

UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCE

Making Your Research Free May Cost You

By [Stephanie M. Lee](#) August 28, 2025



ILLUSTRATION BY THE CHRONICLE

Stephanie Rolin, a mental-health services researcher, found out last month that a journal had accepted her latest paper for publication. But there was an asterisk. *Community Mental Health Journal* was requiring her to fork over about \$4,400 — a fee that she hadn't budgeted for, and one she says she cannot afford.

The journal's parent company, Springer Nature, was levying the charge in response to Rolin's funder, the National Institutes of Health. In effect, she'd been caught in a battle between one of the world's biggest publishers of scientific research and the world's biggest sponsor of biomedical research.



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Ironically, the fight is over how to make research free.

Most studies appear in paywalled journals, and critics have long contended that those paywalls enrich publishers while gatekeeping taxpayers from the research they fund. The NIH has been pushing for more openness in the ecosystem into which it pours nearly \$48 billion annually, and its biggest move yet took effect on July 1. Under a policy that was approved by the Biden administration to

take effect at the end of 2025, and moved up six months by the Trump administration, all agency-funded research must now [be made freely and immediately available](#). The previous policy had allowed papers to stay paywalled for up to a year.

But since July 1, some publishers have only given researchers one way to comply with the NIH's mandate: paying fees that were previously optional. In a year when federal funding has been exceptionally unreliable, scientists say they are stressed about spending thousands of grant dollars on unexpected and questionable open-access charges.

Things don't have to be this way, open-science experts say: These fees are imposed entirely by publishers. The most prominent examples are Springer Nature and Elsevier, for-profit enterprises that generate billions in revenue. "It's because they perceive it as a hit to their bottom line," said Christopher Steven Marcum, who helped draft the federal government's open-science data policy during the Biden administration. "They're driven by market behavior. They're responsible to shareholders, and not to the research community."

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When Rolin submitted to *Community Mental Health Journal* earlier this year, she expected the process to go as it had when she'd published in its pages before. At the time, Springer Nature — which sets policies for the 3,000-plus journals under its umbrella — gave NIH-funded authors a "hybrid" of two choices. They could pay an open-access fee to make their study available right away. Or, for free, they could put their paper behind the journal's paywall while preparing a second copy that was identical save for formatting changes and copy edits. Within 12 months of journal publication, this author's version would become openly available on a federal database called PubMed Central, in line with a 2008-era NIH requirement.

Rolin had always chosen the second route. She submitted her study in April, when she was an assistant professor of clinical psychiatry at Columbia University. But when her manuscript got accepted, she'd left Columbia, and her NIH grant was on hold while she was waiting for it to be transferred to her new employer. "I have zero dollars," she said.

[The NIH policy](#) had also kicked in. When a paper is accepted by a journal on or after July 1, the author's version must get sent to PubMed Central and scheduled to become publicly available on the official publication date. The policy doesn't specify how journals should act.

In late July, *Community Mental Health Journal* hit Rolin with a \$4,390 bill for article-processing charges. Springer Nature's website now explains that publishing behind a paywall is "[not a viable option](#)" for authors like her because it "conflicts with immediate public access policies, such as NIH's policy."

"I think it is important that people have access to science," said Rolin, whose paper is analyzing violent behaviors of patients with psychosis. But she worries about the policy's implications for the rest of her budget. Even if she could tap her grant now, she said, the open-access fee would eat into the \$50,000 she's allocated to annual research costs. "It would really cut into my ability to do other types of science communication I wanted to do," she said, like creating videos or presenting at conferences.

And she added, "If every paper that I publish is going to be 10 percent of my budget, there's only so many papers I'm going to be able to publish."

Rolin said she'd been aware that the NIH policy was forthcoming, but was surprised by Springer Nature's hard-line interpretation. Similarly, Elsevier's [terms and conditions for putting studies on PubMed Central](#) list options that involve either author-paid fees or delayed embargoes that wouldn't comply with the NIH's mandate. A page describing how NIH-funded authors can "[comply with](#)

[NIH's public access requirements](#)" has been deleted.

