

**How open are hybrid journals included in transformative agreements?**

Najko Jahn

Göttingen State and University Library, University of Göttingen

Platz der Göttinger Sieben 1, 37073 Göttingen, Germany

najko.jahn@sub.uni-goettingen.de

## Abstract

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### Introduction

For over two decades, hybrid open access journal publishing, which makes some articles freely available under an open license while others remain behind a paywall, has been discussed as a model for transitioning the subscription system to full open access (Prosser, 2003). The idea was that when journals publish more and more open access articles, they could reduce revenues from subscriptions, while libraries and funders could change their funding models and shift expenditures from subscription to open access. However, initial approaches, mainly based on publication fees, also called article processing charges (APCs), did not contribute substantially to an large open access uptake. In 2012 ddd - at the same time

The introduction of transformative agreements, a collective term for agreements starting from mid-2015, has resulted in a new push for hybrid open access. In particular, the Max Planck Society's Berlin 2020 initiative and plan has advocated these types of agreements as a transitional means to progress with open access. As a result, more than 800 transformative agreements have been tracked so far, which have been instrumental in funding activities and controversies. today, all publishers offer such agreements

Advocates of these agreements argue that they not only overcome the issue of double-dipping but also help to shift library spending from subscriptions to publications, streamline expenditures, and offer more value than big deals, which focus on large publishers. A few agreements can impact an institution's open access share, resulting in a significant proportion of open access content. increase transparency

However, opponents of transformative agreements perceive continued reliance on big deals as problematic. They argue that the focus on large publishers perpetuates the business relationships that led to the serial crisis and lacks evidence that this leads to a reduction of In addition, concerns over inequality abound. could not be mass removal

Effects can be seen, mixed consequences. some countries who have introduced this fundign effects netherlands, sweden. no in germany, elsevier deal to price reduction and first steps towards more privacy. however, main goals associated with

transformative, the transition of the journal landscape not achieved, publishers were not able to meet growth target, Sweden did not see the flipping and has

This study contributes

## Methods and data

This study combines data from multiple publicly available data sources as diagrammatically shown in Figure 1. Initially, transformative agreement data retrieved from the cOAlition S Journal Checker Tool provided information about journal portfolios and participating institutions. After identification of hybrid journals by excluding full open access journals, Crossref served as the primary data source for article-level metadata including Creative Commons (CC) license information to indicate open access availability on publisher websites. To determine open access articles published through transformative agreements, first author affiliations from OpenAlex (Priem et al., 2022) were subsequently linked to eligible institutions according to the transformative agreement data.

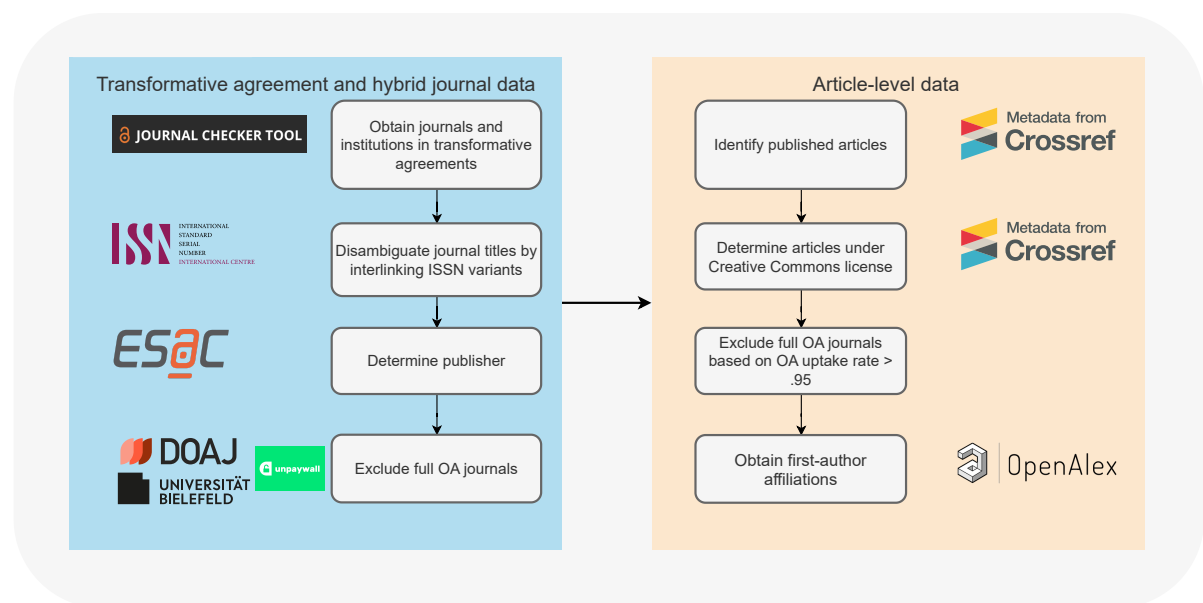


Figure 1. Data collection workflow

## Transformative agreement and hybrid journal data

Data gathering started with obtaining journals included in transformative agreements from the publicly available Transformative Agreement Data dump<sup>1</sup> used by the cOAlition S Journal Checker Tool.<sup>2</sup> The dump consists of multiple online Google spreadsheets where each data file represents one agreement listed in the ESAC Transformative Agreement Registry.<sup>3</sup> From the retrieved spreadsheet files, journals and institutions involved per agreement were obtained.

A limitation of using the Journal Checker Tool and its underlying publicly available data dump to study the development of transformative agreements over time is that expired transformative agreements are constantly removed. To address this, four different snapshots were safeguarded and combined for this study: self-archived versions from July 2021, July 2022, and May 2023, as well as the most current dump downloaded on 11 December 2023. This ensured that transformative agreements, which ended from 2021 onwards, were included, representing the majority of transformative agreements. Overall, the four combined Transformative Agreement Data dumps used in this study contained 729 out of 869 agreements listed in the ESAC registry by December 2023.

The Transformative Agreement Data dumps link agreements to journals represented by journal names and ISSN. After mapping ISSN variants to the corresponding linking ISSN (ISSN-L) as provided by the ISSN International Centre, journals were associated to publishers using the ESAC ID, a unique identifier for transformative agreements in the ESAC Transformative Agreement Registry. Furthermore, journal subjects according to the All Science Journal Classification code (ASJC) were added from the Scopus journal source list as of August 2023.

