

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.

by Blog Admin

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As an editor of an Elsevier-owned academic journal, [Tim Leunig](#) argues that he must expose those who speak falsely, including Elsevier's CEO, who has claimed that critics of the publishing company are relying on 'misunderstandings of fact' to push an academic boycott.



I am managing director of an Elsevier journal, *Explorations in Economic History*. Recently, some 6000 global academics have decided to refuse to cooperate with Elsevier, citing its high-price policy. The chief executive of Reed Elsevier, Erik Engstrom, said that all objections "are based on misstatements or misunderstandings of the fact."

This is simply not correct. In my field there are four major journals: the *Economic History Review*, the *European Review of Economic History*, *Explorations in Economic History* and the *Journal of Economic History*. *Explorations in Economic History* is owned by Elsevier, while the other three are owned by learned societies and published by Oxford University Press, Wiley Blackwell, and Cambridge University Press respectively.

We can get a sense of the extent of Elsevier's high fee approach to journal publishing by looking at the costs of subscribing to *Explorations in Economic History* and its rival journals to both individuals and to libraries.

As an individual it costs me £21 to subscribe to the *Economic History Review*, £23 to subscribe to the *Journal of Economic History*, and £30.50 for the *European Review*. In contrast it costs £77 to subscribe to *Explorations in Economic History*. In each case I have taken the lowest cost subscription method, which is usually to receive the Journal via membership of a learned society.

The picture is relatively similar for libraries. The *Economic History Review* charges £241, the *Journal of Economic History* charges £174 while the *European Review* charges £215. In contrast, Elsevier charge £722 to a library that wishes to subscribe to *Explorations in Economic History*.

There is a clear pattern here. Those journals owned by learned societies charge around £25 a year to individuals, and just over £200 to libraries. In each case Elsevier charges more than three times these figures.

Given that the journals owned by the learned societies make considerable profits for their societies, it follows that *Explorations in Economic History* must be extremely profitable for Elsevier. The only circumstances in which this would not be true would be were Elsevier to be dramatically less efficient than other academic publishers. In that case the additional costs borne by academics and universities would be dissipated in economic rents within Elsevier, rather than accruing as profit to Elsevier's shareholders.

There are academics who believe it is unethical for academics such as myself to take the Elsevier shilling and edit their journals. I would, of course, prefer it were Elsevier to have a low-cost publishing model, or were *Explorations in Economic History* to be owned by a learned society, so that the profits would be ploughed back into my profession. But the reality is that my journal was founded as a commercial venture by a commercial publisher, Academic Press, later taken over by Elsevier. It was they that took the risk initially, and it is they that get the rewards today. There is nothing immoral about entrepreneurial capitalism.

No individual or library is forced to subscribe to Explorations in Economic History and I know a large number of prominent economic historians who do not do so, on value for money grounds. No academic is forced to submit their work to my Journal, and no academic is forced to act as a referee when I asked them to do so.

I therefore have no difficulty in defending Elsevier's right to price its journals as it sees fit. Equally, I have no difficulty in understanding the decisions of individuals and libraries not to subscribe to Elsevier's journals. What I strongly dislike is the Chief Executive claiming that the objections of Elsevier's critics are based on "[misstatements or misunderstandings of the fact](#)". He should be honest and state that in many cases his journals have an element of monopoly power which as a commercial, capitalist company he is determined to exploit as fully as possible. I would respect him were he to say that. For him to claim otherwise is simply false – and as a journal editor it is my job to expose those who speak falsely. That responsibility extends to rejecting comments made by my Journal's publisher's Chief Executive, just as much as it extends to rejecting articles that make unsubstantiated and unwarranted claims unsupported by the evidence.

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