

Dresden, 21.11.2021

Against the surveillance of researchers in the science system - for literature access without user tracking

To whom it may concern,

the German psychology student representation [Psychologie-Fachschaften-Konferenz, PsyFaKo¹] adopted the following position "Against the surveillance of researchers in the science system - for literature access without user tracking" during their 34th conference, that took place from the 19th to the 21st of November 2022 in Dresden, Germany. The adoption of this position was legitimized by 155 conference attendees from 41 faculty-associations of German universities².

The role of science publishers is undergoing a major transformation. Already in 2019, the PsyFaKo drew attention to the importance of a cultural shift towards open science and called for the promotion of open access publications [1]. To achieve this goal, science publishers are a major actor. This position paper supports the goals of the petition "Stop Tracking Science" and outlines its relevance for students [2].

In the course of digitalisation, the activities of publishers simplified and became more cost-effective. Today, publishers mainly provide the digital infrastructure for publications and continue to organise the review process [3]. Both are services that do not necessarily have to be provided by profit-oriented companies. In other scientific disciplines, for example, publication servers operated by universities or professional associations are increasingly used for the publication of research results. There are also ways to organise the review process from within the scientific community without having to rely on publishers. While tasks such as editing scientific articles, conducting the peer review process by post and printing journals used to be the core part of publishers' business activities, they are now increasingly acting as data analysis companies. The aggregation and reuse of user data are thus moving into the centre of their activities [4].

There are two reasons for the increased focus on user data analysis: On the one hand, publishers are tapping into a new lucrative business field that deals with data about the scientific community, research fields and the scientists working in them. On the other hand, they aim to strengthen the already existing monopoly structures in the publishing system. The aim is to enclose researchers in a single ecosystem in which they can conduct all steps of the research process. At the same time, the data collection built into the software allows the

¹ English: Conference of Psychology-Students Councils

² Translator's note: This refers to mainly to Germany, but student's councils from Austria and Switzerland often attend the conference, too

provider to make this data available to other organisations for evaluation purposes. Data collection starts with literature searches and corresponding access to articles but goes far beyond that. Literature management software provided by publishers supports researchers in their work, but also enables the collection of user data. As this process is not fully transparent it is hard to understand for users, whether they be students or lecturers, to what extent user data is collected and analysed. In October 2021, the Committee on Academic Libraries and Information Systems of the German Research Foundation (DFG) reported extensively on the diverse tracking methods, ranging from the use of bidstream data and port scanning to the application of so-called "publisher trojans". Even though some of the software used is described in the publishers' terms of use, these tools go far beyond normal website tracking and the DFG analysis concluded that their legality is questionable under German data protection law. [5].

The current developments can be described as an increasing commercialisation of science. In our view, this violates the principle of freedom of science assured in the Basic Law of the Federal Republic of Germany, as well as the understanding of science as a public good. Freedom of science is assured at the national level in Article 5 (3) of the Basic Law. Internationally freedom of science is recognised as a human right by the UN [6]. If scientists feel threatened and forced to stop their research as a result of the profiling and disclosure of their data, these fundamental rights are violated.

Furthermore, research is largely funded by the state [7]. Knowledge acquired through publicly funded research projects should therefore be freely available to any person. Private individuals without access to university libraries cannot be expected to pay again for access to research largely funded by their tax money. Scientists should have free access to existing literature without being restricted to journals of individual publishers for which their university has purchased access.

Science is characterised by constant exchange of knowledge and expertise. In view of current challenges, such as climate change or the corona pandemic, interdisciplinary cooperation is indispensable. Researchers from all disciplines need free access to insights from other disciplines in order to answer these complex questions. It is also of paramount importance that scientific findings regarding such urgent topics are made known to the public and presented in a comprehensible way. To ensure this, science journalists, among others, must be able to freely access a broad literature base and everyone must be able to check primary sources. Currently, scientific findings are hardly accessible to the general public unless they have been published open access. We criticise this situation. Not only the free exercise of science is a human right, but so is participation in scientific progress [8].

We see user tracking of scientists and the resulting commercialisation of data firstly as a threat to the freedom of science and secondly as a risk to each individual person whose data is collected in the process. In this way, data can be made available to employers, who may use it for non-transparent personnel decisions. Beyond that, there is the risk of misuse, as the collected data can be made available to organisations and authoritarian governments, which use it as a basis for personally attacking or suppressing scientists in certain research fields. As publishers operate worldwide, this is a problem of international scope.

We therefore fully endorse the central demands of the petition "Stop Tracking Science" which are listed below. In addition, the PsyFaKo considers it urgent that the topic of publisher practices also finds its way into academic teaching due to its high relevance for students. This is expressed in the fourth demand we have added:

1. Tracking of academics must stop and can no longer be a subject of negotiations between research institutes and publishers.
2. Open standards in scholarly communication must take precedence over solutions that promote monopolies of knowledge and provider lock-in.
3. All actors in science governance must redesign their decision-making and evaluation instruments and overcome their fixation on bibliometric indicators.
4. Business practices of publishers must be covered in academic teaching and students should reflect them critically regarding the effects on an individual level as well as on the level of the scientific system.

Please do not hesitate to contact us if you have any further questions.

Signed, the *Konferenzrat der Psychologie-Fachschaften-Konferenz* [Executive Committee of the PsyFaKo e.V.]

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