

Two studies suggest trouble ahead for paywall journals (Update)

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(Phys.org)—Two independent studies looking at two aspects of paywalls versus free access to research papers suggest that trouble may lie ahead for traditional journals that continue to expect payment for access to peer-reviewed research papers. In the first study, a small team of researchers from the U.S. and Germany looked at the number of freely

available papers on the internet using a web extension called Unpaywall—users enter information and the extension lists sources online for free. In the second study, a team with members from Canada, the U.S. and Germany looked at the popularity of a website known as Sci-Hub that collects and freely distributes research papers. Both groups have written papers describing their studies and results and have uploaded them to the *PeerJ Preprints* server.

Free access to [research papers](#) is a hot topic in the research community, perhaps indicating coming changes to the status quo. The traditional model, in which a researcher pays for the privilege of reading published articles on journal sites like *Science* and *Nature* in order to cite work by others, is under fire. Many have claimed the system is unfair to those who cannot afford to pay such fees. Meanwhile, journal sites maintain their stance that the only way they can continue to exist as profitable entities is to charge access fees. They note also that they provide a valuable service—peer review. In these two new efforts, the researchers with both teams hint that the argument may soon become moot, as people who want to read research papers for free find easier access.

In the first paper, the researchers worked with the team that makes the Unpaywall extension to get statistics on its use. They report finding that nearly half (45 percent) of all of the papers that people searched for using the app in 2015 were available for free. They also report that overall, users were able to find free versions of 47 percent of articles they were looking for.

In the second [paper](#), the researchers worked with the team behind Sci-Hub, which many have described as a pirating site. They report that visitors could access 85 percent of articles that were still behind a paywall. They found also that the percentage was even higher for papers held behind Elsevier paywalls. They note that the team at Sci-Hub told them that efforts to shut down their site through legal means have

resulted in free press, increasing its user base—a term they described as the "Streisand Effect"—after Barbra Streisand, who famously tried to stop distribution of aerial photographs of her home several years ago, inadvertently exposing the photographs to many more people.

More information: Himmelstein DS, Romero AR, McLaughlin SR, Greshake Tzovaras B, Greene CS. (2017) Sci-Hub provides access to nearly all scholarly literature. *PeerJ Preprints* 5:e3100v1 doi.org/10.7287/peerj.preprints.3100v1 , peerj.com/preprints/3100v1/

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