Because transformative agreements can include both full open access and hybrid journals, the data were complemented with information about a journal's open access

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<sup>1</sup> <https://journalcheckertool.org/transformative-agreements/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.coalition-s.org/blog/enabling-accurate-results-within-the-journal-checker-tool/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://esac-initiative.org/about/transformative-agreements/agreement-registry/>

status using multiple sources: the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ) downloaded on 12 December 2023<sup>4</sup>, OpenAlex (November 2023) and the the Bielefeld list of GOLD OA journals (Bruns et al., 2022). As shown in Figure 2A, combining different data sources considerably extended the journal matching to exclude full open access journals from transformative agreements. In total, 3,439 full open access journals were excluded based on ISSN matching. The overlap between the three data sources was 72%. The Gold OA journals dataset alone added 176 journals, while the DOAJ comprised 10 full open access journals not listed in either of the other two sources. These full open access journals were mostly launched in 2022.

### **Article and author metadata**

After identifying hybrid journals included in transformative agreements, article metadata was retrieved from the Crossref November 2023 database snapshot for the five-year period 2018 to 2022 according to the issued date, representing the earliest known publication date. Because Crossref metadata lacked information to distinguish between original research articles including review and other types of journal content, which are often not covered by transformative agreements (Borrego et al., 2020), only articles published in regular issues indicated by non-numeric pagination were included. Furthermore, an expanded version of Unpaywall’s paratext recognition approach was applied to exclude non-scholarly journal content such as table of contents.

Open access articles in hybrid journals were identified through Creative Commons (CC) license information in Crossref metadata. License information relative to the “accepted manuscript (AM)” version were not considered. Crossref was used for open access identification because transformative agreements workflows generally require publishers to deliver CC license information to this DOI registration agency (Geschuhn & Stone, 2017). Comparing Crossref license coverage with OpenAlex, which re-uses open access evidence from Unpaywall, a widely used open access discovery service that also parses journal websites for open content licenses (Piwowar et al., 2018), highlighted ongoing challenges to identify hybrid open access (Butler et al., 2023; Jahn et al., 2021;

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<sup>4</sup> <https://doaj.org/csv>

Martín-Martín et al., 2018; Zhang et al., 2022). Here, 742,369 articles with CC license were retrieved using Crossref, while 950,260 articles were tagged as “hybrid” according to the OpenAlex November 2023 release, which was used throughout this study. The biggest differences concerned articles published between 2018 and 2020. In 2022, however, Crossref and OpenAlex open access numbers only differ slightly (249,511 records using Crossref vs. 255,344 in OpenAlex). Notable difference could be furthermore observed among some publishers that presumably did not provide CC license information to Crossref including AIP Publishing, American Physiological Society and Emerald. Crossref license metadata was more complete with regard to articles from the publisher Wiley and American Chemical Society. Finally, inconsistent open access status information in previous OpenAlex versions was observed (Jahn et al., 2023). According to the OpenAlex release notes, fixing this issue was still ongoing, which might also explain this discrepancy.

After retrieving article metadata, the publication volume including open access was calculated per journal. To improve the identification of hybrid journals, journals with an open access proportion above 95% were excluded. This further step allowed to remove additional 241 full open access journals.

Affiliation metadata about corresponding authors are crucial for the planning and evaluation of transformative agreements, because they are considered to be responsible to arrange open access publication (Borrego et al., 2020; Geschuhn & Stone, 2017; Schimmer et al., 2015). Here, country and institutional affiliations were retrieved from OpenAlex. However, because of low coverage in OpenAlex, this study focused on first authors and their affiliations instead. First authors typically contribute most to a paper and are often considered lead author research papers (Larivière et al., 2016), and can be therefore assumed as a proxy to measure to open access payments (Zhang et al., 2022). Overall, around 90% of studied articles had first author affiliation metadata in OpenAlex, whereas the coverage of articles with corresponding author information was around 54%.

To assess the impact of transformative agreements to hybrid open access,

participating institutions from the Transformative Agreement Data dump, which were crowd-sourced from the agreements and consortia that successfully negotiated an agreement, were matched with first author affiliations recorded by OpenAlex using the ROR-ID. The matching also took into account the duration of an agreement according to the ESAC registry. Upon inspection, Transformative Agreement Data did not cover associated institutions comprehensively like university hospitals or institutes of large research organisations like the Max Planck Society. To improve the matching, Transformative Agreement Data was automatically enriched with associated organisations using OpenAlex’s institution entity.

In total, the compiled data set consists of 8,922,146 articles published in 12,857 hybrid journals between 2018 and 2022 (see Figure 2B). Hybrid journals included in transformative agreements represented 40% of total global output over the same time period according to Crossref, while full open access journals accounted for 35% of total article volume.

