

Boycott of Elsevier Journals: Can New Ideas Reduce the Cost for Scientific Publications?

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Post Url

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Recently, researchers in Germany, Peru, and Taiwan found themselves without access to many online scientific journals. Negotiations with [Elsevier](#), a major scientific journal publisher in The Netherlands, have broken down and without contracts in place, scientists temporarily lost access to the thousands of journals produced by Elsevier.^{1,2,3,4} How did we get to this situation? Will other scientists also lose access to journals? How can this issue be resolved?

Brief History of Journal Publication

The history of scientific journals dates back to 1665 when two journals, *Journal des sçavans* and *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society*, were first published in France and England, respectively. In between the years 1800 and 1900, many scientific organizations published their own journals, supported primarily by subscriptions of the club members. They often were clubs, with regular meetings, field trips, newsletters, and journals. While they have changed their names to eliminate words like “club,” many still

exist today. For example, the [Southern Appalachian Botanical Club](#), changed to “Society” a few years ago. Members would often own copies of a group’s journal. When it came time to publish, they would search through their own library or a university library.

By 1926, *Biological Abstracts* was first produced which allowed researchers to find articles on a specific topic more easily than by looking through a stack of old publications. However, by the 1970s the number of journals proliferated. Today, the whole idea of seeking information by looking through paper copies of journals feels antiquated. We now search the internet, instead of a stack of magazines for information. With this change, the way we think about journals has changed. No longer are we bound to the library when seeking information since we can seek data from any location with just a device having internet access.

Scientific Publishing Today

Over time, scientific organizations began to lease the work of publishing journals to the publishers themselves. Instead of relying on volunteers to review and edit manuscripts, these groups began allowing professional writers to manage much of the work. Over time, specialized publishing companies formed and many now publish numerous scientific journals. This allows them to standardize much of the work with specialist employees who can work more efficiently. Today, Elsevier, [Springer](#), [Taylor & Francis Group](#), and [Wiley](#) produce more than 2000, 2900, 2400, and 1500 journals each, respectively. Some organizations still work with smaller publishers, rather than relying on major publishers of scientific journals, but challenges to the cost of publication remain the same.

In today’s world, access to journals has become a major issue and a major cost to college and university libraries. The cost of a publication might have been \$20 to \$50 a year in 1960 when a library simply subscribed to a journal. Now, subscription often requires more than \$1000 a year for a library to gain access to both printed and electronic copies of a single journal. Typically, libraries, businesses, and government agencies sign contracts with publishers of major journals to allow students, business people, and government employees access to many journals at one time. This provides obvious advantages to everyone involved. Publishers can specialize in scientific journals and researchers can do what they do best, i.e., conduct research rather than edit each other’s papers while having access to a wide variety of published research.

Predatory Publishers and Cost of Publication

Part of the problem is due to “[predatory publishers](#).”⁵ Some publishers, unlike those listed above, have organized themselves like other online scammers with claims that often fail a test of truthfulness. These publishers will claim to have strong reputations and staffing. However, in reality, they charge high prices to publish articles without any scientific review or without screening by qualified scientists. Sometimes, their websites list scientists on their staff when those scientists never agreed to work with the publisher. Often, predatory publishers make unsubstantiated claims of publishing in

open access journals which disappear within a year or two, leaving the authors with empty pockets after paying a high fee for the privilege of getting their research published.

While predatory publishers exist, the major publishing companies don't fall into this category. In many ways, they simply want to provide excellent service for a reasonable price. The question "What is reasonable?" should be considered. Without the free services of voluntary editors, and often providing high-quality journals with color illustration, publishers would say they need to make a reasonable profit. Therefore, someone has to pay for the high costs of publication.

Is Boycotting a Solution?

The DEAL project consists of a consortium of state-funded universities and research organizations in Germany. This consortium could not accept the terms proposed by Elsevier. Another problem is related to open access, where the idea that anyone with access to the internet can read the full content of any [research paper](#).

In order to boost open access, European scientific and other leaders announced plans in May 2016, to make all research publications in Europe open access.⁶ Doing this would challenge the current concept of subscribers and authors paying for the cost of publication. Gradually, the old concept of an individual scientist or library paying for a paper copy of a journal is evaporating. Today, anyone can go online and read research papers without paying the cost of a subscription. Therefore, new paradigms are needed.

More than 75% of the universities in Taiwan have joined the boycott, while in Peru the problem is simply a lack of government funding which may be a combination of the shortage of funds and the high costs of subscription services.^{1,2,3,4}

Whether the prices charged by Elsevier and other publishers are too high is now up for discussion. If universities join together to negotiate lower cost subscriptions, this can provide one alternative. Illegal websites in some areas also provide open access globally by accessing publisher's websites through subscription services and then release those same publications independently.

Although these solutions may be illegal and temporary, [such illegal websites](#) are also putting pressure on the publishers. The obvious solution will require both sides to negotiate fairly and openly and whether this can happen, only [time will tell](#).

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