Developing SocArXiv — a new open archive of the social sciences to challenge the outdated journal system.
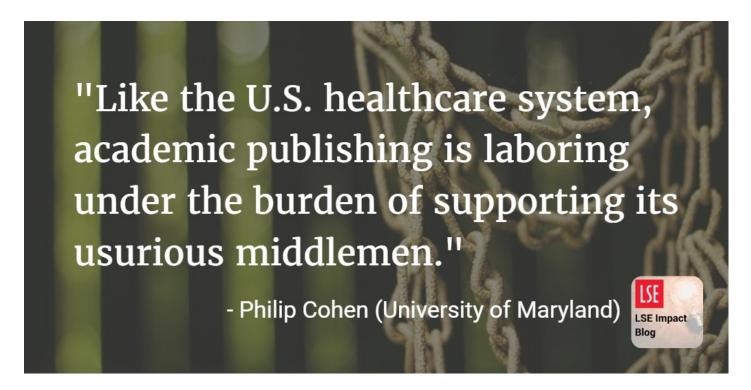
While STEM disciplines have developed a number of mechanisms to challenge the time-lags and paywalls of traditional academic publishing, options in the social sciences remain few and far between. Philip Cohen *of the University of Maryland argues a cultural shift is taking place in the social sciences. He introduces SocArxiv, a fast, free, open paper server to encourage wider open scholarship in the social sciences.*

Over the last few years I have frequently complained about our publishing system (see the academia tag on my blog for examples): it's needlessly slow, inefficient, hierarchical, profit-driven, exploitative, and also doesn't work well. Here's a simple example: a junior scholar sends a perfectly reasonable sociology paper to a high-status journal. The editor commissions three anonymous reviews, and four months later the paper is rejected on the basis of a few hours of their volunteer labor. It's not that the paper is wrong, but that its results are not novel enough, and it doesn't break new theoretical ground – it's just a piece of research – and doesn't justify taking up scarce pages in the journal's budget.

This rejection increases the value — and subscription price — of the for-profit journal (or journal published by a for-profit company on behalf of an academic association), because their high rejection rate is a key selling point.

The author will now revise the paper (some of the advice was good, but nothing to suggest the analysis or conclusions were actually wrong) and send it to another journal, where three more anonymous reviewers — probably different people, and having no access to the previous round of review and exchange — will donate a few more hours labor, each, to a different for-profit publisher. In a few months we'll find out what happens. Repeat.

> "Like the U.S. healthcare system, academic publishing is laboring under the burden of supporting its usurious middlemen."
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> - Philip Cohen (University of Maryland)
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If all goes as hoped, the outcome will be a good paper, improved by the process, published 1-3 years after it was written — during which time the paper, the code, and the data, were not available to anyone else. It will finally be available for $39.95 to non-academics, but most of the people who are aware of it will be able to read it "free"

because their institutions buy it as part of a giant bundle of journals from the publisher, so this will not bother them. The writer may get a job and, later, tenure. Thus, the process produces a good paper, inaccessible to most of the world, as well as a person whose career is dependent on the process, one with the institutional position and incentive to perpetuate it for another generation. There's more wrong with our system than this simple story shows, but that's the basic idea. The system is not completely non-functional, it's just very bad.

My own association, the American Sociological Association, has come to depend on the revenue from this model, despite its negative effect on the research process and its drain on the public coffers. We must do better. With current technology, fortunately, replacing our outdated journal system is not difficult. We all know that we could save vast amounts of money while providing free, faster access to research for everyone, but it's difficult to get there.

Like the U.S. healthcare system, academic publishing is laboring under the burden of supporting its usurious middlemen. Getting them out of the way is a problem of politics and organization, not technology or cost. We academics do all the work already – research, writing, reviewing, editing – contributing our labor without compensation to giant companies that claim to be helping us get and keep our incredibly privileged jobs. But most of us are supported directly or indirectly by the state and our students (or their banks), not the journal publishers. We don't need most of what the journal publishers do any more, and working for them is degrading our research, making it less innovative and transformative, less engaging and engaged, less open and accountable.

Introducing SocArXiv

The people in math and physics developed a workaround for this system in arXiv.org, where people share papers before they are peer-reviewed. Other paper servers have arisen as well. These include some run by universities (which are an excellent innovation, if they are open and accessible, and share their data with other systems), but many researchers are not part of such plans. Some, primarily Research Gate, Academia.edu, and now Elsevier's SSRN are run privately for profit. New initiatives have arisen in specific disciplines, such as the new biorxiv in biology.

Social scientists want their work to be broadly accessible, but it is mostly locked up from the public and even other researchers, even when the public has paid for it. SocArXiv wants to change that.

But there remains a need for a new general, open-access, open-source, paper server for the social sciences, one that encourages linking and sharing data and code, that serves its research to an open metadata system, and that provides the foundation for a post-publication review system. I hope that SocArXiv will enable us to save research from the journal system. Once it's built, anyone will be able to use it to organize their own peer-review community, to select and publish papers (though not exclusively), to review and comment on each other's work — and to discover, cite, value, and share research unimpeded. We will be able to do this because of a partnership with the Center for Open Science (which is already developing a new preprint server) and SHARE ("a free, open, data set about research and scholarly activities across their life cycle"). We are also supported by the University of Maryland, which hosts the initiative.

In the short run, SocArXiv will be a convenient, fast, free, open paper server. In the longer run, we hope it will be a building block for the future system of scholarly communication. In sociology, the discipline with which I (and our steering committee) are most familiar, we do not have a strong cultural norm of pre-print paper sharing, or data sharing. But sociologists – like most social scientists – do want our research to have an impact in the wider world, to reach a broader audience, and to engage with the public for the benefit of all parties. Our challenge is to persuade these academic communities that open scholarship is necessary for achieving that larger ambition.

There is a lot to do to make SocArXiv work: sharing research, reviewing, moderating, editing, mobilizing. But the good news is we're doing most of this work already.

SocArXiv is directed by a steering committee of sociologists and members of the research library community. They are:

- [Elizabeth Popp Berman](#), sociologist, University at Albany SUNY

- [Chris Bourg](#), director of libraries, Massachusetts Institute of Technology

- [Neal Caren](#), sociologist, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

- [Philip N. Cohen](#), sociologist, University of Maryland, College Park

- [Tressie McMillan Cottom](#), sociologist, Virginia Commonwealth University

- [Tina Fetner](#), sociologist, McMaster University

- [Dan Hirschman](#), sociologist, Brown University

- [Rebecca Kennison](#), K|N Consultants

- [Judy Ruttenberg](#), program officer, Association of Research Libraries

This post is adapted from a piece on my blog, [Family Inequality](#). You can read more about the project in the [announcement of our partnership](#). For updates, you can follow us on [Twitter](#) or [Facebook](#), or email to add your name to the mailing list. (In fact, you can also make a tax-deductible contribution to SocArXiv through the University of Maryland [here](#).) When your paper is ready, check [SocArXiv.org](#).

(SocArXiv, prounounced sosh-archive (soʊʃɑrkaɪv), is adapted from arXiv, a trademark of Cornell University, used under license.)

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.

About the Author

Philip Cohen *is a professor of sociology at the University of Maryland and author of* [The Family: Diversity, Inequality and Social Change](#) *(W. W. Norton, 2014). He is the co-editor of* [Contexts](#)*.*