## **Data Analysis**

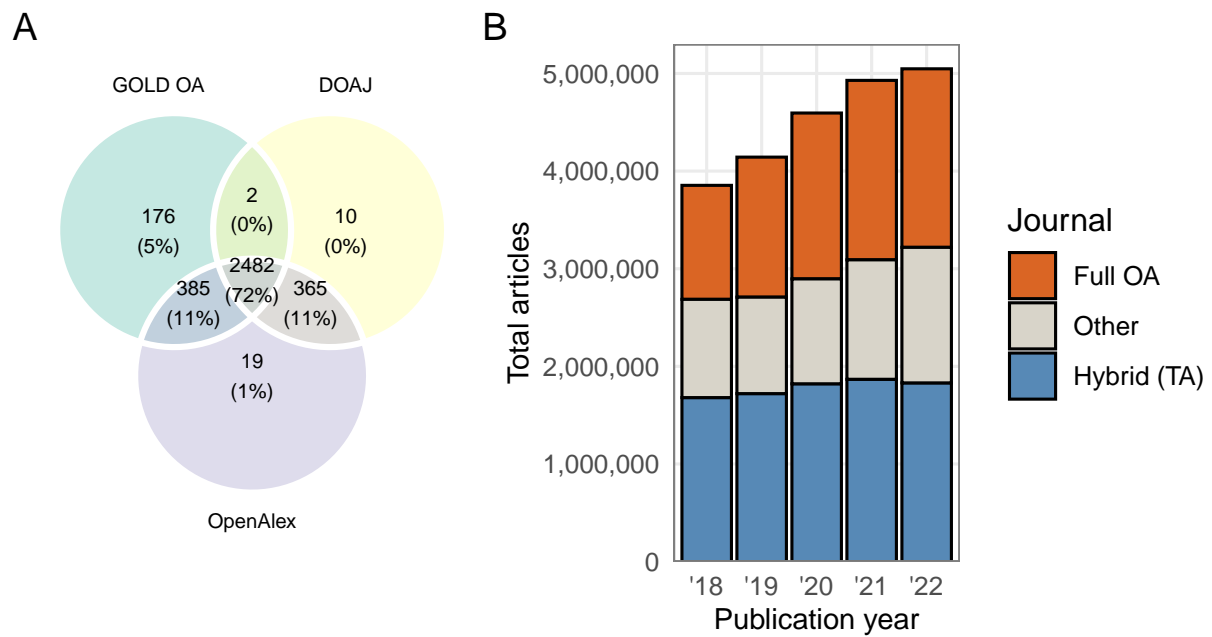
Throughout this mostly automated data gathering and analysis process, we used tools from the Tidyverse (Wickham et al., 2019) for the R programming language (R Core Team, 2020). The resulting data is openly available through an R package, `hoaddata`. Following Marwick et al. (2018), `hoaddata` contains not only the datasets used in the data analysis. It also includes code used to compile the data by connecting it the cloud-based Google Big Query data warehouse, where the big scholarly data from Crossref, OpenAlex and Unpaywall were imported. To increase the computational reproducibility, the R package was automatically built using GitHub Actions, a continuous integration service.

## **Results**

### **Overview**

Between 2018 and 2022, a total of 11,189 out of 12,857 hybrid journals in transformative agreements published at least one open access article under a Creative Commons license. During this period, these hybrid journals provided open access to



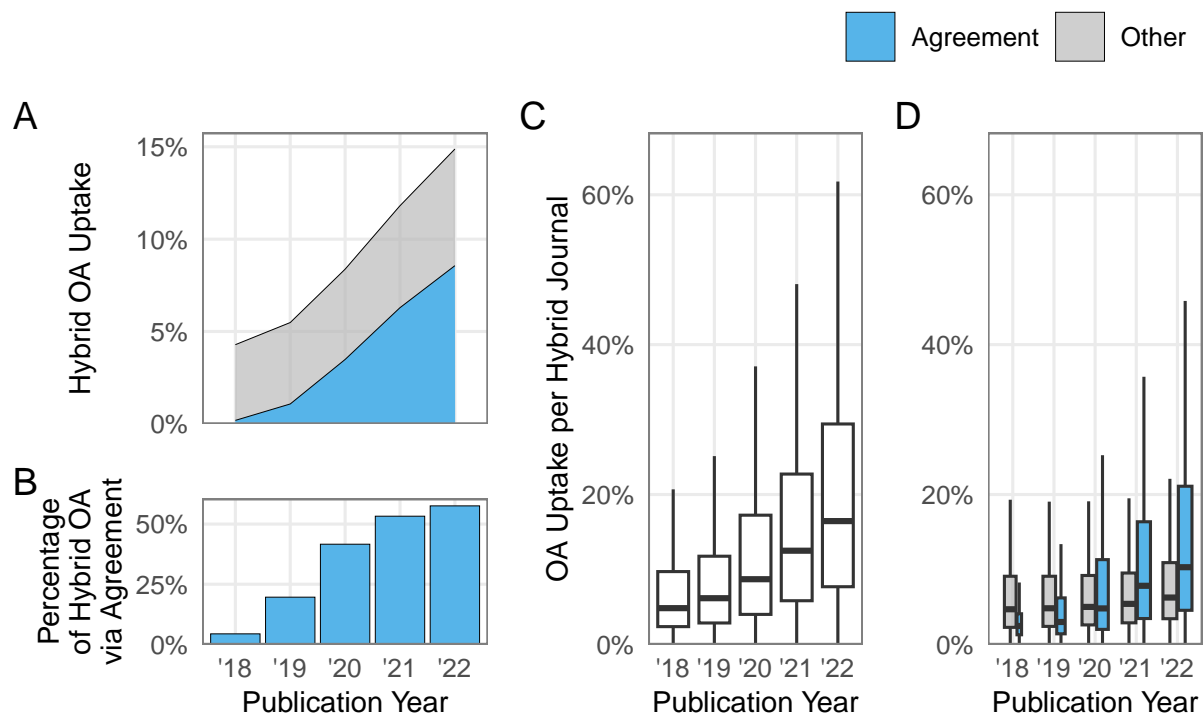


*Figure 2.* Initial data characteristics. (A) Full open access journals included in transformative agreements by evidence source Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ), OpenAlex and the Bielefeld GOLD OA list. (B) Number of articles in Crossref by journal types. The blue bars show the overall article volume of hybrid journals in transformative agreements, which were initially included in the study, in comparison with full open access journals according to OpenAlex. The remainder represents closed access journals not covered by transformative agreements.

742,369 out of 8,146,958 articles, representing a five-year open access proportion of 9.1%. Authors who could make use of transformative agreements at the time of publication contributed 328,957 open access articles to the total.

Figure 3A shows a moderate growth in the proportion of open access articles in hybrid journals, comparing the overall open access uptake and the impact of transformative agreements on this trend. Over the five-years period from 2018 to 2022, open access increased from 4.3% ( $n = 65,486$ ) to 15% ( $n = 249,511$ ). At the same time, the total article volume of the investigated journals grew from 1,528,051 in 2018 to 1,676,928 in 2022.

Figure 3B highlights that the majority of open access articles in hybrid journals were made available through transformative agreements in 2021 and 2022, contributing



*Figure 3.* Relative growth of open access in hybrid journals in transformative agreements between 2018 and 2022 per publication year. The blue areas represent open access through transformative agreements, the grey areas depict open access articles where no link to an agreement could be established (according to matching OpenAlex first author affiliations matched with cOAlition S transformative agreement data). (A) Proportion of open access articles in hybrid journals per year. (B) Percentage of hybrid open access via agreements per year. Boxplots show the proportion of open access articles by individual hybrid journals (C) and individual open access uptake rates by individual hybrid journals and open access funding (D) per publication year. The individual outliers are not shown. Note that data on transformative agreements ending before June 2021 were not available for this study.

