ResearchGate's publisher solutions: a new chapter in platform–publisher relations?

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Abstract

Purpose/Thesis: This article presents the services offered by the ResearchGate platform for scientific publishers. Tools such as Publisher Solutions, Journal Home, and Open Access Agreement Upgrade aim to facilitate the legal sharing of content and increase the visibility of publications in the digital environment.
Approach/Methods: The article analyses the services provided by ResearchGate for publishers—ResearchGate Publisher Solutions, Journal Home, and Open Access Agreement Upgrade. It examines the platform's collaboration with publishers and discusses its impact on the dissemination of scientific publications beyond traditional publishing channels.
Results and Conclusions: Solutions such as ResearchGate Publisher Solutions and Journal Home, despite their clear advantages, raise questions about their compatibility with the principles of open science and their actual impact on the long-term accessibility of scientific research.
Originality/Value: The services offered by ResearchGate to publishers represent a new approach to the dissemination of scientific publications outside traditional publishing channels. As this is a relatively recent phenomenon, further analysis and research are needed. This article highlights the issue and may serve as an introduction to future studies.

Keywords

Academic social networks; open access; publishing copyright; ResearchGate; scholarly communication; scientific journals.

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1. Introduction

The aim of this article is to present and analyse the most recent forms of collaboration between the ResearchGate platform and academic publishers, with particular attention to services designed specifically for publishers, such as Publisher Solutions, Journal Home, and Open Access Agreement Upgrade. The article seeks to address the question of whether these initiatives represent a step towards genuinely open

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science or instead constitute a new model of commercial control over the circulation of scholarly publications.

The article examines the origins of the conflict between ResearchGate and academic publishers, the nature of the agreements that have been concluded, and the development of new services such as Journal Home and Open Access Agreement Upgrade. The analysis is based on primary sources (press releases, court documents, and publishers' reports), as well as on the relevant literature concerning copyright law, open access models, and self-archiving practices. The research method employed in this study combines qualitative document analysis with a comparison of the solutions implemented by ResearchGate and individual publishers. This approach enables assessment of the extent to which the platform's new services reflect the principles of open science and transparency in scholarly communication.

The author therefore seeks to determine whether the services offered by ResearchGate genuinely support open science or constitute a new form of commercial control over the circulation of knowledge.

2. ResearchGate—a brief history

ResearchGate is arguably the most widely recognized social networking platform for scientists. Founded in Berlin in 2008 by two physicians and a computer scientist, it quickly attracted both a large user base and substantial private investment following its launch (Scott, 2017). As of June 2025, the platform gathers approximately 23 million members from 190 countries worldwide (ResearchGate a, n.d.). The service is free for users, while the platform generates revenue partly through advertising, which appears on the Q&A database webpage, as well as through job listings and conference announcements tailored to individual users.

According to statements on the platform's website, its mission is "to connect the world of science and make research open to all" (ResearchGate b, n.d.). A key feature of ResearchGate is the individual researcher profile, which allows users to showcase and promote their scholarly output. Users can outline their career trajectories, list their research interests, and share information about ongoing projects. Members of the community can follow other researchers' profiles, establish collaboration, and build professional networks. One of the features that particularly attracts users is the ability to share the full texts of their publications. Each publication on ResearchGate is associated with a page containing its metadata, along with a file—typically in PDF format—providing access to the full text. The deposit function for publications constitutes one of the platform's core features. Authors can upload preprint or postprint versions of their articles. ResearchGate also provides article-level metrics, such as the number of downloads or views.

Although such open sharing significantly enhances the visibility and accessibility of research, it has also led to considerable tensions with academic publishers.

3. The conflict between ResearchGate and academic publishers

A standard publishing practice is the Copyright Transfer Agreement (CTA), under which the author transfers the full copyright to the publisher. As a result, the author may not legally share the publication outside channels approved by the publisher, including on social networking platforms such as ResearchGate.

