

Five Minutes with Tim Gowers and Tyler Neylon: “The boycott has made Elsevier more concerned about its public image”.

by Blog Admin

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Earlier this year [Tim Gowers](#) sparked debate about the future of academic publishing when he declared his intentions to boycott Elsevier. With [Tyler Neylon](#)'s work on the Cost of Knowledge website, the pair discuss how they made a splash in the comfy world of academic publishing.



What motivated you to call for the boycott? And, Tyler, what was your reaction to reading Tim's pledge to boycott Elsevier?

Tim Gowers: For a long time, I've been aware that Elsevier was annoying to many mathematicians. For this reason, I have avoided publishing with them and refereeing for them. However, it occurred to me recently that it could make a difference if, rather than just privately avoiding Elsevier, I were to go public. I felt it would be easier for people to decide to boycott Elsevier if they knew a lot of other people were doing the same thing, which could be done via a website. I knew that if I suggested this, there would be somebody out there who would be able to produce a [website](#) very quickly – and Tyler was that person.



Tyler Neylon: I thought it was a great idea. I really wanted to help out. I feel I can't do research right now as an individual. It's very difficult to do the background work. I knew it was a problem I wanted to solve. When I read the blog, I thought 'I can actually make a difference'. Tim is a superstar. If he is taking a stand, it would generate enough publicity and interest to get something started. I knew it was a great opportunity – I wanted to help build awareness and a community.

What is your goal for this boycott?

Tyler Neylon: I think there is an awareness of how much better things could be through a nonprofit publishing system. People want to get rid of high-profit publishing. The ultimate goal is that the current Elsevier business model becomes irrelevant – that there would be a switch to a free-to-read model where authors retain copyrights of their papers. PLoS is one example of this.

What do you know about the demographics of the boycott supporters?

Neylon: We don't track that information, but looking at the email addresses, it is a wide international phenomenon. About half are American and British and there are many German-language users.

There are two groups: older researchers who have tenure and less to lose by giving up a publisher, and young people who are not on a tenure track now. Postdocs, whose career depends on these journals, are the hardest to recruit.

What do you think of the response?

Tim Gowers: I am pleased, though I don't have a good idea of how many mathematicians there are in the world or how many biologists. I don't know how many people you could expect to sign it. There are a number of quite high profile people as signatures. Also, I think there are many people who have not signed but who are nevertheless broadly sympathetic to the aims of the boycott.

Tyler Neylon: I am delighted with how much attention and response we've gotten. I did not expect that much. These are all research-level professors refraining from doing work with Elsevier. There have been a lot of people who wanted to do something, but felt powerless. They didn't say much publicly, but now they are coming to understand there are many who feel the same way.

Has there been any reaction from Elsevier to your efforts?

Tyler Neylon: There was an open letter published on its website, which defended their practices. More recently, Elsevier has rescinded their stance on the Research Works Act. It's possible that the bill's sponsors didn't like the unpopularity they saw. This is a great sign for the boycott, and a positive move in the right direction, although many people, including me, are interested in even further change.

What impact do you think the boycott had on Elsevier backing off of the Research Works Act?

Tim Gowers: Elsevier has denied that the decision had to do with the boycott. My guess is that there was at least some connection. The boycott has made Elsevier more concerned about its public image, and their support for RWA was damaging that image.

What is next for the boycott?

Tyler Neylon: About five years ago, there wasn't much optimism around this issue. People would complain, but not really do that much. That attitude is changing. People are saying this is unacceptable, and we can do something about it. If FRPAA (Federal Research Public Access Act) passed, that would be great. Even a sense that it has a chance of passing would change the culture of the community.

Tim Gowers: I've always felt that the boycott wasn't aimed at getting concessions out of Elsevier. It was more aimed at getting mathematicians to produce a new and better system for evaluating their work. Since we write articles for no charge, it is obvious there exists a better system.

In fact, I would say that there is a spectrum of different systems, from relatively modest changes to how journals work to much more radical alternatives. At the conventional end of the spectrum, we can set up cheap new electronic journals. Funding these is a challenge, but in theory they would save libraries so much money that the libraries should support them for the sake of their own long-term financial interest. At the more radical end there are ideas for websites where people can submit papers, anybody can write a review, and everyone gets a collection of reviews. The challenge there is to provide suitable incentives to reviewers. In between, you might have free floating editorial boards offering their stamp of approval to papers that are submitted to the arXiv.

We need to try out a number of things. There are further ideas I'd like to see that are probably too radical at the moment. One assumption that most people take for granted is that the right unit of discourse is the journal article. You do your research quietly, then polish into a neat form, and publish it. However, this hides a lot of the thought processes that go into discovering mathematical results. Recently, I experimented with something more radical where you do your thinking online and anybody who wants to can contribute to it. A difficulty with that kind of approach is how you apportion credit: I wish the whole notion of credit would go away, because it creates a number of difficulties.

This interview was written by Caralee Adams and was [originally posted here](#) by the [SPARC blog](#).

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