

Right to access scholarship

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Every year more than 2.5 million research articles are published but access to more than three quarters of this is barred by paywalls. Debate on who owns right to the content of research publications has surfaced frequently in the recent past. The ownership or right to access has been questioned openly since a significant proportion of research is funded through public or trusted funds or philanthropy.

Publishing industry has grown over the past few decades to a money-making laundry. Over ten billion dollars of annual revenue was reported in 2016. If you consider Elsevier, the current largest publisher of science, makes a significant profit margin of over 37% from their large database of scientific content, faithfully transferred to them free of charge by academics in return for publication of their work. These scholarly materials are copyrighted and licensed at such exorbitantly high prices that even Harvard University, the richest in the USA, has spoken of their inability to afford continued subscription[1]. Many voices, expert opinions, debates, petitions raised against this monopoly, however, have yet to make a significant change. Access is still largely limited to major institutions such as universities and medical organisations.

The creation of Open Access Initiative has contributed slowly towards a drift from the orthodox policies of copy right. As a result, open access publications have gained increasing popularity and more and more articles are made to be accessible even in some of the most prestigious science journals. After about 10 years of hard work, the movement has been able to reach nearly 50% of the newly published research to be accessible without paywalls. This has increased the availability of research for use without a cost to scientists anywhere in the world. Initiatives such as those from the European Commission (2014) and United States enforcing need for all publications funded

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by the European Union and the US government be made open access also has contributed towards changes in trend in publication accessibility. These changes are reflected by the increasing number of publications available for access without paywalls and the increased number of citations to these open access articles.

This type of free access to scholarship is known as libre open access, and it refers to the literature which is openly accessible for reuse. In comparison to this another type of free scholarship occurs and it is known as gratis open access. Here the literature is available for free use but permission barriers may remain. The web-site Sci-Hub, short for Science Hub, which brands, itself as the “the first pirate website in the world to provide mass and public access to tens of millions of research papers” has made scholarly articles available for universal access through gratis open access. Since its creation 8 years ago in 2011 by Alexandra Elbakyan, a graduate student and native of Kazakhstan, it has created a revolutionary change in the concept of ownership and accessibility to scholarship. Sci-Hub which considers it to be a repository or a library of scientific research, has gained increasing popularity and usage over the past three years. Its popularity has also been intermittently kindled by the various legal battles, outcries on social media and news coverages on its activities. The civil suit filed by Elsevier in 2016 against Sci-Hub as well as many concurrently published articles, loudly debating the true ownership of scientific scholarship, resulted in a board conversation in support of Sci-Hub as well as many other humanitarian publishers. Articles such as “Half of 2011 papers are now free for download” in Nature[2] and the New York times asking “Should all research papers be free?”[3] in 2006 attracted a wave of attention towards public right to science and “true ownership of advances in science and scholarship”.

The use of Sci-Hub worldwide has seen a rapid growth over the past few years. Twenty five percent of its content concentrates on medical literature while there are many articles related to chemistry as well. In 2017, Himmelstein D et al published on the coverage by Sci-Hub[4]. This showed that 65% of all published science with a DOI could be accessed in the Sci-Hub repository. It concentrates on recently



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published literature and mainly research that would have otherwise been inaccessible. In 2017, it provided access to 85% of articles published in toll access journals. Its content was concentrated mainly over conference proceedings articles (79%) and full text journal articles (77%) amongst other forms such as reports, book chapters, reference entries etc. Sci-Hub has a global usage with Portugal, Iran, Greece and Tunisia having the highest. Analysis of their user data shows that it is mostly used by those with limited or no institutional access to literature. Their creation of free access to scholarship to anyone with an internet connection is likely to challenge the sustainability of the subscription publishing model significantly. In 2016, Alexandra Elbakyan was named as one of “Nature’s 10” which is a list of persons named by Nature based on individuals who mattered most in that year.

This editorial by no means endorses copyright infringement. It only endorses the courage of those who have championed the rise against the monopoly of privatization of knowledge and science.

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