58% of the total open access article volume in 2022. However, there was also a notable growth in open access provision through individual publication fees, which increased from 4.1% ( $n = 62,625$ ) in 2018 to 6.3% ( $n = 105,896$ ). This suggests that publishers were able to gain equally from individual and institutional open access publishing options.

Figure 3C depicts the substantial variations among the hybrid journals included in

transformative agreements in terms of open access uptake. Although the median generally follows the trend shown in Figure 3A, the farther stretch of upper quartiles and whiskers over the years illustrates that an increasing number of journals published an above-average proportion of open access articles. In 2022, 25% of hybrid journals ( $n = 2,576$ ) had an open access uptake of 29%, and 6.6% of journals ( $n = 744$ ) provided the majority of their articles under a Creative Commons license in the same year. These journals were, on average, smaller ( $M = 75$ ,  $SD = 186$ ) than those with an open access share below 50% ( $M = 164$ ,  $SD = 347$ ). Notable exception of large journals with an above-average open access proportion were Physical Review D, a high-energy physics journal covered by the SCOAP3 consortium that provided open access to 2,341 out of 4,074 articles in 2022, Astronomy and Physics (1,396 out of 2,230 articles in 2022 were open access), which shifted to a subscribe to open business model for all accepted articles as of April 2022, and the Journal of Fluid Mechanics (577 of 1,077 articles in 2022 were open access).

When comparing the impact of open access through transformative agreements across journals, it shows that for many journals these agreements substantially contributed to the growth of open access over the years (Figure 3D). Examples of such journals include those with a scope on specific countries or regions, where also transformative agreements were implemented. For instance, in 2022, the Germany-based journals *Zeitschrift für Erziehungswissenschaft* and *Zeitschrift für Politikwissenschaft*, as well as the Scandinavian Political Studies addressing the Nordic countries, achieved an overall open access uptake of more than 90% just through transformative agreements. Despite the rise in transformative agreements, it is worth noting that other means of publishing open access in hybrid journals remained common. In total, 9,153 journals published open access articles from authors affiliated with institutions without transformative agreements in place, while 8,780 journals published at least one open access article through a transformative agreement in the same year.

## Publishing market

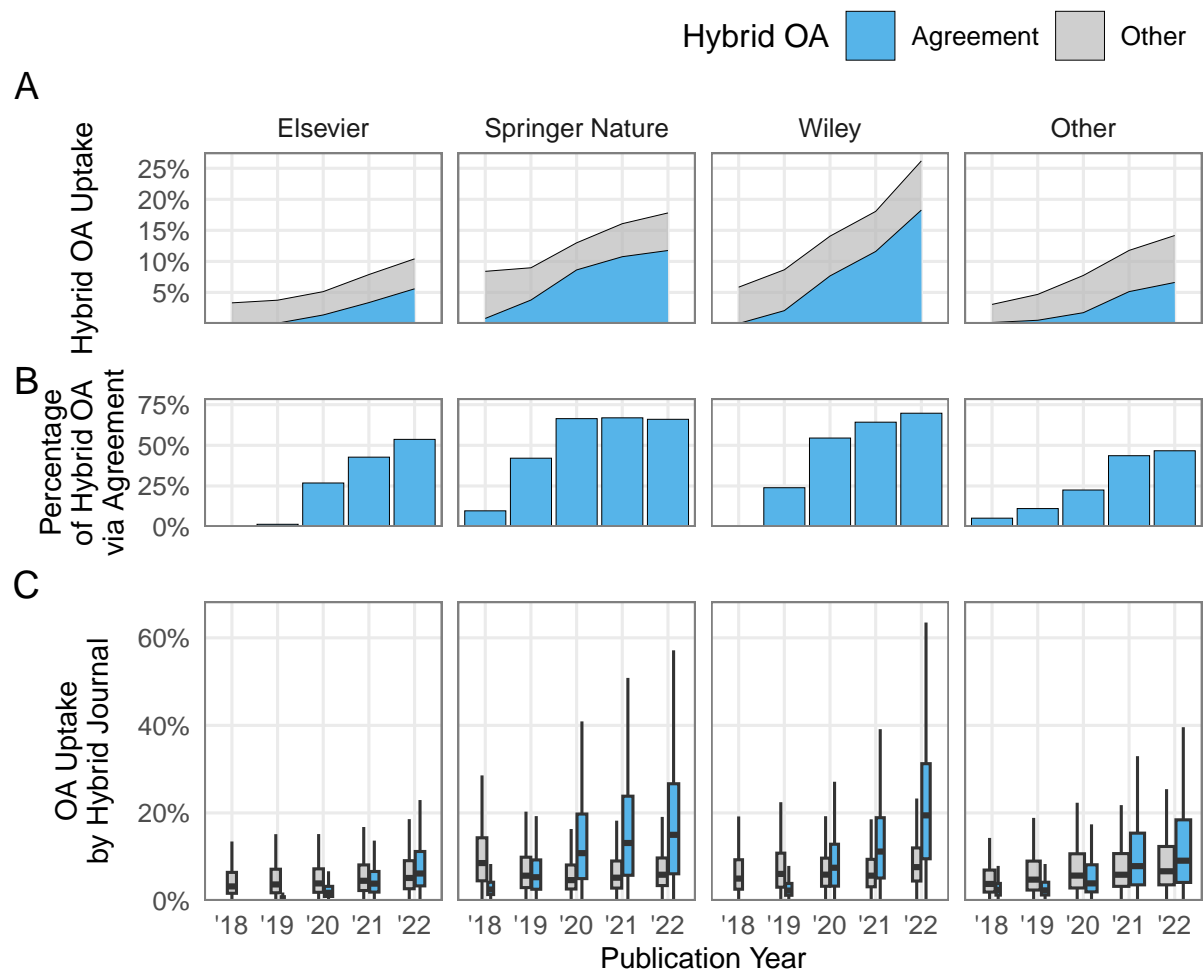
Table 1

*Hybrid open access through transformative agreements market shares 2018-2022*

Publisher	Hybrid journals		Articles		OA articles		TA OA articles	
	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%
Elsevier	1,936	17	2,770,826	33.8	172,723	22.9	60,440	18.3
Springer Nature	2,274	20	1,330,430	16.2	175,432	23.3	100,008	30.3
Wiley	1,410	12.4	1,043,052	12.7	152,723	20.3	83,443	25.3
Other	5,767	50.6	3,061,337	37.3	252,523	33.5	86,294	26.1

