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Journal publication: why the Netherlands is so prolific

Research Trends Editorial Board

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Journal publication: why the Netherlands is so prolific

It is generally known that the share of world articles is dominated by the countries with the most researchers. This is unsurprising and has been the case for many years. However, the geographical distribution of the journals' publication country does not follow the same pattern, as Table 1 reveals.

Table 1 - Publishing location of journals in 2007. Source: Scopus.

Country	Number of journals published from that country	% of all journals
United States	7,589	33.2%
United Kingdom	4,536	19.8%
Netherlands	2,085	9.1%
Germany	1,729	7.6%
China, People's Republic of	633	2.8%
Japan	630	2.8%
France	611	2.7%
Switzerland	460	2.0%
Italy	454	2.0%
Canada	404	1.8%
Russian Federation	342	1.5%
Poland	284	1.2%
Spain	276	1.2%
India	270	1.2%
Australia	256	1.1%
Brazil	215	0.9%
Czech Republic	123	0.5%
Turkey	112	0.5%
Hungary	107	0.5%

The Netherlands is a particularly notable example of this differential, especially when one considers the size of the country's population, ranking third on the list behind the United States and the United Kingdom.

According to these data, the Netherlands publishes over 9.0% of all journals in the world. An initial explanation for this is that several of the world's largest scientific, technical and medical publishers, including Elsevier, Springer and Taylor & Francis, all have offices in the Netherlands. This skews the figures somewhat since the country of publication is linked to the publishers' head office location and not necessarily to where the journal is physically published. However, this does not explain why these companies chose the Netherlands as their publishing location.

Location, location, location

A look back at the history of Elsevier in the Netherlands goes some way to answering the second anomaly. For centuries, the Netherlands was a haven for scholars escaping religious or creative persecution in their own countries. Between the 17th and 19th centuries, famous scholars such as Erasmus, John Locke, John Milton, Descartes and Galileo published their work in the Netherlands rather than in their home countries because it had a liberal publishing infrastructure. One of the first publishers in the Netherlands, founded in 1580, was Elzevir. Its name was adopted in 1880 by one of the largest science and technology publishers, Elsevier.

By the 19th century, the German language had become the standard scientific language. In many disciplines, knowledge of German was a basic requirement internationally until well into the 20th century. German publishers were well established in the market and at a commercial peak. However, with the rise of Hitler's Nazi regime in the 1930s, many of Germany's best scientists fled to neighboring countries as well as the United States.

Moving west

This emigration of scientists led the Noord Hollandsche Uitgevers Maatschappij, which later became a part of Elsevier, to believe that the language of science would shift from German to English, a prediction that proved to be true. Elsevier started to publish the work of European scientists in English, one of the first of which was Paul Karrer's *Organic Chemistry* in 1937.

After the Second World War, the German publishing industry was in tatters and what remained of it, mainly located in Leipzig and Berlin, found itself within the Soviet occupation zone and later in

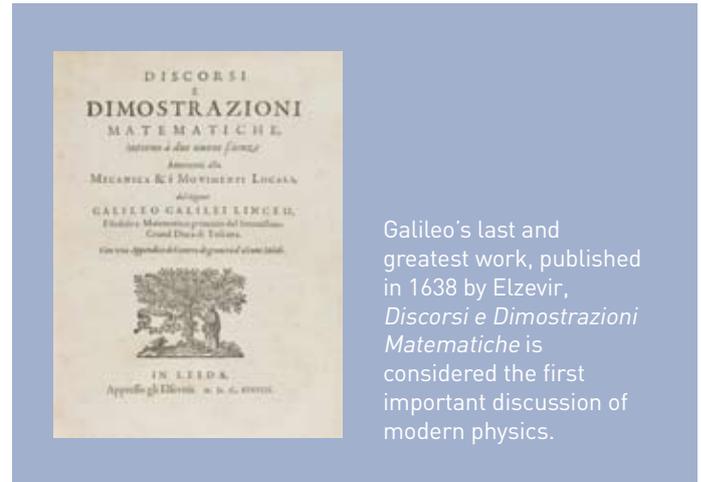
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the GDR. As a consequence, there was a movement westwards: the German National Library moved from Leipzig to Frankfurt and Springer from Berlin to Heidelberg.

Dutch publishers took advantage of the situation and the Netherlands' location between Western Europe and the English-speaking UK and US, which made it the perfect center of the new international science-publishing world that emerged after the war. Other international publishing houses also saw the opportunities the Netherlands offered and established offices there. This has resulted in a high concentration of publishing companies relative to the size of the country and number of researchers, and thus a high number of published journals attributed to it.

Many thanks to Professor Hans Roosendaal for his help with the historical aspects of this article.



Country trends



English as the international language of science

Since the end of the Second World War, English has become the established language of scholarly communication, but not without controversy. In this article we examine some of the reasons for the rise of English and its consequences in the context of national trends in English and local-language publishing.

The underlying reason for the rise of English as the language of science remains a topic of debate, but most frequently it is acknowledged as an accident of 20th century political and economic history (1). The British Empire, which spanned the globe from the late 16th to the early 20th century, was the largest empire in history and made English a truly international language. Today it is the first language of about 400 million people in 53 countries, and the second language of as many as 1.4 billion more. English was therefore well positioned to become the default language of science in the wake of the disruptive wars of the first half of the 20th century.

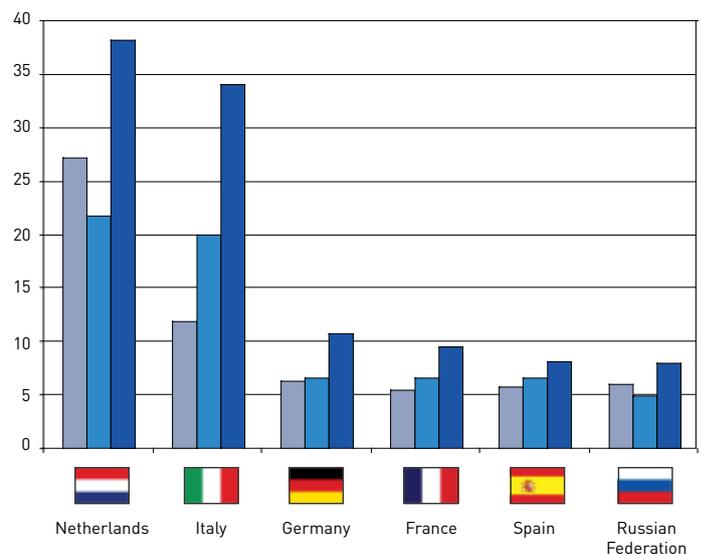


Figure 1 – Ratio of the number of journal articles published by researchers in English to those in the official language in six European countries, 1996–2007. Source: Scopus.

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