PRESS RELEASE

In 2018, French researchers will no longer have access to Springer Nature journals: the consortium Couperin.org is not renewing the previous national agreement with this publisher.

Researchers from institutions and universities in France will no longer have subscriptions to Springer journals. Access that had been granted to this point will be eliminated on April 1, according to the publisher.

Such is the outcome of 13 months of frantic negotiations between the national consortium Couperin.org and Springer Nature. Couperin.org represents more than 250 higher education research and healthcare institutions: universities, schools, research institutions including the CNRS, hospitals such as the Lyon Civil Hospices.

Negotiations ended in stalemate due to economic differences between the publisher and the higher education and research institutions.

French academic research ordered Couperin.org to obtain a reduction in cost for the subscription contract. This requirement was made following a qualitative analysis of the Springer collection and how it was being used.

The development of open-access, author-funded publications at an international level has created a noticeable increase in the number of free, open-access articles published in paid subscription journals distributed by Springer Nature. According to a study carried out by the Couperin.org consortium, open-access articles represented 8% of total content in Springer journal subscriptions in 2017, compared to 3% in 2014.

What does author-funded mean?
An author pays the publication costs (APC, for Article Processing Charges) to the publisher to have his or her article published through open access in “hybrid” journals. A hybrid journal publishes both content that is freely available, as well as content that is only available via subscription; hence the necessity of having a subscription. Paradoxically, the cost of subscriptions has continued to rise despite the increase in freely accessible articles. Institutions must therefore pay twice: on the one hand, paying article processing charges to journals with paid subscriptions; and on the other hand, maintaining subscriptions to those journals in order to have access to the subscriber-only articles.

The increasing number of open access published articles makes it untenable to maintain the policy of continued rises in subscription costs. This is the rationale for Couperin.org’s demand for a reduction in those costs.

The publisher justifies the increase in subscription costs, citing an increase in the number of articles in its 1185 journals by an estimated 3% per year. The publisher is offering a purely quantitative notion based on an ever-growing volume of articles, with little regard for their quality.
At the same time, the utilization of Springer journals is declining and is focused within only a third of the collection. This is a paradoxical phenomenon, since the number of available articles is growing, leading us to reasonably question whether there has been a change in the quality of the publications’ content. It confirms the widely expressed opinion of researchers on the dangers associated with the steady increase in the number of journals and articles being published. Scientists regularly denounce the general decline in the quality of content as resulting from the uptick in the volume of scientific publications.

After 13 months of negotiations, Springer Nature steadfastly maintains its proposal for an increased rate, which, though limited, still largely exceeds the expectations of the research community.

The ever-increasing costs of scientific information are now straining institutions’ budgets, which are unable to be applied toward financing research activities or supporting editorial diversity. This situation represents a threat to research, as researchers produce and provide this information to publishers free of charge, while also providing free content analysis and editorial management.

The lack of agreement between Springer Nature and the consortium Couperin.org amounts to a loss of 5 million euros per year for the publisher; the inaccessibility of Springer journals in French research will negatively impact these journals in terms of citations and article submissions.

Higher education and research institutions are no longer willing to accept the open-ended growth of their subscription expenses. The development of open-access content and the existence of alternative means to access information diminish the dependency of researchers, thereby reducing their willingness to pay the increasingly astronomical prices demanded to gain access to the information that they themselves produce and validate, for the profit of publishers.

The development of open access, the undeniable future of scientific communication, should in no way accompany or justify further skyrocketing costs.

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