Dave Hansen, executive director of the Authors Alliance, a nonprofit that argues for looser copyright laws, said that he'd anticipated stories like Rolin's in the wake of the NIH's policy. "Springer Nature and Elsevier in particular have been pretty outspoken that, basically, the only pathway to comply with your publishing agreement and comply with NIH is to pay the article-processing charge," he said.

Not every publisher is responding in kind. [The JAMA journals](#), published by the American Medical Association, say that immediately after publication, authors can post their accepted manuscript in a repository of their choice. [Science and its family of journals](#), run by the American Association for the Advancement of Science, permit the same, although they also have one journal that charges open-access fees.

A Springer Nature spokesperson said that it "enables compliance with the NIH's public access policy" through its paid open-access offering. "We are eager to support and work with authors as they adapt to accelerated Open Access deadlines and requirements," the spokesperson said, adding that authors can reach out for assistance.

And an Elsevier spokesperson said, "We offer authors choice and we continue to present authors with both the open access and subscription publishing options during their publishing journey. We are committed to providing authors with transparent information based on their individual circumstances."

But Springer Nature and Elsevier aren't the only ones reacting to the NIH's mandate this way. Melanie J. Scott, an associate professor of surgery at the University of Pittsburgh, had a paper accepted in August by the *Journal of Leukocyte Biology*, which is published by the Society for Leukocyte Biology and Oxford University Press. The cheapest immediate open-access option was \$3,500, more than twice what she had paid in the past for a paywalled option. Scott said that it seemed "reasonable to charge publication fees and even to pay a fee for open access." But she worried that exorbitant fees could create a schism, elevating the scientists with ample funding or employers able to swallow their costs.

"If you're lucky enough to have such great data that you're submitting three or four manuscripts to high-impact journals, then that's going to cost you a considerable amount of money," Scott said. And if you can't afford it, then maybe you can't try for "the top-flight journals that perhaps your work would have gotten into."

A spokesperson for Oxford University Press said that its prices "are set with the aim of providing a sustainable return which allows OUP and the societies we work with to curate and publish high-quality content," and it tries "to ensure that cost is not a barrier to publication." Authors in lower- and middle-income countries automatically receive waivers and discounts to fully open-access journals, and any author can request a waiver, the spokesperson said.

Journals have had plenty of time to prepare for this moment, said Marcum, the former assistant director for open science and data policy in the White House's Office of Science and Technology Policy. In [a 2022 memo](#) he helped draft, the office recommended that federal agencies adopt policies to make research publicly and immediately available. That kicked off more than a year of [discussion and revision](#) over the NIH's policy. Then, in April, the agency [announced](#) that implementation was moving up from December to July. "Providing speedy public access to NIH-funded results," agency director Jay Bhattacharya said, "is just one of the ways we are working to earn back the trust of the American people."

But Marcum said that the accelerated timeline created an opening for a "successful campaign of misinformation by the publishers." He added, "NIH could have done a much better job about advertising how to comply."

A medical physicist at Stanford University agrees. The scientist, who declined to be named because he feared retribution, said that he was frustrated to learn of the requirement not from the NIH, but during a faculty meeting weeks before July 1 — just as two of his NIH-funded papers were heading to the finish line at two different journals.

In one case, an editor emailed him on June 30, confirming that his paper had been accepted. Then on July 2, he got another confirmation email, this one auto-generated. Depending on which was the "real" acceptance date, the open-access fee would be either \$0 or \$7,000. "I don't even know where the money would come from," said the scientist.

He decided against paying. But in an effort to comply with the NIH, he sent his manuscript to PubMed Central for immediate viewing — only for the publisher to then submit its own, dueling version, scheduled to stay offline for 12 months. For now, the scientist is letting that copy remain. If the NIH asks him over the next year why his manuscript isn't freely available, he reasons, the June 30 email would show that it falls under the old policy.

The scientist's second paper was accepted in July by a journal with a roughly \$4,000 open-access fee. In the publishing agreement, he pledged to bypass the fee in exchange for keeping his article offline for a year. But he decided to post it on PubMed Central right away anyway. "I know I kind of went against that agreement in a way," he acknowledged. To cover his bases, he copied a move he'd seen mentioned online: He threw in a disclaimer that the NIH has the right to put his work on PubMed Central.