Analysing hybrid open access across publishers between 2018 and 2022 reveals a large market concentration. Although 48 publishers offered transformative agreements, the big three commercial publishers Elsevier, Springer Nature, and Wiley, accounted for 49% of total article volume published (see Table 1). Together, they published 500,878 open access articles, representing 66% of the open access articles in hybrid journals. Elsevier, Springer Nature, and Wiley made 243,891 articles open access in hybrid journals through transformative agreements, resulting in an even larger market share of 74%. However, there are differences among the three large publishers. Although Elsevier published the largest volume of articles ( $n = 2,770,826$ , 34%), it published a relatively low number of open access articles, including those that can be associated with transformative agreements. In contrast, Springer Nature and Wiley provided open access to a larger proportion of their articles (13% of Springer Nature articles and 15% of Wiley articles were open access), leading to higher open access market shares (23% Springer Nature resp. 23% Wiley). This difference between Elsevier on the one hand and Springer Nature and Wiley on the other can be attributed to transformative agreements, as the latter made the majority of their open access articles available through such deals (Springer Nature 57% resp. Wiley 55%).

Figure 4 takes a closer look into the growth of hybrid open access across publishers



*Figure 4.* Development of open access in hybrid journals included in transformative agreements between 2018 and 2022 by publishers. The blue areas represent open access through transformative agreements, the grey areas depict open access articles where no link to an agreement could be established (according to matching OpenAlex first author affiliations matched with cOAlition S transformative agreement data). (A) Proportion of open access articles in hybrid journals per year and publisher. (B) Percentage of hybrid open access via agreements per year and publisher. Boxplots (C) show individual open access uptake rates by individual hybrid journals and open access funding per publication year and publisher. The individual outliers are not shown. Note that data on transformative agreements ending before June 2021 were not available for this study.

by year with a focus on open articles enabled by transformative agreements. Although all publishers show a general long-term trend towards transformative agreements, Figure 4A and B indicate that, in particular, Wiley's has experienced a substantial increase in

its open access share from 5.9% ( $n = 11,628$ ) in 2018 to 26% ( $n = 53,503$ ) in 2022, representing an 4.5-fold increase. In contrast, Elsevier's hybrid journals demonstrated a more modest increase, from 3.3% ( $n = 16,872$ ) in 2018 to 10% ( $n = 60,821$ ) in 2022, which is a relatively low open access share compared to the general trend. In 2018, Springer Nature had the largest open access proportion among the three publishers of 8.4% ( $n = 19,701$ ), but experienced a relatively slower growth, resulting in 18% ( $n = 52,616$ ) of articles being open access in Springer Nature hybrid journals in 2022.

The varying degrees of uptake of open access across the three major publishers can be attributed to distinct approaches to transformative agreements. Springer Nature, for example, began in 2015 offering selected consortia, such as the Max Planck Society, the Swedish Bibsam consortium, and the Finnish FinELib consortium, open access agreements for its hybrid journal portfolio under the name Springer Compact<sup>5</sup>. However, these agreements were not included in the data as they concluded prior to the start of the transformative agreement data collection in June 2021. Nonetheless, the results suggest the importance of central agreements for Springer Nature's hybrid open access business over the past five years (Figure 2B). In 2022, 66% ( $n = 34,725$ ) of open access articles in f Springer Nature hybrid journals were enabled through transformative agreements. In the same year, 70% ( $n = 37,316$ ) of Wiley's open access articles could be linked to transformative agreements in 2022. In contrast, Elsevier published fewer than half of its open access articles through transformative agreements ( $n = 32,627$ ; 54%).

The increasing trend towards transformative agreements can be also observed at the journal-level (Figure 4C). While no substantial differences between open access enabled through transformative agreements and other revenue source could observed across Elsevier journals, the distribution of open access across Springer Nature and Wiley hybrid journals indicates that the growth is not limited to a few journals, but extends across the portfolio. In particular, Wiley's upper quantile, which represents the top 25% of journals in terms of the proportion of open access articles from

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<sup>5</sup> [https://web.archive.org/web/20180414062853id\\_/http://www.liber2015.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Springer-Compact.pdf](https://web.archive.org/web/20180414062853id_/http://www.liber2015.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Springer-Compact.pdf)

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transformative agreements, increased markedly from 13% in 2020 to 31% in 2022. At the same time, the median proportion grew from 7.5% to 19%. It is interesting to note that a small but increasing number of journals from these two publishers are providing open access to the majority of articles through transformative agreements. Wiley recorded 68 and Springer Nature 102 hybrid journals with an open access share above 50% that could be solely attributed to transformative agreements. Upon inspection, these journals were mainly society or local language journals with a small yearly article volume.

### Journal subjects

Table 2 presents a high-level overview of hybrid open access by AJCS subject area using fractionalised counting to account for journals belonging to more than one category. Between 2018 and 2022, most hybrid journals with at least one open articles could be attributed to the social sciences including the humanities. However, these journals published the fewest number of articles, whereas physical sciences journals recorded most articles, followed by the health sciences and the life sciences. In terms of open access, physical sciences journals accounted for more than one third of articles published in the five-years period, followed by the health science, the social sciences and the life sciences.

