

Hybrid Open Access: why paying twice?

The Italian Association for the promotion of Open Science wishes to draw the attention of researchers, students, librarians and administrators of universities and research institutions on an add on of the [CARE license](#) with the [Elsevier publisher](#) covering the period 2018-2022, the so-called " Pilot Open Access Gold ".

[CARE](#) is a e-resources licensing [consortium](#) lead by the Conference of Italian University Rectors: its task, according to a [strategy set out almost twenty years ago](#), is to negotiate modular collective agreements to which individual institutions can selectively join so that no Italian research library is left alone when negotiating subscription based scholarly journals with global scientific publishing oligopolists.

The CRUI-CARE contract, intended to remain in force for five years, in addition to regulating the licensed access to the Science Direct platform, offers discounts on the so-called Article Processing Charges (APC). This second option allows authors to have their own articles published in Elsevier journals immediately available to everyone, at the cost of an additional disbursement on the licensed subscriptions. Therefore, subscriptions and APCs are not mutually alternative: a single university, with regard to the same journals, can sign the license and pay APCs.

Elsevier, by adopting this hybrid model, gets paid on both sides, on the reader's side, through the licensed subscriptions, and on the author's side, through the APCs. As authors and readers are affiliated to the same institution, the latter, institutionally, will pay twice for the same thing. In fact, even if the APCs come from non-library funds - for example from research funds - it is still the same public money that comes from tax payers and student tuition fees. Within the open access movement, this behavior, commonly adopted by the great oligopolies of the publishing industry, is so well known and feared as to be called [double dipping](#): it is certainly beneficial for the publishers, who can add a further profit to the one deriving from the licensed subscriptions which cost to each Italian large university about one (1) million euro a year, but it is difficult to understand what is the benefit for their customers. In fact, the [Plan-S initiative of Science Europe](#), launched by [INFN](#) along with ten other European institutions, bans, starting from 1 January 2020, the practice of publishing open access articles in licensed toll access hybrid journals.

Double dipping is not just a waste of public money. If it became a new norm in Italian universities, it would cause three possible side damages at least:

- wealthy institutions which can afford to pay for immediate access to the articles would systematically benefit their authors in terms of readership and citations in comparison with scholars affiliated with institutions that can not afford it;
- authors would be led to believe that open access publishing is the same as paying APC to Elsevier, ignoring the existence of many free of charge open access journals (for readers and for authors) published by learned societies, scholars group, university presses and small publishers;
- universities that have their own open access journals platform, managed by their library system or by the university press, would fund the open (hybrid) access of a competitor already in a dominant position.

According to the [Open Access Commission of the University of Milan](#), which is among the institutional members of AISA, it is essential that professors and researchers become aware of the costs of commercial scientific publishing and conscious of the difference between full open access and hybrid open access. If they could reach such an awareness, they would give their support to negotiate harder with publishers. The university is not a business company where students are mere end users and professors are research workers yielding products whose sense is established by others: it is a community discussing and living on awareness and participation. Treating it as such would be beneficial even economically.

Greater participation, indeed, would also help to assess the amount of free work provided by professors and researchers in editing and peer review activities for large publishers' journals. This contribution could be valued on the bargaining table, if necessary, through boycott - or strike? - threat actions.

In academic institutions, at all levels, there are committee members, researchers and librarians who are engaged in open science: they too would deserve to be informed in order to promote a broader discussion.

Unfortunately, the CARE license agreement has already been signed. AISA hopes that authors and their institutions will refuse to pay Elsevier for the so-called hybrid open access, preferring the so-called [green route](#), namely the option of self-archiving in disciplinary or institutional repositories after a period of embargo. A similar solution, even if it does not promote open science as much as other strategies, prevents the truly full open-access journals provided by libraries, university presses and groups of scholars from undergoing an internal competition subsidized by the very institutions that should instead encourage and foster them.