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A note on recent content takedowns

23rd September 2021

ResearchGate recently received demands from two publishers — Elsevier and the American Chemical Society (ACS) — to remove certain content that they alleged infringed their copyrights. These types of requests are not really new: we have received many similar requests from them in the past, and, in accordance with applicable law, have complied with them. But these most recent requests were notable because of the number of articles involved. Although privately stored files were not affected, the demands by Elsevier and ACS resulted in the removal of around 200,000 public files. In the context of a community of over 20 million researchers this is unfortunate, rather than existential, but it has sparked an acute reaction from many of our members who believe in the importance of open science.

Given the keen interest in these events, we want to lay out ResearchGate's position.

Our mission is to connect the world of science and make research open to all. In everything we do, we put the researcher first. We have a vision where more content is available for the benefit of

science, researchers, and the society at large. At the same time, we respect the rights of publishers, and have always complied with applicable laws. We have offered a “notice and takedown” process since the inception of the company. A small number of publishers have taken advantage of these tools.

The decision by Elsevier and ACS to simply remove content is disappointing to the entire research community, not just because of the loss to science and researchers, but because there is a better way. Publishers such as [Springer Nature](#) and [Wiley](#) are working with us to explore the opportunities that openness unlocks for all actors in the scholarly publishing ecosystem, with the researcher at the center. Specifically, through our content syndication program, these publishers have placed their content on ResearchGate (not taken it away) and made it seamlessly available to eligible researchers. This drives the consumption of content, reaches new audiences, and makes discovery and access easier for the researcher. This is the path for a brighter future in science.

We started ResearchGate with the clear vision to transform science into an open endeavour. Initially we met with great resistance from the publishing industry, which was entrenched in a model that put its profits above the needs of the researcher. Over the past decade, however, we’ve seen the majority of publishers – under pressure from the research community, funders, institutions, and libraries – rethink their models from the ground up. These publishers deserve huge credit for this, and we’re now partnering with many of them as allies, to transition to an author-centric open access future. This is good news for researchers.

We acknowledge that many of you have had strong reactions to the recent removals of content. Some have expressed general disapproval or anger over the restrictions Elsevier and ACS exert over the distribution of academic content. Others believe a mistake has been made and that their upload does not qualify as infringement. For example, some have variously stated that their content was the subject of a rights buyout and is now open access, the content has passed its embargo period, or the content cannot be restricted because it is a government-created work. Others have said that they never signed copyright transfer agreements and that therefore they still own their works. We are not able to assess these claims – only the representatives of Elsevier and ACS who requested those removals know the basis for their requests, and only they are in a position to withdraw those requests. We encourage members who have had materials wrongfully removed to contact those representatives by emailing article17@lausen.com.

Some of you have commented on the serious nature of our communications with you regarding the removal of content. We appreciate that the tone of our messaging was rather direct. International laws require that we implement a policy regarding repeat takedown requests from publishers, and we felt duty bound to clearly communicate these policies to you in no uncertain terms. This is done for the protection of users and the benefit of the ResearchGate community.

Finally, we are mindful of recent changes in European copyright law in some countries, particularly relating to Article 17 of the Directive on Copyright in the Digital Single Market. While we believe we are not subject to such laws due to the nature of our business, we decided to nonetheless take advantage of advancements in technology which we believe will be beneficial for researchers. In particular, we have started implementing a new system – called “Jarvis” – which matches publisher rights information with user content at the time of upload. Where a publisher has provided required information, Jarvis can prevent a researcher from unintentionally uploading content that is not allowed to be public. As always, it remains the responsibility of researchers to know and confirm their rights before uploading any content.

To all authors who were affected by a takedown notice: please know that we’re here to serve you. We urge you to comply with any license terms or restrictions in uploading your content. At the same time, we will continue to fight the good fight, striving for greater access to scientific knowledge for all.

To all publishers: the future of academic publishing is open. Let’s work together to unlock its true potential.

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