"The priority is to get NIH to continue funding my grants," the scientist said. "If the publisher isn't happy, I guess, what are they going to do?"

Since the beginning of the year, the agency has terminated thousands of research projects and awarded far fewer grants than in previous years. In this unpredictable environment, Martha R.C. Bhattacharya, an associate professor of neuroscience at the University of Arizona, said that "everyone is trying to do a little bit of belt-tightening right now." But that became difficult this summer, when Bhattacharya and a collaborator got an NIH-funded paper accepted after more than a year of reviews and revisions. They then learned that their only NIH-compliant publishing option would cost \$5,000.

"At the moment, we said that we're not going to pay that," Bhattacharya said, "because that wasn't how we had prepared this a year ago." She and her colleague have been trying, so far unsuccessfully, to get guidance from the agency, she said.

She questioned why the journal — which she declined to name — was charging \$5,000 and what it was paying for. "I don't know what the exact number should be," she said, "but I do think it's gotten out of control."

Open-access fees have helped turn some publishers into lucrative businesses. Worldwide, the average fee is about \$1,235, an NIH analysis has found. But among more than 2,700 of Elsevier's journals, fees average around \$3,160 and go as high as \$11,400 for *Cell*, one of its most prestigious journals, according to publicly posted rates. Elsevier's parent company says that the division including the publisher [generated \\$4.1 billion](#) in 2024, with high growth "particularly in pay-to-publish."

Publishing open access in Springer Nature's flagship title, *Nature*, [costs \\$12,690](#). That company's revenue last year [was about \\$2.2 billion](#); its [adjusted operating profit margin](#) in the first quarter of this year was 28 percent. Research revenue, its main business, grew primarily due to "the excellent performance" of its open-access offerings, Springer Nature noted.

Some researchers are fed up. Last year, a group of them [filed a class-action lawsuit](#) against Elsevier, Springer Nature, and four other major publishers, alleging that they violated federal antitrust law by colluding to exploit scholars' labor. The Trump administration, too, has feuded with Springer Nature. It [cut subscriptions](#) to the publisher's journals this summer, though *Nature* reported that it later seemed to walk back the measure, with a Department of Health and Human Services spokesperson saying that NIH scientists "have continued access to all scientific journals." In the same statement, the representative said, "Science journals are ripping the American people off with exorbitant access fees and extra charges to publish research openly."

Now, the NIH is considering capping federal spending on publication fees — a move that would be unprecedented. In a July 30 call for public comments, the agency [laid out possibilities](#), including dollar- and percentage-based limits for how much grantees could put toward journal costs.

An Elsevier spokesperson said that it determines charges based on a journal's quality, editorial and technical processes, and other revenue streams, as well as "competitive considerations" and "market conditions." The company was reviewing the NIH's proposals, the representative said. Springer Nature didn't answer questions about the proposals.

But Marcum said that he was concerned that publishers would exploit loopholes in whatever the NIH comes up with. If a maximum price is set, a journal with a low processing charge could simply raise it to that amount, he said: "The floor and the ceiling can collapse." He also worried that the most prestigious journals would just stick to their high prices anyway, betting that researchers and institutions would reach into their own pockets to make up the difference in federal funding.

Hansen, of the Authors Alliance, thinks that the political moment is fraught for this kind of regulation. “I would have a lot of hesitancy about any government agency trying to put their thumb on the scale of where things get published or how they get published,” he said. A better solution, he suggested, could be more investment in open-access journals that [don’t charge fees to either authors or readers](#).

In the meantime, researchers will have to figure out how to foot the bill.

As of late August, Rolin felt hopeful that she would find a way to publish her paper. Her NIH funding was still frozen, but she’d gotten a lucky break: Her former department at Columbia was open to covering the \$4,390 fee. It just needed an invoice first. So Rolin asked Springer Nature if she could have one.

Sure, she was told — for \$75.

We welcome your thoughts and questions about this article. Please [email the editors](#) or [submit a letter](#) for publication.