An alternative to the CTA is the Licence to Publish (LtP), which may be granted on either an exclusive or a non-exclusive basis. In this model, the author formally retains property rights to the publication but grants the publisher a licence to publish and distribute the work. In practice, however, problems arise. As shown by Coalition S (Rumsey, 2021, 2022), LtP agreements prepared by publishers often take the form of exclusive licences, which in reality restrict authors' rights almost as strongly as a CTA. Consequently, even when a publication is made available under a Creative Commons licence, the right to decide how it may be disseminated often remains with the publisher.

Many authors inadvertently violate the terms of their publishing agreements because they do not always understand which versions of their texts they are legally allowed to share (for example, the preprint, postprint, or the final published version). For many years, ResearchGate did not implement an effective mechanism to verify whether uploaded materials complied with publishing contracts. Complaints from publishers were met with the argument that authors themselves are responsible for ensuring their publications comply with copyright law.

The ability to easily share publications directly on ResearchGate became one of the main factors behind the platform's popularity. It should be noted, however, that a significant proportion of the PDF files uploaded to the platform are protected by copyright, and sharing them in violation of publishing agreements is illegal. This aspect of ResearchGate's activity provoked strong reactions from academic publishers, who argued that the platform facilitated the unlawful distribution of articles for which copyright had been transferred to publishers.

In 2017, a group of major academic publishers—including Elsevier, the American Chemical Society (ACS), Wiley, and Brill—formed the Coalition for Responsible Sharing (2017). Its aim was to take "formal steps to address the illicit dissemination of enormous amounts of published journal articles on ResearchGate's website" and to pressure the platform to limit unlawful practices. The coalition also referred to the Voluntary Principles for Article Sharing on Scholarly Collaboration Networks, developed by the International Association of Scientific, Technical and Medical Publishers (STM, 2015). In the same year, Elsevier and ACS filed a lawsuit against

ResearchGate in Germany and, in 2018, expanded the legal action by filing another lawsuit in the United States (Coalition for Responsible Sharing, 2018).

Under legal pressure, ResearchGate removed a substantial number of unlawfully shared files from the platform (in 2021, around 200,000 articles belonging to ACS and Elsevier). In 2022, a court in Munich ruled that ResearchGate bears partial responsibility for its users' illegal sharing of protected publications. However, it rejected the publishers' claims for damages, as they failed to demonstrate that they held licensing rights from all co-authors of the disputed articles (Chawla, 2022).

In September 2023, Elsevier, ACS, and ResearchGate reached a settlement that allows articles published by ACS and Elsevier to be legally shared on the ResearchGate platform. Although the details of the agreement remain confidential, it is known that ResearchGate will verify publication rights and determine how articles may be shared. Authors may store their articles in a protected version within their private profiles and share them with other users upon request, while the platform will identify materials that can be made publicly available (ResearchGate, 2023a).

While Elsevier and ACS pursued legal action, other members of the Coalition for Responsible Sharing—such as Springer Nature (Springer, 2018), Cambridge University Press, and Thieme—opted for amicable agreements with ResearchGate. Under these arrangements, ResearchGate declared that it would "promptly remove copyright-infringing content when alerted by publishers" and would work with publishers to educate platform users on the lawful sharing of research outputs (ResearchGate, 2018).

4. Publisher-oriented services on ResearchGate

4.1. The ResearchGate Publisher Solutions service

The agreements reached between ResearchGate and academic publishers have enabled the development of the ResearchGate Publisher Solutions service, which consists of three main components:

- Content syndication—allows full-text scholarly articles to be made available to researchers through the ResearchGate platform, both in open access and subscription-based models. Users without full access can view abstracts or the first page of a publication. The service has been operating since 2019.
- Journal Home—a dedicated journal page on the ResearchGate platform, available since 2021, which includes, among other elements, publisher branding, editorial recommendations, and statistics on user activity.
- Open Access Agreement Upgrade (OAAU)—a communication and analytics tool launched in 2024 that informs authors about open access publishing conditions under their institutions' transformative agreements.

