

"Agreement with notorious publisher damages research"

A new agreement between Swedish university libraries and a Swiss publisher both drains the Swedish research budget and erodes research legitimacy. The Minister of Education cannot stand by while this is happening, write thirteen professors.

Open Science is one of the most important new requirements for promoting the dissemination of research beyond the academy. The pursuit of Open Science does not however justify underwriting or financing questionable publishers and the journals they promote. In order to achieve the goal of openness, all actors in the research ecosystem need to increase vigilance to ensure that scientific quality and good publishing practices are not sacrificed at the altar of openness. It is with this in mind that governments in Europe provide extra funding to subsidise the transition to Open Science. Against this background, it is particularly troubling to find that a consortium of Swedish university libraries, which goes by the name BIBSAM, has signed an agreement with the scientific publishing group MDPI. MDPI is headquartered in Switzerland but has affiliates in several other countries.

MDPI (Multidisciplinary Digital Publishing Institute) was included on the Beale list of predatory open access publishing companies in 2014 and removed in 2015 after significant pressure by the company. MDPI promises authors that their manuscripts will be published within 5-7 weeks of submission (provided no major revisions are required). A comparison between this turn around time and that of the more established publishers suggests at the very least that the quality of the review process is not the primary focus. The global science system depends on rigorous and painstaking review and that the review process is not part of a commercial business model. Not all of its journals are dodgy but several bad apples ruin the overall quality of the MDPI barrel. In one of MDPI's journals - Sustainability - Swedish researchers published 295 articles in 2021 alone at a cost of six million. Sustainability is just one of many MDPI journals that have been heavily criticized for producing [thousands of 'special issues' of difficult-to-control scientific value](#). The total cost of [3,531 articles](#) published by Swedish researchers in MDPI's 386 journals was €4.25 million in 2021 alone. In 2021, MDPI published a slightly absurd [240,739 articles](#) at a writing cost of almost €300 million. Strange that so little quality can cost so much! According to the latest annual report, the MDPI has an annual growth of 50 percent. Open access is for some companies a lucrative industry, financed by tax money.

A perusal of the discussion sites for researchers such as Research Gate will show that there is a lively debate about the merits of MDPI's publishing practices. The Swedish agreement with MDPI can at first glance look advantageous: Swedish universities receive a 10 percent discount on the fees MDPI charges every time a Swedish researcher publishes in the company's open journals. The Swedish National Library (KB), coordinates the Bibsam consortium with representatives from the country's universities and colleges, including the authorities. Bibsam has similar agreements with other well-established publishers. The agreement demonstrates the national commitment to promote Open Access Publishing. What is troubling about the MDPI arrangement is that it demonstrates that the authority in charge of making these agreements lacks the capacity to discriminate. Moreover, by unreservedly sanctioning MDPI, despite its reputation of uneven quality, the Swedish authorities now create incentives for researchers to "buy" fast publications from "predatory journals" at a discount. This contributes to undermining the quality and overall legitimacy of the global science system. On a national level, it increases the temptation to buy fast publications to prop up CVs for promotion and funding purposes. Is this really the intention of the authorities? Is this what the Swedish government wants?

By entering in to such an agreement with MDPI, Bibsam has taken an active position for a publisher notorious for its low quality, at a large and growing cost. However, costs are not the main problem. MDPI has been infamous for many years for pushing ethical boundaries and their

journals have been blacklisted by several national [research councils and authorities](#). External [reviews](#) show [unusually high citation rates](#) for MDPI journals. Quotations are normally a sign of scientific legitimacy. These abnormally high numbers instead indicate that the scientific quality review is deficient and governed by economic considerations. The research world has also reacted. For example, in 2018 [the entire Scientific Board resigned](#) from one of the largest MDPI journals - Nutrients - in protest of being forced to lower scientific quality to promote profit maximization.

MDPI and other less meticulous publishers engage in aggressive marketing to recruit authors and editors to their journals. Our own mailboxes are regularly filled with invitations with promises to "publish easily and for free", often in topics far beyond our expertise. Right now, MDPI is marketing its agreement with Bibsam through sponsored posts on Facebook and Twitter with the Swedish flag.

Sweden's and the EU's ambition that all research should be openly available must not lead to good research being undermined by an industrial model intended to maximize profits for unscrupulous companies. Researchers must publish their articles at publishers with high-quality scientific review where it is not possible to pay one's way.

The availability of research through open access should of course not lead to reduced quality of Swedish research or harm taxpayers.

KB's mission is to ["promote the quality of Swedish research and a democratic development of society"](#). The current system where Bibsam more or less automatically signs agreements with publishers whose popularity is increasing is in direct conflict with this mission. We urge KB and the country's higher education institutions to revise the instructions and forms for Bibsam's work, and that the Ministry of Education, through regulatory letters, ensures that the authorities put scientific quality first in the pursuit of their mission. In addition to this, a scientific expert group consisting of researchers from different disciplines should be consulted when decided on new agreements.

Hopefully, the authorities and the government share our view that the goal of Swedish research should be *both* accessibility and high quality. This requires reflection and competence. Agreements with publishers like MDPI instead lead to the worst of both worlds: large volumes of low quality, at high cost.

This is a machine-translated and slightly touched up version of the Swedish original:
<https://www.svd.se/a/BjKez0/professorer-avtal-med-okant-forlag-slar-mot-forskningen>

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