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Knowledge Monopolies and Global Academic Publishing

DOMENICO FIORMONTE¹ ERNESTO PRIEGO²

1. University of Roma Tre, Italy

2. City University London, UK

On Monday 11 July 2016 Thomson Reuters Corp. announced it had agreed to sell its intellectual property and science business (including Web of Science) to private-equity funds affiliated with Onex Corp. and Baring Private Equity Asia for \$3.55 billion in cash. This announcement appeared after the authors submitted together a proposal to the Toronto School conference trying to expand the concept of ‘monopolies of knowledge’ as coined by the Canadian economist Harold Innis. The text presented here includes an abridged version of the proposal, which is currently under review. In this text the authors have also included some further discussion of recent developments as a means to provide further context.

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CORRESPONDENCE:

domenico.fiormonte@uniroma3.it

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According to the [Reuters](#) news agency and the [Wall Street Journal](#), on Monday 11 July 2016 Thomson Reuters Corp. announced it had agreed to sell its intellectual property and science business (including Web of Science) to private-equity funds affiliated with Onex Corp. and Baring Private Equity Asia for **\$3.55 billion in cash**.

What is interesting to notice is that [BPEA](#) is a firm established in 1997 in Singapore that operates with companies based mainly in China or Chinese-speaking areas. So what’s going on? Some commentators say that “knowledge-hungry” economies, especially China and India, are trying to get a seat at the table of the world knowledge industry, which has been dominated by Western countries and connected cultures (more on this in a while).

It is premature to argue that Asia (China?) is going to challenge Western (and especially Anglophone) hegemony in academic knowledge and higher education, but it would be a mistake to underestimate the geopolitical consequences of such a move. As Gramsci taught us, knowledge is never culturally or politically neutral, and the non-Western world is becoming increasingly aware of it. *Ne vedremo delle belle*.

The disruptive announcement of Thomson Reuters’ dismissal appeared after submitting together a proposal to the [Toronto School](#) conference in which we tried to expand the concept of ‘monopolies of knowledge’ as coined by the Canadian economist [Harold Innis](#) in the fifties (ironically, Thomson Reuters is a Canadian company, too...). What we present here is an abridged version of the proposal, which is currently under review.

Innis did not provide a formal definition of the term “monopoly of knowledge”, but he was convinced that “mechanization has emphasized complexity and confusion; it has been responsible for monopolies in the field of knowledge and it becomes extremely important to any civilization, if it is not to succumb to the influence of this monopoly of knowledge, to make some critical survey and report.” (Innis 2008: 190).

We are inspired by Innis’s call to survey and report and argue that a look at the current situation of the publishing industry seems to confirm his worse fears. For example, only 10 world publishers account



for 54% of all revenue generated by the 57 publishing companies listed by *Publishers Weekly* in 2015. The top 4 publishers, ranked by revenue, happen to be *all* scientific or academic publishers: Pearsons, Thomson Reuters, Relx Group (formerly Reed Elsevier) and Woters Kluwer. The returns are astronomical, and make any other industry profits pale by comparison: “in the past financial year, for example, Elsevier’s operating profit margin was 36%... They result from a stranglehold on the market” (Monbiot 2011).

Lawson et al (2016) have noted that the top 10 academic publishers received £94m in subscription revenues from UK academic libraries in 2014 alone. They also note that the Austrian research funder Zentrale Einrichtung zur Förderung “estimates that around €65–70m is spent on journal subscriptions each year in Austria (Bauer et al., 2015)”. As many of us know, in spite of the rise of open access mandates worldwide, academic libraries continue to bear the burden of peer-reviewed academic journal *subscriptions* within a context of increasingly reduced budgets (Sample 2012).

Larivière, Haustein, and Mongeon confirmed that both in the Natural and Medical Sciences and in the Social Sciences and Humanities, “five publishers account for more than half of today’s published journal output.” The situation of Social Sciences is particularly striking: “combined, the top three commercial publishers alone -- Reed-Elsevier, Taylor & Francis and Wiley-Blackwell -- represent almost 50% of all papers in 2013” (Larivière et al 2015).