Until recently, institutions could access content offered by publishers through two main models. The first consists of subscription agreements signed directly with publishers, in which case publications are available on the publisher's website. The second option involves subscribing through an aggregator that serves as an intermediary in content distribution. The aggregator licenses materials from the publisher and then resells access to institutions that sign agreements with the aggregator. In such cases, the content is hosted on the aggregator's platform (rather than the publisher's), meaning users have access only to materials available through that platform, not directly on the publisher's website.

In the content syndication model, institutions continue to subscribe to content from publishers. At the same time, the publisher additionally distributes the subscribed content through digital platforms, potentially reaching a larger and more diverse audience. For authors, this means that their work is made available not only in traditional journals but also on digital platforms, where access is significantly easier, and the potential reach is broader.

The syndication mechanism involves the publisher transferring a version of the publication known as the version of record (VoR) to a selected platform, where the text is made available and automatically linked to the author's profile—for example, on ResearchGate. In the case of open access publications, the content is freely available to all users. For subscription-based or hybrid publications, access is regulated by user permissions: authorized users can view the full text, while users without access can view abstracts, figures, or the first page of the publication. Authentication is usually multi-stage (this mechanism has been implemented on ResearchGate). First, the user's IP address is checked; if authentication does not occur in this way, the system verifies the user's affiliations and email address.

4.2. The ResearchGate Journal Home service

In 2022, ResearchGate expanded its offer for publishers by introducing the *Journal Home* service. This feature provides centralised ResearchGate landing pages for selected journals. These pages include publisher branding, links to the publisher's official website, editorial information, featured or recommended articles, and updates for followers about newly published content. Publishers can also use the *Editor's Pick* feature, which allows editors to highlight up to three articles per week. In addition, ResearchGate provides publishers with detailed statistics on publication usage, audience demographics, and engagement indicators.

Articles are automatically aggregated on the journal page based on metadata such as the ISSN, publisher information, and DOI records. For journals participating in the *ResearchGate Syndication* programme, article metadata and full texts are synchronised directly from the publisher's feed and linked to the authors' profiles.

4.3. ResearchGate Open Access Agreement Upgrade

In October 2024, ResearchGate introduced the Open Access Agreement Upgrade service (ResearchGate, 2024). This service functions as a tool for both communication and analysis. It enables ResearchGate users who are interested in publishing with a given publisher to obtain direct information on the platform about whether they are eligible to publish an article in open access in a given journal under the agreements held by their institutions (for example, Read & Publish or Transformative Agreements). For publishers, the service acts as a way to promote their open access publishing agreements and to reach potential authors. In addition, publishers receive statistical data on the number of researchers who have browsed journals, interacted with them, or were eligible to publish in open access under existing agreements.

5. Publishers' response

ResearchGate concluded its first content syndication agreement with the publisher Springer Nature in 2019. In 2020, the agreement was extended to include all titles from the Springer catalogue (the previous five years) and from Nature (the previous three years) (Springer, 2020). The publisher decided to expand collaboration following the success of the pilot programme. As indicated in a report jointly prepared by ResearchGate and Springer Nature (Hawkins et al., 2020), downloads increased from 0.6% to 19.5%, and more than 90% of the 700 surveyed authors supported continuing the partnership.

In 2021, a similar agreement was concluded with the publisher Wiley, initially covering 17 open access journals and later expanded to more than 700 titles. As stated in the announcement, "the expanded partnership includes nearly all open access journals published by Wiley, including association journals from the American Geophysical Union (AGU) and the Institution of Engineering and Technology (IET), as well as a broader range of hybrid journals" (ResearchGate, 2023b). In addition, Wiley syndicates 102 subscription or hybrid journals.

A survey of authors publishing with Wiley found that 98% of respondents were satisfied with the visibility of their research on ResearchGate. In 2023, more than 3,800 authors participating directly in the Journal Home programme published over 4,000 articles in Wiley journals. Among these authors, 1,300 had never previously published with Wiley, and 700 had not published with Wiley during the two years preceding the survey. This impact is confirmed by another survey of Wiley authors, in which 91% indicated they would be more likely to submit articles to a journal if they knew their work would be automatically shared on ResearchGate (2023b).