Table 2

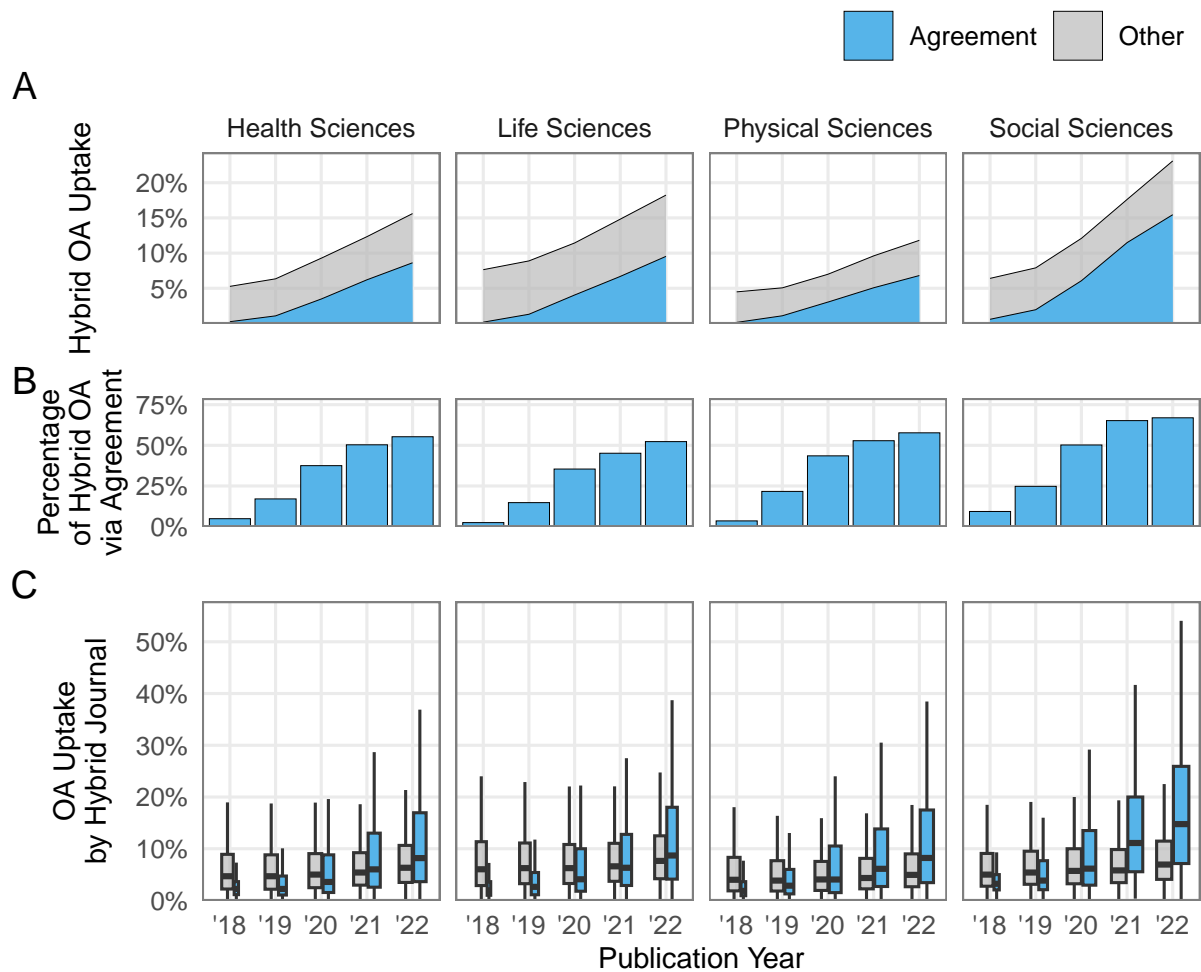
*Hybrid open access through transformative agreements by journal subject 2018-2022*

Journal subject	Hybrid journals		Articles		OA articles		TA OA articles	
	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%
Health Sciences	2,376	22.5	2,709,906	27.8	286,592	27.3	117,746	25
Life Sciences	1,403	13.3	1,477,808	15.1	191,880	18.3	71,593	15.2
Physical Sciences	2,732	25.9	4,291,833	44	366,794	35	167,686	35.6
Social Sciences	4,050	38.3	1,280,460	13.1	203,461	19.4	114,190	24.2

Figure ?? presents the relative growth of hybrid open access by subject area

between 2018-2022. In particular, Social Sciences and Humanities journals accounted for the strongest growth in the five-years period from 6.4% ( $n = 8,361$ ) to 23% ( $n = 51,938$ ), followed by the Life Science from 7.6% ( $n = 15,003$ ) to 18% ( $n = 39,494$ ), Health Science from 5.3% ( $n = 18,279$ ) to 16% ( $n = 63,089$ ) and Physical Sciences from 4.5% ( $n = 22,364$ ) to 12% ( $n = 85,428$ ). This growth in the social sciences can be largely attributed to transformative agreements. In 2022, two-third of open access articles (67%,  $n = 34,759$ ) were published by first authors affiliated with participating institutions (see ??B). Figure ??C shows that this trend is consistent across Social Sciences journals. In 2022, 25% of Social Science journals provided open access to at least every fourth article exclusively through transformative agreements. However, hybrid open access through transformative agreements played a comparable lesser role in the Life Sciences and Health Sciences. In these two subject areas, only about half of the open access articles can be linked to these agreements, both overall and on median average across journals. In contrast, the majority of Physical Science Journals, shows an increase of open access through transformative agreements compared to other options to publish open access in hybrid journals.





### Comparing countries

Between 2018 and 2022, Western economies almost exclusively dominated hybrid open access publishing through transformative agreements. During this period, first-authors affiliated with institutions from Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) member countries published 602,050 open access articles in hybrid journals, representing 81% of the investigated open access articles. This disparity between OECD nations and other countries becomes even more evident when considering open access through transformative agreements, as 310,712 of 328,957, or 94% of open access articles were associated with such agreements.

