

High prices to access scholarly research could drive developing country researchers to use pirate sites like SciHub.

*Developing countries are investing more in research and higher education and it should be no surprise that publishers are building commercial relationships to expand access and services. But prices are often still too high. **Jonathan Harle** argues now is a good time for the research community to reflect on what we can do to bring the cost of access down. If we don't, we can't be surprised when pirate alternatives like SciHub crop up.*

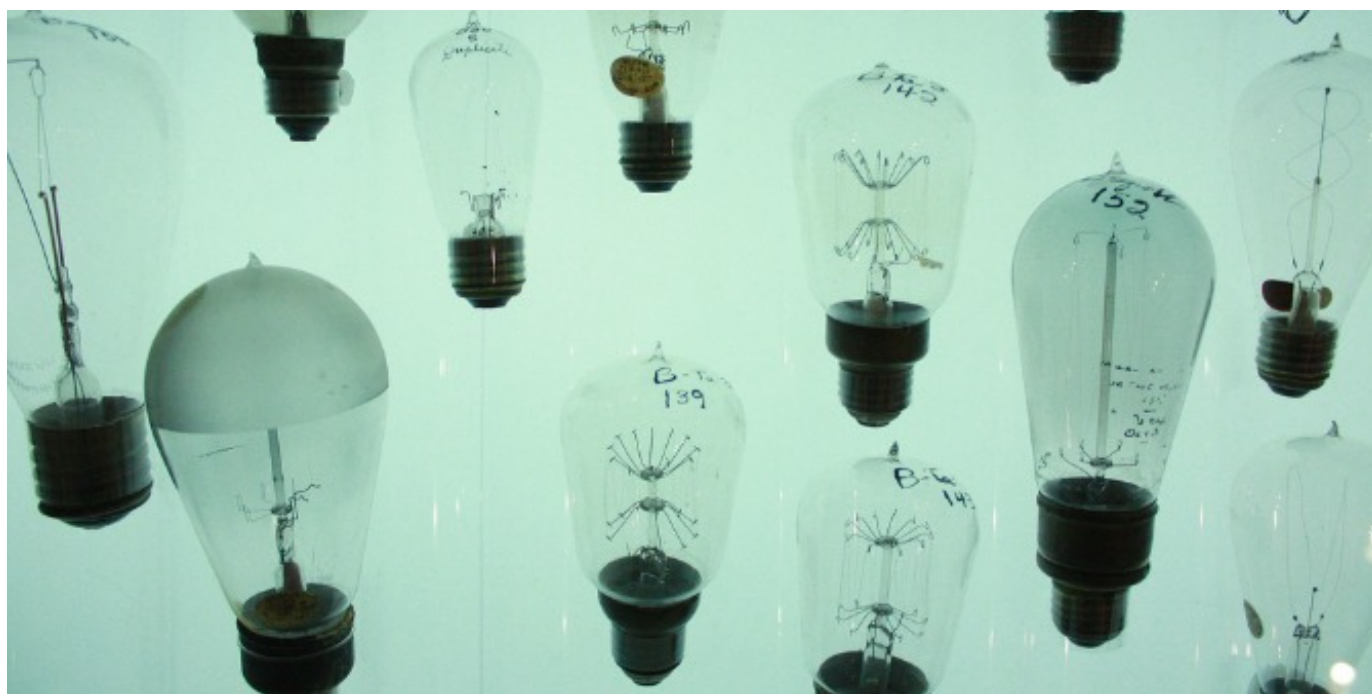


SciHub – a website that finds a way through paywalls to host free copies of over 40 million journal papers from major publishers – has been a topic of much discussion in the last few weeks. My aim here isn't to get into the rights and wrongs of the site – I'll leave that for others. But it is a good opportunity to reflect on a deeper problem, one that **INASP** sees – and works to solve – daily.

In short, access to essential research is just too expensive for many institutions and individuals in the developing world. That's something that we need to talk about. It's also something we should be worrying about.

Struggles to access research hamper development

If researchers and students are still struggling to access what they need, then that's a major obstacle to them reaching their full potential. That's not just an issue for individual careers. It's an issue for nations that need their researchers to help them tackle entrenched problems of poverty, ill health, hunger, the emerging effects of climate change. Developing nations need deeper understanding in a whole host of questions, and they need their graduates to be able to play a full and active role in society – whether it's in the public, private or civil society sectors.



And it's a problem for the rest of the world too. If developing countries can't harness this potential, and can't bring new knowledge and evidence to bear on these problems, we'll continue to have a world divided into haves and have-nots, of children dying too young, or failing to learn in schools, of adults struggling to get decent work, and struggling to support their own families.

Publishers are making changes

It's important here to celebrate the successes. The publishing industry often comes under fire, but it's important to acknowledge the important contributions publishers have made. For 14 years [Research4Life](#) (R4L) has brought critical health, environmental and agricultural research from major publishers within reach of researchers and students across the developing world. The R4L collections together include 68,000 journals, books and databases. INASP's own [access initiative](#) has extended access further, to journals and books spanning the full range of academic disciplines and research topics, and amounting to [some 75,000 titles](#). Some of it is offered by publishers freely, some at substantially reduced rates.

But times change.

Developing viable commercial relationships

Developing countries are investing more in their research and higher-education systems. They're doing more research, and they're publishing more. Universities are expanding daily and student numbers are steadily increasing. So it's not surprising that publishers are beginning to move beyond philanthropy, and develop ordinary, commercial relationships. And this is a good thing; developing countries need to make their own decisions about what they need, and ultimately to gain access on the same terms that wealthier countries do.



But although prices are lowered, they're often still too high. This pushes vital knowledge out of reach of institutions and individuals who could do a lot with it. We hear weekly from our partners – purchasing consortia in Africa, Asia and Latin America – how the prices are beyond the budgets they can raise locally. Every time they have to pay a high price for one collection, something else has to be cut from the list. Of course cost isn't the only barrier – there are IT systems and skills to find and use it amongst other obstacles – but cost is a challenge that the publishing industry can help address.

At INASP we understand that publishing isn't free, and we understand that publishers are often commercial enterprises – whether the income stream is subscriptions, article processing charges or a mix of both. But we think there is a middle ground here. We put together a series of principles for what we've called "[responsible business](#)" in 2014 and in the last 18 months we've been working hard to promote these INASP Principles and [explain why they matter](#). They're about respecting national consortia, being realistic about sales, taking a long term view of pricing, and not making sudden changes. Many of the publishers we work with have enthusiastically embraced these – but undoubtedly more could be done.

On the 1st January a series of goals to improve lives globally came into effect – the [Sustainable Development Goals](#) or SDGs. They not only commit the world to tackling the familiar challenges of poverty, hunger and ill health, but they place a shared, universal responsibility on all countries to [engage in a collective effort](#) to do so.

Now is a good time to reflect on how we can contribute to that effort – and what we can do to bring the cost of access down. If we don't, we can't be surprised if people find alternative ways to get what they urgently need.

This piece originally appeared on INASP's [Practicing Development](#) blog and is reposted with the author's permission. [INASP](#) is an international development charity working with a global network of partners to improve access, production and use of research information and knowledge so that countries are equipped to solve their development challenges. INASP receives funding from UKAID (DFID) and Sida.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Impact blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [Comments Policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

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