We suggest that this concentration has consequences transcending scholarly publishing alone. World University Rankings are commercial products based on proprietary data from Scopus, which is owned by Reed Elsevier. Web of Science (WoS), the online subscription-based scientific citation indexing service is currently maintained by Thomson Reuters. This is the basis for The Journal Impact Factor, a proprietary metric so far calculated by Thomson Reuters. The San Francisco Declaration of Research Assessment (DORA, 2013) advises against the use of the Journal Impact Factor for research quality assessment, but it is still widely adopted as a key indicator by the academic sector to determine ‘quality’ and ‘excellence’. According to DORA, the Impact Factor “was originally created as a tool to help librarians identify journals to purchase, not as a measure of the scientific quality of research in an article” (2013).

The rhetoric of excellence in methods of academic assessment and promotion is often linked to an over-reliance on indexing on the Scopus and WoS databases and the corresponding proprietary citation metrics and associated journal brand ‘reputation’ (Eve 2014; Moore et al 2016). It has to be emphasised that these mechanisms to index and rank university researchers’ outputs are not neutral. They remain designed with commercial interests in mind, and deeply biased from a cultural view. In fact, journals not published in English and not published by any of the top academic publishers, regardless of their distribution model, can *remain virtually invisible* to these proprietary metrication and reputation-enhancing mechanisms. The result is the widespread perception that if today’s humanities and social sciences scholars want to survive as researchers and improve their careers, they are forced to submit their work to these core journals – mostly published in *English*.

In *Geographies of the World’s Knowledge* (2011), Graham et al presented a series of maps showing the linguistic, cultural and geographical biases of academic knowledge production. The linguistic bias is an ingredient often neglected in the literature. Many non-Anglophone countries in fact have adopted, established and standardised evaluation criteria that favours English over native languages, also in Humanities and Social Sciences (Gazzola 2012; Priego 2015).

This linguistic bias goes beyond the language used in research submissions. Non “Anglo-sounding” academic author names also face greater challenges to participate in global academic publishing. As argued by Isabel Galina during the *Digital Humanities 2016* conference in Krakow, “if your name is not Anglo-sounding, you’ll get worse [peer] reviews” (as reported by *Glen Worthey, 2016*).

Although there is no necessary relationship between international visibility, language of publication and research quality, what happens today is that an Italian or Latin American Literature scholar publishing

in English would score/rank better than a colleague that writes on the same subject and with the same rigour in Italian or Spanish. But are scholarly texts, as cultural products, independent from their language of production? And what will the fate of our cultural heritage be if we are being discouraged to describe, analyze and study it through our own languages (Fiormonte 2015)?

Guédon (2001) hoped that digitization would have limited the power of publishers, but so far it seems to have made it worse. We argue that the expansion of Elsevier into social reference management and networking software (by acquiring Mendeley) and Open Access repositories (by acquiring SSRN), is another expression of an aggressive digital feudalism that shows no reticence to monopolise as much of the current scholarly publishing infrastructures as possible.

As we do the final edits to this text before publication we read a blog post by Andrew Prescott from Digital Humanities 2016, a conference sponsored by Gale Cengage Learning. Professor Prescott writes:

“While there has been much fevered discussion about open access to scholarly publications, there has been little parallel discussion about the importance of ensuring open access to the contents of libraries, archives and museums owned by the public and part of a shared cultural heritage. The digital humanities need to make common cause with those institutions [...] which have stood up for the importance of resisting the enclosure of our cultural commons by engrossers such as Gale. Maybe I might refuse the next glass of wine sponsored by them” (Prescott, 15 July 2016).

In our ongoing research, we argue that in academic publishing and scholarly communications we are seeing the kind of consequences Innis was fearing in his critique of ethnocentrism. Knowledge-sharing and universal access are crucial, but we also need to work on the idea of the equality of all knowledge(s). In other words, this means we need to work harder, collectively as academia, to improve the visibility of local academic knowledge, and so redefine and reshuffle its present geographical, epistemological and political hierarchies.

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