Taylor & Francis has also established cooperation with ResearchGate under the *Journal Home* model. The partnership covers all open access journals and platforms published by Taylor & Francis, including titles published under the Routledge, Dove, and F1000 imprints, as well as a broader range of hybrid journals (ResearchGate, 2024b). In this case as well, the publisher reported considerable success from the collaboration: increased engagement was observed from certain regions (such as Africa and South America), and more than 2,400 authors were encouraged through Journal Home to submit articles (Taylor & Francis, 2025).

Other publishers have also entered into cooperation with ResearchGate, including De Gruyter (an agreement from February 2023 covering 437 open access journals), IGI Global (a 2022 agreement covering its full open access portfolio), as well as publishers such as Hindawi, PLOS, and IntechOpen, and the following associations: the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Meteorological Society, and the American Psychological Association.

Since 2019, ResearchGate has established cooperation with 58 academic publishers worldwide. These agreements primarily concern content syndication and the Journal Home service for journals published under full open access or hybrid models. Fourteen publishers have opted for full cooperation, syndicating all their publications on the platform. In addition to Springer Nature, this group includes Hindawi, the open access publishers PLOS and IntechOpen, as well as the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Meteorological Society, and the American Psychological Association. Among this group, the Royal Society reported a 64% increase in article usage through *Journal Home*, with more than 70% of engagement coming from early-career researchers, doctoral candidates, and postdoctoral researchers (ResearchGate, 2023d). In the Polish academic publishing market, the publisher Termedia has also begun cooperating with ResearchGate, including thirteen fully open access titles in the Journal Home programme.

The publishers that have signed agreements for the Open Access Agreement Upgrade service include Taylor & Francis, De Gruyter, Brill, AIP Publishing, Cambridge University Press, SAGE Publishing, Royal Society, Wiley, BMJ, IOP, and Canadian Science Publishing.

6. Publisher services from ResearchGate: a bittersweet success

The solutions offered by ResearchGate, such as *Publisher Solutions* and *Journal Home*, appear, at first glance, to be attractive to both publishers and authors. Publishers gain greater control over what is shared and when it is made available outside their distribution channels, while authors can legally share their work without concerns about violating their publishing agreements.

However, the agreements between publishers and the platform seem to benefit only authors and their institutions. These arrangements are concluded without the active participation of authors, which means that publishers—not authors—continue to decide how and to what extent publications may be shared. Notably, in most cases, syndication covers only selected journals, and the criteria for title selection are not transparent. As a result, some authors publishing in a given journal may be able to share their work on ResearchGate, while others—even within the same publishing house—do not have this possibility. Such practices raise questions about fairness and transparency.

Another concern arises from restricting the legal sharing of publications to a single platform. This mechanism may limit the potential reach and impact of scientific research. In practice, it means that the communication channel is effectively confined to the community gathered around ResearchGate, excluding other repositories and social media channels.

It is understandable that reaching agreements with publishers was the only viable step for ResearchGate to avoid further lawsuits and to continue its operations. From an open science perspective, however, this form of distribution raises serious concerns. Making publications available in a partially open model—within subscription-based or hybrid journals—does not fully realize the idea of open access. ResearchGate also fails to meet several key requirements of Open Access infrastructure, such as long-term preservation, metadata interoperability, open standards, and transparent governance, as defined by the FAIR principles (Bilder, Lin & Neylon, 2020). ResearchGate was not designed as a long-term repository, and its terms of service permit the removal of content or even the complete closure of the platform, without any guarantee of continued access to the resources hosted there.

Such a centralized, commercial distribution channel, therefore, does not favour open science or the broad dissemination of knowledge. On the contrary, it may further restrict equitable access to research results. In practice, control remains in the hands of corporate actors, offering no assurance of the long-term availability of publications or service stability.