Clarification (Aug. 29, 2025, 2:40 p.m.): A previous version of this article stated that the federal government cut subscriptions to Springer Nature’s journals without qualifying that a Department of Health and Human Services spokesperson later seemed to walk back the measure.

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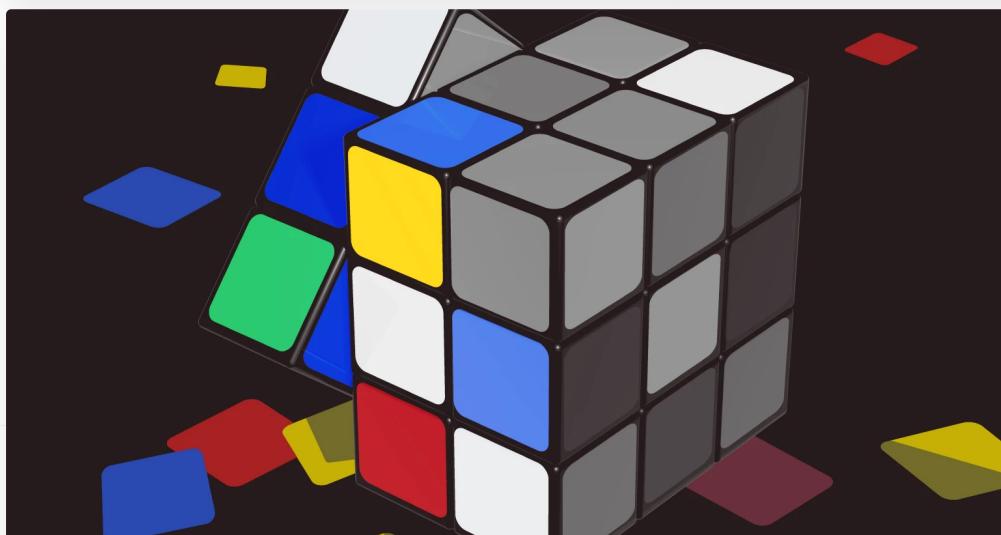
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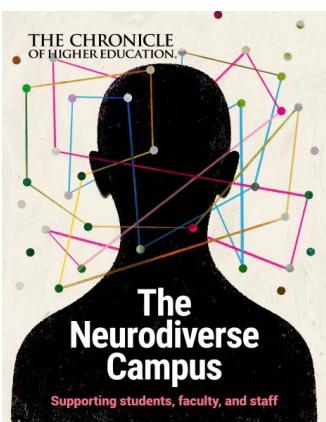




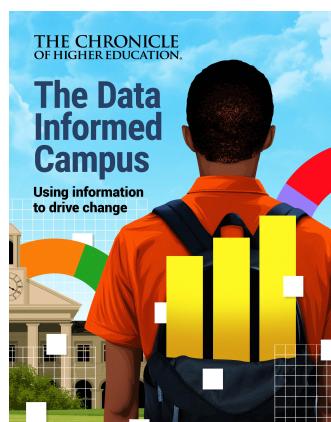
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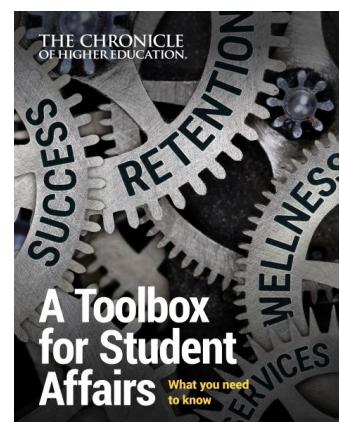
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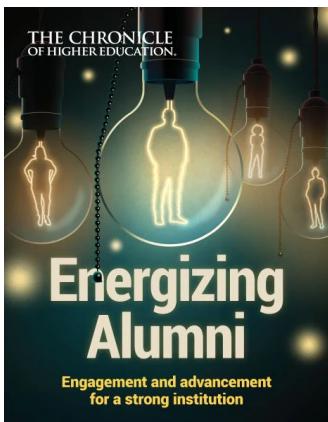
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