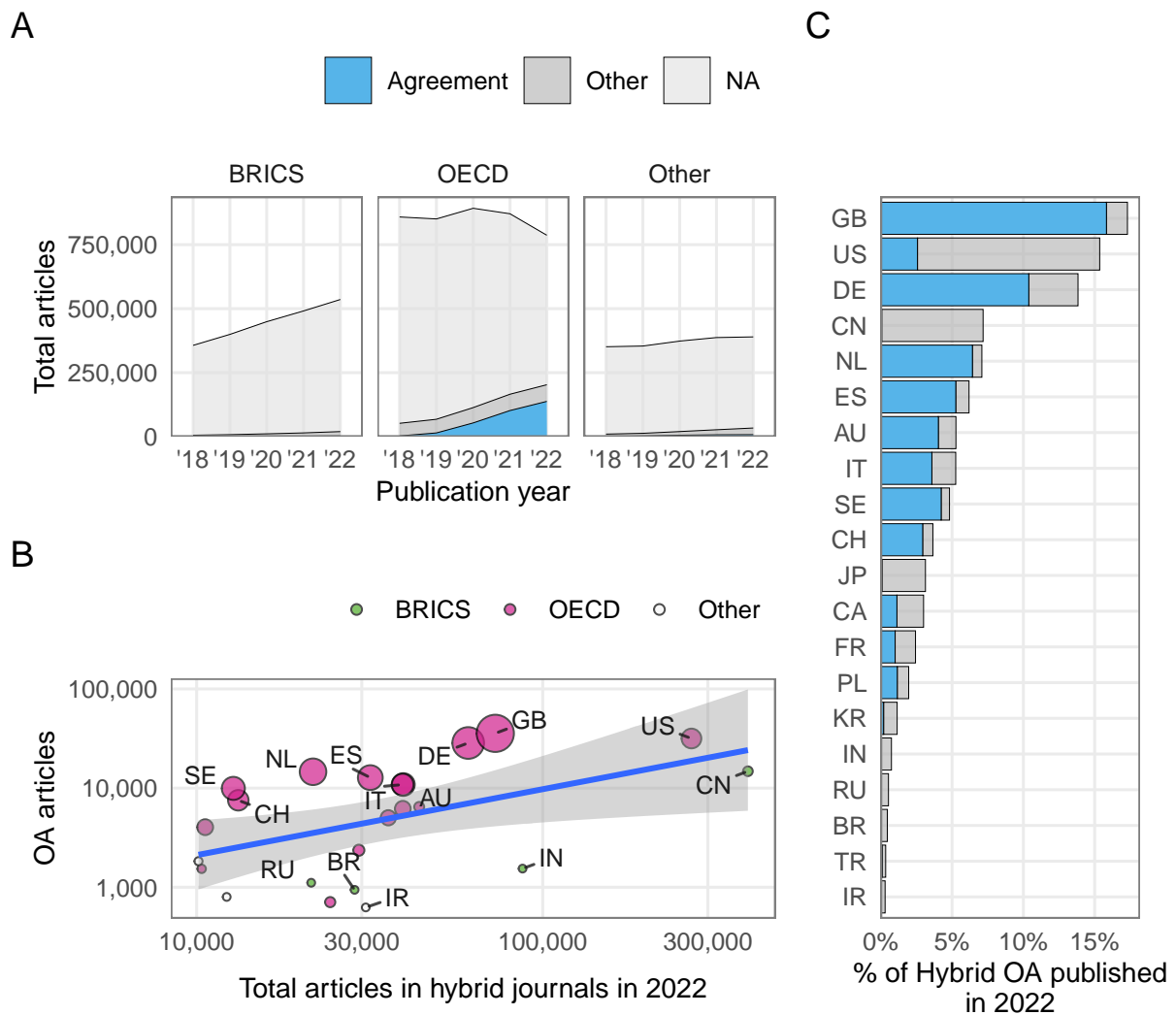
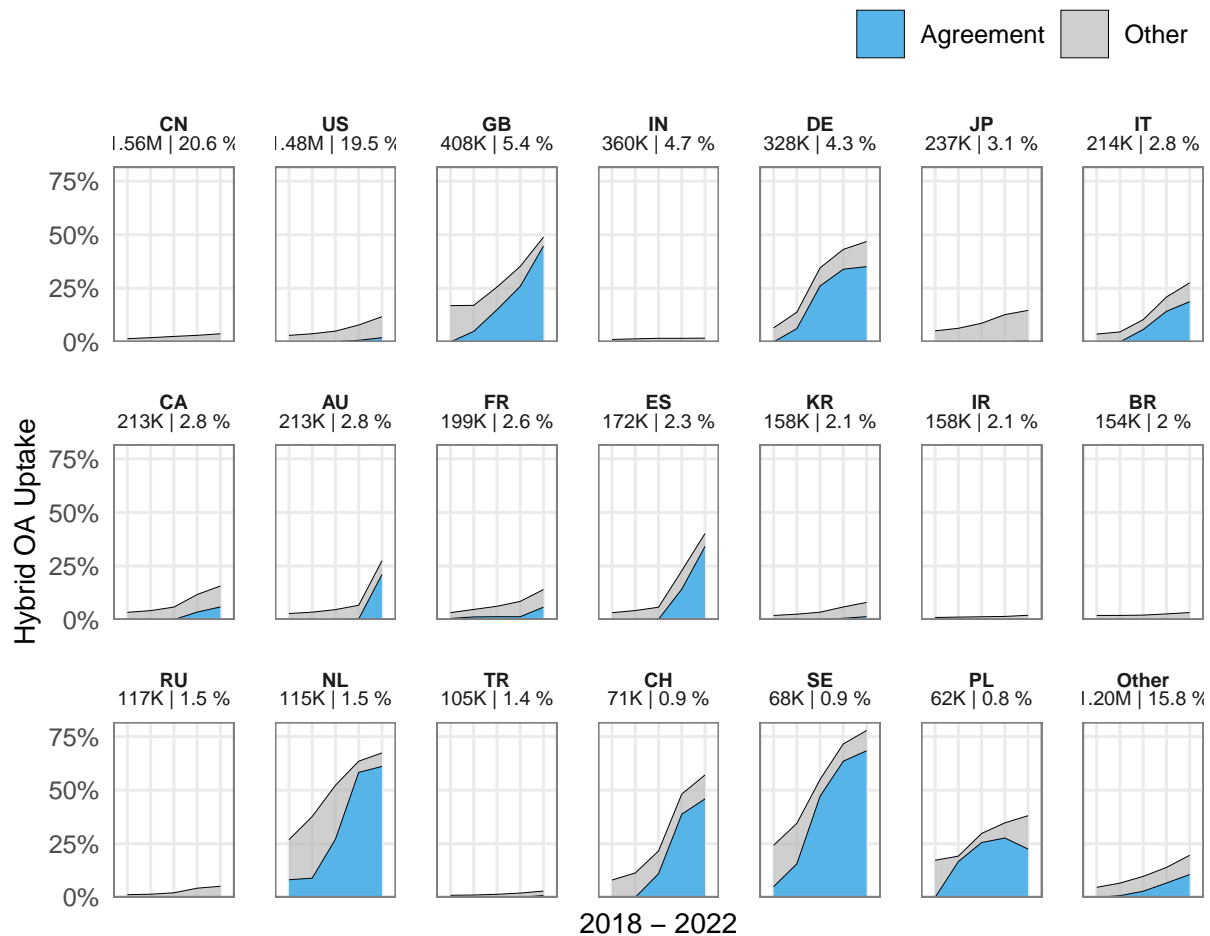