In its press releases announcing agreements with publishers, ResearchGate frequently refers to the idea of open access. In practice, however, the platform's operational model does not fully meet the definition of open access as formulated in the Berlin Declaration (2003), which emphasizes free and unrestricted access to publications without financial or technical barriers. Access to ResearchGate resources requires creating a user account, which poses a clear technical barrier. While such an account is currently free of charge, there is no guarantee this will remain the case in the future. Despite its declarations, the platform also fails to fulfil the principle of the democratization of science.

Moreover, ResearchGate's marketing is directed primarily at the academic community. Individuals outside this community are often unaware of the platform's

existence, which further limits its potential reach. It is estimated that there are approximately 8.8 million active scientists worldwide, and when doctoral candidates and other research staff are included, the number may reach as many as 15 million. ResearchGate, by contrast, reports around 23 million registered users. It should be noted, however, that not all of these accounts belong to active researchers; some belong to students, engineers, practitioners, or inactive users. Consequently, the platform's actual reach may cover only about 40–60% of the global population of researchers, depending on discipline and region.

It is also worth noting that the agreements concluded between publishers and ResearchGate do not represent a broader shift in publishers' general approach to authors' control over their work. Publishing agreements continue to restrict authors' control over their own work, for example, by requiring the transfer of economic rights or by structuring license-to-publish clauses so that the right to further distribute the publication remains with the publisher (Rumsey, 2021, 2022). Authors have repeatedly been warned that sharing full texts on ResearchGate without the publisher's consent may constitute a breach of their publishing agreements, particularly in cases where copyright has been transferred. The agreements concluded between publishers and ResearchGate do not fundamentally change this situation: publishers, as copyright holders, still decide where and in what form a publication may be made available.

Moreover, a review of publishers' policies reveals no significant changes in self-archiving rules following the agreements with ResearchGate. For example, on the websites of publishers such as Wiley (including Hindawi), Springer Nature, or Taylor & Francis, the traditional rules still apply: the submitted version may be self-archived at any time, while the accepted author manuscript may be self-archived only after an embargo period (usually 6–24 months), and that only applies to private or institutional repositories, not to commercial social networking platforms. There may be an exception, as in a brief note on the Taylor & Francis website in the section "Sharing versions of journal articles," titled "Post about article on scholarly collaboration networks (ResearchGate, Academia.edu, etc.)." It indicates that authors may share the AAM version on such platforms after the embargo period. On the Springer Nature website (in the section *Open access policies for journals*), under *Publisher deposition of papers published open access*, there is no reference to syndicating content to ResearchGate. Instead, the information concerns the transfer of content to PubMed Central (PMC) and Europe PubMed Central.

From a legal perspective, the actions of publishers fall within the boundaries of existing regulations. One may nevertheless ask whether they are ethical. Authors who transfer rights to their scholarly output should have full knowledge of where and in what form their publications will subsequently be distributed by the publisher, especially when this occurs through commercial platforms. In many cases, however, authors are not informed—either at the stage of signing the publishing agreement or afterwards—that their publication will be transferred for syndication within

ResearchGate or another platform. This creates a sense of opacity and weakens trust in publishers, particularly in environments where open communication and open science are promoted as fundamental values.

Moreover, there are no mechanisms that allow authors to withdraw consent to the sharing of their publications under such agreements if they do not agree to their work being made available on platforms such as ResearchGate. This represents another example of the transfer of full control to publishers, which runs counter to the idea of open science, in which authors should retain meaningful influence over the fate of their work.

For this reason, despite certain benefits arising from ResearchGate's agreements with publishers, these arrangements should not be regarded as fully consistent with the values of open access as defined by the Berlin Declaration or the FAIR principles. In its current model, ResearchGate remains primarily a social networking platform that facilitates collaboration among researchers and the exchange of knowledge, but it does not function as an open, long-term, and democratic infrastructure in the full sense of the term.

