



Jan Velterop interview: further opening science thanks to a cultural shift

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What is left to be done before science can really be open

Jan Velterop is one of the small group of people who first defined “open access” in the [Budapest Open Access Initiative](#), which was published in early 2002.

He has worked in science publishing since the mid-1970’s. At the beginning of his career, he worked at Elsevier, in The Netherlands, and after a stint in the regional mainstream press moved to London to work subsequently at Academic Press and then Nature. Afterwards, he became involved in BioMed Central, the first commercial open access science publisher. Later, he joined Springer, as director of open access.

He then left to help further develop approaches based on the semantic web as a means to accelerate scientific discovery. Since 2009, he is involved in the [Concept Web Alliance](#), as one of the initiators. In this exclusive interview with *EuroScientist*, Jan Velterop gives his views on how scholarly publishing is going to play a role in the evolution of research towards more open science, and ultimately speed up the scientific process.

Science=business

Velterop points to issues affecting the way research is being done, which relate to what he calls the “commercial side of science.” He explains: “I am against the way that copyright is being used in science.” It is not, as was the original purpose of copyright, designed to ensure that authors kept on creating. He adds: “If you [didn’t] have copyright as a scientist, it would not stop you [from] publishing.”

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The original meaning of the idea of copyright, he feels, is not reflected in the English language. “The English word copyright is very much focusing on the commercial side of things.” In other languages, the term more accurately reflects what it is designed to do: protect authors’ right. This is the case in Dutch with the words ‘auteursrecht’ or the French ‘droits d’auteur’ as well as in German with the word ‘Urheberrecht’. “The right of the originator, the right of the author, should be to enable the widest possible use to the widest possible dissemination of the material in science,” he says.

Open Facts project

One of the most useful solutions developed recently in order to accelerate scientific discovery belongs to the field of semantic web and linked data. He quotes the example of the European [Open PHACTS](#) project, which aims to accelerate scientific discovery by semantic analyses and recombination of already published knowledge. This includes ensuring that “synonyms of concepts are seen as the same things, so that cancer and malignant neoplasm were considered as the same thing—although the words are very different,” he explains.

This approach which can be applied to other fields, could lead to new insights into what is the functional part of a drug by establishing the relationships between compounds, targets, pathways, diseases and tissue. He says : “The chances of finding something significant are much greater when you apply this technique to the already known knowledge, the tacit knowledge that’s there in the publication and the databases.” Besides, the fact that it is humanly impossible to read everything that is relevant will make this approach necessary, as it can deal with large numbers of articles with the help of computers.

Peer-review improvement

Another issue hindering the way the scientific process works is peer review. To improve it, he believes that it is good to make it open. We need to “say who peer reviewed it, say what they did, will they advise publication or not, because sometimes, you know, there are two peer reviewers and one says yes, the other says no,” he says.

He proposes to introduce [peer-review by endorsement](#), currently tested by German/US publishing start-up [ScienceOpen](#). This means leaving peer-review in the hands of academics themselves by asking authors to identify potential reviewers themselves and approach them to review and endorse publication. “It is far more likely to be an open, honest, and I think, qualitatively better and enormously cheaper process,” he points out.

Getting rid of bad habits

In addition to all the hurdles referred to above, Velterop is of the opinion that “the biggest problem of it all is scientists themselves.” The ‘publish or perish culture’ is creating incentives, which need to be taken out of the equation, as they negatively affect the scientific process. Publishing becomes in a sense a career advancing exercise and that it is not necessarily always helping the addition to the world’s knowledge that it should be.

He concludes: “scientists should change their emphasis from “I’m working on my career” to “I’m working on improving and progressing people’s knowledge about the natural environment or something about the human body...”

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