

Is this Smits' tripleC moment?

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Jeffrey “predatory journals” Beall famously catapulted himself out of any serious debate with an article in the journal TripleC, entitled “[The Open-Access Movement is Not Really about Open Access](#)”. In it, Beall claimed that OA proponents don’t care about access, but that they form an “anti-corporatist movement that wants to deny the freedom of the press to companies it disagrees with”. The article is so replete with similarly unhinged fairy tales that Beall quickly lost all standing with the scholarly community.

Seasoned science policy developer [Robert-Jan Smits](#) may just have published a similarly devastating article. Granted, the comparison of Smits to Beall is hugely unfair: In contrast to Beall, Smits has an outstanding track-record: architect of the EU Horizon 2020 program, director-general of research and innovation (RTD) at the European Commission, spearheading the [Plan S](#) initiative, to only name a few. Likely, no single article can have a major impact on such a stellar career. Especially because of Smits’ expertise, experience and competence, his recent Research Professional News article “[Plan S: Stay the course](#)” (also on [ScienceBusiness](#)), is raising a number of flabbergasting concerns. Some quotes:

The case for open access became utterly clear when the Covid-19 virus spread rapidly across the globe, and the science community was mobilised 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.

Actually, the publishers to a large extent only formally ‘published’ what had already been published as preprints before. If anything, in contrast to Smits’ claims, the Covid-19 pandemic is [widely seen](#) as an [example](#) how [science](#) can [thrive](#) without the involvement of commercial publishers.

new open-access publishers and platforms have entered the market and, as such, widened the landscape of services and enhanced competition.

It has been established for several decades now that academic publishing [is not a market](#) and that the kind of competition that does exist is not really the kind of competition commonly associated with a “market”. It is difficult to understand why someone with Smits’ level of competence still perpetuates this myth of a market.

Only 31 per cent of all cancer-related publications are openly accessible.

This figure seems to assume that public access to cancer research would benefit cancer patients. However, cancer research is only [reproducible to just under 12%](#). Having much of this unreliable research accessible only to experts at funded institutions could be interpreted as a public health measure. This paragraph is one of many statements by Smits over the years where he appears to endorse an “open access at all costs” attitude. With regard to notoriously unreliable medical research, maybe the cost aspect should be considered more carefully? Talking about costs:

While the costs of subscription range between €4,000 and €9,500 per article, the costs of open-access publishing APCs 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.

These numbers and their juxtapositions are really strange. There is a very [common number](#) that has held surprisingly constant over the years, that the average cost of a subscription article is between US\$4000-5000. It is nearly impossible to compute a range, as one would need to know the total subscription income for the single journals, which is a notoriously difficult to know number for all but the smallest publishers/journals. For small journals, per-article-costs are often very high, sometimes even absurdly high, see, e.g., the New England Journal of Medicine, where [each research article would cost](#) about US\$300,000. Given the average cost of a subscription article, subscriptions per-article range is probably best estimated at between almost zero and 300k – not a very useful range and far from what Smits wrote.

The price of about 2500€ for an OA article is fairly accurate, but he conveniently leaves out that [publishing costs](#) are less than half that price. With that in mind, a >100% markup doesn't seem like such a fair price any more. Add to that the admission that APCs are increasing (arguably at a similarly supra-inflationary rate as subscriptions) and the number of published articles keeps increasing, the total cost of publishing research OA exponentially increases, making APC-OA an even less sustainable option than subscriptions. Smits goes on about costs further down:

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

But he never mentions what that price is: we know that it is less than half of even current average APCs. Is he endorsing such price gouging only because it is less bad than subscription-based price-gouging?

perhaps most importantly, the transformative agreements mentioned above have not yet delivered and in many cases are not really transformative.

and immediately below that:

be ruthless about the 2024 deadline for the transformative agreements to have delivered

So Smits claims that TAs don't work, so we must keep going with the TAs? Not sure what to make of that.

And if the bottleneck is the increasing price of APCs, just put a cap on them

Smits does not explain how that cap should be implemented. He doesn't mention any laws being passed (in what countries?) to make high APCs illegal, so one can only assume he is referring to the Plan S idea to simply not reimburse authors for more than a fixed amount. Such a cap has been in place in Germany for nearly 20 years now and it has not had any effect on prices, as authors simply pay the amount exceeding the cap from other sources. Not sure why such an important piece of evidence seems to have escaped someone with Smits' experience.

It was therefore very disappointing that in the Council of the EU's conclusions of 23 May, Europe's science ministers, while being unambiguous about their support of open access, hardly mentioned Plan S, but called for the support of "not-for-profit open-access publishing platforms and models". With this, they take a 'left turn'.

This ranks very high on the list of most problematic paragraphs of the article. The [Council of the EU's conclusions of 23 May](#) have been widely heralded as a major policy advance and have been [roundly welcomed](#) from [all corners](#) of the [scholarly landscape](#), even by some smaller [publishers](#) and, notably, by cOAlition S. With his statement, Smits is alone in siding with the corporate publishers who are now all but isolated from all other stakeholders. Is Smits trying to make a political statement by "left turn"? If so, his notion of a "price cap" seems hard to reconcile with a right-wing ideology, his statement that there existed a market with competition and even more so with his later statement:

It was also surprising that the science ministers gave the impression with their conclusions to wish to exclude the large commercial publishers, which provide a 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.

The EU Council conclusions explicitly mention the importance of preventing the kinds of corporate lock-ins which are a [main driver](#) behind the current academic crises related to infrastructure. Smits' previous quote lamenting these conclusions together with this statement seem to imply that lock-in by corporate monopolists is precisely what Smits is defending here. A public, non-profit infrastructure, with *substitutable* for-profit service providers, for instance, is one option to prevent such lock-ins. If "left turn" is a political reference, then Smits finds actual competition with substitutability in a genuine market to be more to the left, politically, than his position, where the government actors in cOAlition S would be forcing corporations to change their business models and impose artificial price caps, while maintaining the corporations' monopolist position. Where is the reason in such an argument?

I also wonder what evidence Smits has used to base his statement on that the corporate publishers provide "provide a quality service to the science community". The most prestigious journals are all in corporate hands and [the higher the prestige, the lower the reliability of the research](#) published there. This evidence seems to suggest that getting rid of the corporate publishers and their hierarchy of expensive journals, if anything, should increase the quality of science.

Very little makes any sense in this article of a seasoned, competent, yes, even renowned policy maker. This is concerning on a number of levels. What could possibly bring someone who for decades very prominently sided with science, to become the only one left defending the corporate monopolists?