ResearchGate is a for-profit company whose services are designed to generate revenue. From the outset, however, it has cultivated the image of a space created *by* and *for* researchers, intended to facilitate the sharing of research results beyond the traditional, closed system of scholarly publishing. Researchers themselves were meant to form both the foundation and the driving force of the platform. On the platform's website, one can still read: "We put the researcher first." Yet the conclusion of agreements with commercial publishers, without transparent communication with authors, raises doubts about the actual implementation of this declaration. ResearchGate thus becomes a space increasingly shaped by publishers rather than by the community of researchers.

At the same time, publishers' control over how content is shared through ResearchGate may prove to only be ostensible. Journals that rely heavily on ResearchGate as a channel for reaching readers risk losing direct control over their audiences. If ResearchGate changes its terms or algorithms, the visibility of these journals may suffer. Nor does the service truly democratize access to scientific content. Journals that are not partners in the *ResearchGate Syndication programme* may not have access to the platform's full functionality, creating inequalities among journals on the platform.

7. Conclusion

The *Journal Home* feature on ResearchGate represents an important step toward balancing the interests of authors, publishers, and readers. It may help reduce copyright infringement by enabling the legal, controlled sharing of content while

increasing the visibility of scholarly research. In the long run, it may also contribute to changes in the standards of publishing agreements, thereby promoting greater transparency and respect for authors' rights to their own work.

From a long-term open access perspective, however, the solutions implemented by ResearchGate appear to be merely half-measures. The platform operates as a closed channel dependent on commercial decisions—both those of publishers and of the company itself—which may limit equal access to knowledge. Journals that do not have an agreement with ResearchGate may be unable to benefit from the same level of visibility and functionality, potentially deepening inequalities within the scholarly community.

The cooperation between ResearchGate and publishers, therefore, appears to be a compromise solution, but one burdened with significant limitations. It does not offer full openness, does not guarantee stable access to publications, and does not ensure transparency in decision-making. From the perspective of open science and authors' rights within the academic community, further critical reflection and debate are needed.

Ultimately, although ResearchGate has played an important role in promoting the sharing of research results, its current model of cooperation with publishers does not guarantee either genuine openness or the long-term accessibility of publications, leaving authors still subordinate to the decisions of commercial actors.

Translated by Katarzyna Laurent

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Usługi dedykowane wydawcom na ResearchGate: nowy rozdział w relacjach między platformą a wydawcami?

Abstrakt

Cel/Teza: Artykuł przybliża ofertę platformy ResearchGate dedykowaną wydawcom naukowym. Usługi Publisher Solution, Journal Home i Open Access Agreement Upgrade mają na celu usprawnienie prawnej wymiany treści i zwiększenie widoczności publikacji w przestrzeni cyfrowej.

Koncepcja/Metody badań: W artykule opisano ofertę platformy ResearchGate: ResearchGate Publisher Solution, Journal Home oraz ResearchGate Open Access Agreement Upgrade. Przedstawiono współpracę platformy z wydawcami oraz zarysowano jej wpływ na upowszechnianie publikacji naukowych poza obiegiem wydawniczym.

Wyniki i wnioski: Rozwiązania takie jak ResearchGate Publisher Solution i Journal Home, pomimo niekwestionowanych zalet, stawiają pytania dotyczące zgodności z zasadami otwartej nauki i ich rzeczywistego wpływu na długoterminową dostępność badań naukowych.

Oryginalność/Wartość poznawcza: Oferta dla wydawców platformy ResearchGate to zupełnie nowe podejście do kwestii rozpowszechniania publikacji naukowych poza obiegiem wydawniczym. Ze względu na to, że jest to dość nowe zjawisko, konieczne będą dalsze analizy i badania. Niniejsza publikacja sygnalizuje temat i może posłużyć jako wstęp do dalszych badań.

Słowa kluczowe

Akademickie sieci społecznościowe. Czasopisma naukowe. Komunikacja naukowa. Otwarty dostęp. ResearchGate. Umowy wydawnicze.

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