in an uncontrolled manner, and to monopolize the market. This also positions these companies to continue collecting data without offering accountability in the way they use, store or repurpose data. Third, there is the wider concern about commercial companies monetizing public goods and academic futures (e.g., in selling/using collected data

as input for hiring/recruitment committees/agency) at the expense of staff, students and ultimately taxpayers.

These harvesting of data and the risks we have mentioned have largely gone unnoticed. While there is some debate in Dutch universities about privacy concerns with [regards to Google](#), similar discussions about publishers [remain scarce](#). In a recent [op-ed](#), Juliëtte Schaafsma and Martijn van der Meer from Tilburg University sounded the alarm bell, arguing that it is time to formulate a long-term vision for a sustainable, independent higher education system. As members of the Young Academy Groningen and the Open Science Community Groningen, we not only endorse this ambition but call on our university to reclaim ownership over our research output. In the following paragraphs, we suggest a series of short-term and long-term proposals for alternative publishing scenarios and raise questions to our university board about the future of academic publishing.

Figure 1 - The Academic Knowledge Research Production Process



Source: Chen, G., Posada, A., & Chan, L. 2019. "Vertical Integration in Academic Publishing: Implications for Knowledge Inequality". In Chan, L., & Mounier, P. (Eds.), *Connecting the Knowledge Commons – From Projects to Sustainable Infrastructure: The 22nd International Conference on Electronic Publishing – Revised Selected Papers*. Marseille: OpenEdition Press. doi:10.4000/books.oep.9068

### Call for Action

As a first step, we call on the University of Groningen to reconsider the use of *Pure*. In principle, institutions are free to decide for themselves what kind of repository they use. Some universities have their own repositories, while others outsource this to an external (commercial) party. The University of Groningen uses *Pure*—initially a Danish start-up but later sold to Elsevier—for

archiving publications. The (personal) data collected via this route can potentially be exported for marketing purposes. Because of the risks described above, Radboud University, for example, maintains the [Radboud Repository](#). This non-commercial internal repository grants researchers control over their own research output and personal data. We therefore propose switching to an in-house alternative.

In the long run, we would like to contribute to developing a long-term vision on the future of academic publishing and the university's relationship with commercial publishers. To this end, we seek answers to the following questions:

- 1) What is the position of the University of Groningen in relation to the increasing control that commercial companies have over the academic publishing cycle (including the "open science" infrastructure)?
- 2) To what extent is the implicit subsidizing of shareholder payouts and multi-million executive pay packages reconcilable with the principles of open science that the University advocates? Are there viable alternatives?
- 3) What concrete steps are currently being taken to mitigate the dependence on commercial publishers on the one hand, and to regain control of the publishing cycle on the other?
- 4) What concrete steps has the university taken to create awareness among the academic staff about surveillance practices of publishers (and/or the mis/use of their data)?
- 5) What is the university's position on data ethics, especially in relation to partnerships or agreements with external parties (mainly publishers) who handle academic staffs' data?

Sincerely,

The Young Academy Groningen & The Open Science Community Groningen