

Academics must be applauded for making a stand by boycotting Elsevier. It's time for librarians to join the conversation on the future of dissemination, but not join the boycott.

by Blog Admin

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Blog posts and campaign statements published by an anonymous scientist and blogger [@FakeElsevier](#) have struck a chord with [Dave Puplett](#). Here he explains why the blogger's call to arms appeals to his inner ideological librarian.



The growing [disquiet over Elsevier's publishing practices](#), recently documented on this blog by [Cameron Neylon](#), [Neil Stewart](#) and others has been significant because it is scientists who are leading the protest. Their ranks have recently been swelled by the voice of an anonymous scientist and blogger, [@FakeElsevier](#).

This anonymous scientist recently posted an [open letter to Elsevier employees](#) expounding their own take on the causes of the increasingly widespread dissatisfaction with Elsevier held by researchers. The result is one of the most concise and passionately argued pieces I've read on the subject of scholarly communications for years. The author calls out to Elsevier's employers and appeals to the ideologies that may have led them into the publishing world to begin with:

"...if you joined Elsevier because you wanted to help disseminate knowledge and advance the human condition, consider the rest of this letter addressed directly to you."

My message to the Elsevier staff who identified with that call is simple: Librarians feel the same way, and we all got into this profession for the same reasons. One of the hallmarks of progressive academic libraries are the Open Access services they've been offering in recent years. [@FakeElsevier's](#) central arguments really appeal to my inner ideological librarian.

"It's not about money and never has been"

The Librarian voices in the Open Access movement have in my opinion too often been distracted by using spiralling journal subscription costs as a rationale for pushing for Open Access. Don't get me wrong – some of the price rises have been very difficult for Libraries to cope with, but it is the effect it has on a Library's ability to afford really good journal collections that really hurts us. Fundamentally the librarians in research supporting roles that I know want to bring down barriers to accessing scholarly research. Inflexible packages and rocketing prices don't make that goal any more likely. That's why the second point raised by this anonymous blogger is so resonant with me:

"As far as we are concerned, publishers have ONE JOB: disseminating the results of our work to the widest possible audience"

Again, Libraries want the same thing, and we want to help. University Libraries have a critical role in helping people find research, and many are now helping researchers make their work accessible with repositories or even hosting journal titles. For a lively post on that subject, I recommend Bjoern Brembs' post '[Libraries are Better than Corporate Publishers Because...](#)'.

“In the internet age, Elsevier is doing an unbelievably sh*tty job of accomplishing its ONE AND ONLY PURPOSE: to distribute our work as broadly as possible”

Some readers may remember [Elsevier withdrawing free access for Bangladeshi researchers to its content](#) about a year ago. Although Elsevier reversed the decision once pressured, it sent a message to the academic community about its priorities in widening access and maximising profit. I understand why scientists are angry with Elsevier, and I think it's because of the growing distance between the goals of academia and those of some major publishers.

“Adapt, or be disintermediated”

Publishers do add value to the process of scholarly communication, but it should be kept in context. I've always liked the thinking behind describing publishers as midwives: 'The Scholarly Publisher as Midwife' ([Information Today](#); Jul/Aug2001, Vol. 18 Issue 7, p32, 3/4p). This analogy works for several reasons, not least because researchers are understandably proud and protective of their work. It is also sound for reasons that [@FakeElsevier](#) points out:

“Whether you acknowledge it or not, you (academic publishers) are effectively a government subcontractor, that takes tax-payer money to provide a distribution service for government-funded research”.

Academic publishers, researchers and librarians all care passionately about the creating and dissemination of knowledge. The tensions emerging were inevitable when some publishers saw online dissemination as an opportunity to lock down access and squeeze more profit rather than a chance to maximise access.

This ideological gap poses the problem, but the fundamental goals of Academics and Libraries are what has made academic publishers successful in the first place. There remains enough space in this arena for all parties. The role of the Library is clear – we want to maximise access to articles for LSE members and we want to provide access to LSE research to the rest of the academic community and beyond using LSE Research Online.

Summary:

On this blog we've seen Cameron Neylon say he thinks we need to see the investors behind Elsevier get spooked before we see real change. Neil Stewart suggests boycotting academics should take their work online immediately using 'Green' open access by archiving their work in repositories.

I believe there are business and distribution models out there that will work for all parties because it's in the interests of all three to make it happen. Where can we learn lessons from? PlosOne certainly, but also from the university presses that have adapted to the current climate with impressive open mindedness, keeping their eyes firmly on the goal – sharing scholarly research. See '[Sustaining Scholarly Publishing: New Business Models for University Presses](#)' for an excellent overview.

[@FakeElsevier](#) wants Elsevier staff to listen to the needs of researchers, and suggests that research funders themselves could do more. On this I completely agree, and I think it's in the international and disciplinary interest of funders to ensure that the work they fund is widely accessible.

Major research libraries have [taken a stand recently](#) but the Elsevier boycott is something that I think libraries should remain interested observers in and not much more. The role of academic libraries here should be, as ever, to support the process of scholarly research and communication. We are not here to try and define its course. If the academic community chooses to make a stand on widening access then I applaud it for using its voice. Librarians should be ready to join the conversation, but not the boycott.

Related posts:

1. [What comes after the Elsevier boycott? The answer might be found by following the 'Green' road to open access.](#)

2. The advent of online dissemination techniques allow academics to focus just on developing great ideas, without needlessly trying to play the system.
3. Elsevier have a right to price their journals as they see fit, but they must be honest in their reasoning and not attack boycotters with untruths.
4. A service by scientists for scientists: Elsevier's Editors' Choice App aims to select best research articles
5. By championing open access publishing, the academic community can bring us closer to making research available to all.