Figure ??A shows the development of hybrid open access publishing by countries, comparing the OECD area with the BRICS, an intergovernmental organisation, which comprised the countries Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa in 2022. The residual category “Other” includes the remaining countries. From 2018 to 2022, the proportion of open access in hybrid journals increased from 6.1% in 2018 to 26% in 2022. On the other hand, BRICS recorded a low uptake, from 1.6% in 2018 to 3.7% in 2022.

Despite rise of open access across OECD countries, the overall publication output decreased sharply, dropping to 786,903 in 2022 after peaking 892,197 articles in 2020. In stark contrast, the number of articles published in hybrid journals by first authors affiliated with institutions from BRICS countries increased steadily over the years, more than doubling from 356,632 in 2018 to 786,903 in 2022. Upon closer examination, this trend can be observed across all big three publishers, although the shift towards BRICS

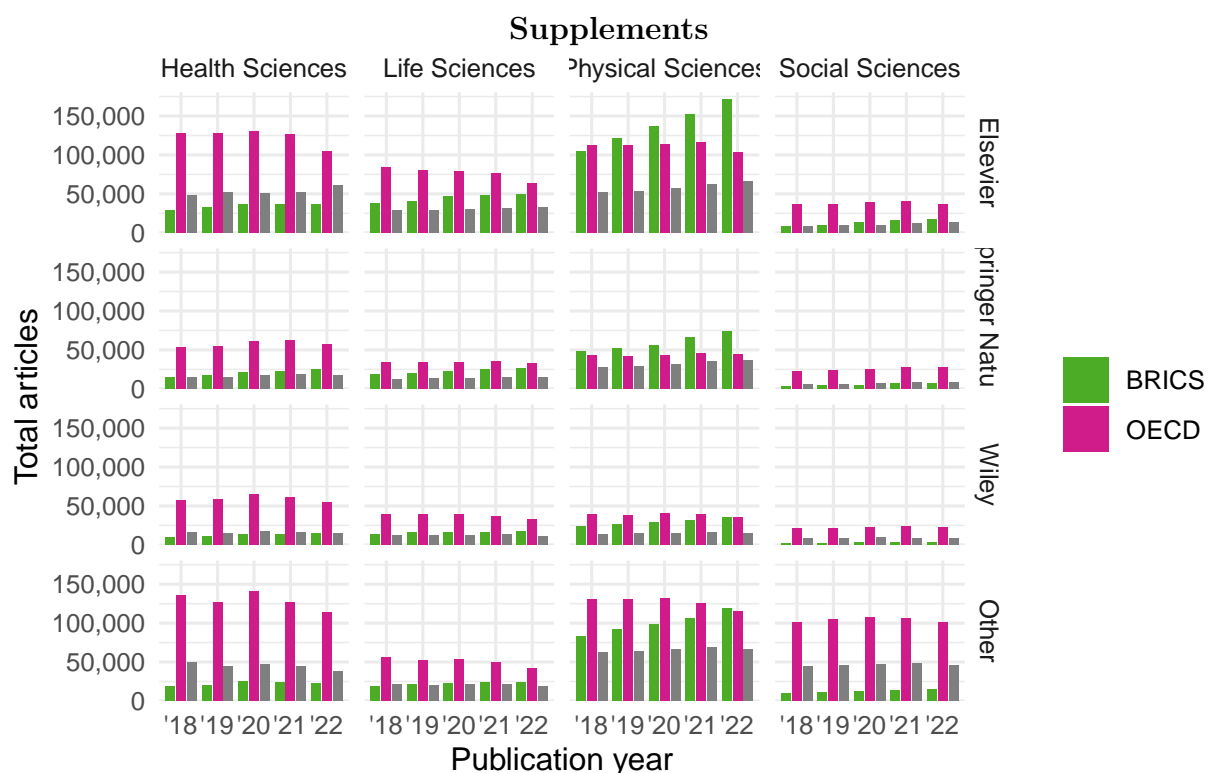
is particularly evident in Elsevier's hybrid journal portfolio, in particular with regard to articles published in Physical Sciences journals (see Supplement). While OECD publication output in Elsevier's Physical Sciences journals declined from 112,822 articles in 2018 to 103,766 in 2022, BRICS output increased from 104,654 to 171,713 in the same five-year period. Furthermore, OECD publication output in Health Science Journals and Life Science journals stagnated across the investigated hybrid journal portfolios after a peak in 2020.

To illustrate the situation in 2022, ??B compares total publication output with the number of open access articles. With 391,530 articles, China was the most productive country, followed by the United States (268,965 articles) and India (87,428 articles). In contrast, West and Nord European countries published a considerable high number of open access articles, mainly due to transformative agreements. Particularly, Germany, Great Britain, the Netherlands, Sweden, Switzerland and Spain recorded an above-average open access share as indicated by the linear trend line. As represented by the point size, as well as it can be seen in Figure ??C, transformative agreements contributed to this market position of these countries. Interestingly, the United States had a notable open access market share of 15%, although transformative agreements contributed to a lesser extent. Similarly, China's open access market share of 7.2 in 2022 was comparable to that of the Netherlands, which was (7.1%,).



proliferation of transformative agreements differed across these countries. For instance, Germany successfully negotiated an agreement with Elsevier not until 2023.

Additionally, publication limits or eligibility criteria for institutions and article types may explain why even countries with widespread agreement implementation do not achieve 100% hybrid open access. Interestingly, in Japan and the US other options than transformative agreements were the main driver for the increase in hybrid open access. Once again, the graph highlights countries with low hybrid open access, particularly non-OECD countries, where only a few or no agreements were in place.



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