Riled up by Elsevier’s take-downs? Time to embrace open access journals
13 December 2013, by Alex O. Holcombe

Researchers burned by copyright ‘take-downs’ do have other options. Credit: marfis75

The publishing giant Elsevier owns much of the world’s academic knowledge, in the form of article copyright. In the past few weeks it has stepped up enforcement of its property rights, issuing “take-down notices” to Academia.edu, where many researchers post PDFs of their articles.

The articles in question were published in Elsevier-owned journals, and are legally available only by subscription, often at exorbitant prices.

Before publication, journals owned by Elsevier send academics’ manuscripts to other scholars for review. Following the review process, Elsevier reformats the manuscripts into PDFs in the style of the journals, whereupon authors are required to sign away the copyright.

So Elsevier is certainly within its legal rights to not allow posting of these final article PDFs to third-party sites, whether it’s Academia.edu or an author’s personal webpage.

Keep putting them up?

Some scholars (such as Mike Taylor) have suggested that scientists should actively rebel by illegally posting final article PDFs to our personal websites. They make the point that Elsevier likely won’t serve take-down notices to large numbers of individual scholars, because doing so would generate too much ill will in the research community.

Nevertheless, I don’t think encouraging illegal posting is the best response to the situation.

I say this in spite of my disgust with our system of signing away our rights to publishers. Universities lose billions of dollars by having to pay subscriptions to get back what we gave away.

The entrenched hierarchy of subscription journals also hinders innovation. I have a partial boycott policy with regards to Elsevier and am exercised enough to contribute to several open access related initiatives, as well as lectures, blog posts, and a sarcastic video.

But posting the publisher-owned PDFs of scholarly articles increases the availability only of the specific articles posted, rather than contributing to the uptake of a more comprehensive solution.

We will never see university administrators and research funders encouraging people to do something illegal, and if the administrators and funders do not encourage a thing, many academics will not do it. We have to promote action that official policymakers can get behind.

Illegal action can be useful in another way: attracting attention and exposing injustice, but we may be past the need for that. After decades of sleepwalking into this situation, the majority of researchers are finally now, I believe, aware that the continuing restrictions on dissemination of scholarly knowledge are fundamentally unnecessary.
Preprints: a legal solution

Here are two simple solutions for scholars and other researchers: patronise open access journals, or post preprints rather than final PDFs.

The solution that all levels of the sector can support, from individual researchers to government ministers, is the posting of preprints to websites such as university web repositories. A preprint is the article as formatted by the author, before it is turned into the publisher-owned PDF that appears in the journal.

If posting preprints is linked by universities and funders to their promotions and research evaluation processes, the majority of researchers begin posting their preprints quite quickly! This has already happened in Belgium at the University of Liege, and in Australia at the Queensland University of Technology.

Wherever such a mandate is adopted, it brings increased citations for that institution's researchers (it helps that the preprint repositories are fully indexed by Google Scholar). It also moves scholarship towards a preprint-centered culture, which:

- accelerates progress (because we don't have to wait for the publishers for research to become available)
- facilitates innovation (such as open peer review, since many manuscripts are then already available openly on websites)
- leads to library savings (eventually, thanks to cancellation of journal subscriptions).

Unfortunately, most universities adopting open access "mandates" have not linked their policy to research assessment and promotion processes. Without that link, such measures largely fail to induce researchers to change their habits.

Aesthetics aren't everything

Several of my colleagues have objected to the preprint-posting solution. They tell me they simply don't like reading preprints as they frequently contain ugly double-spaced text and relegate the figures to the end of the document.

Certainly the publisher-created PDF is a more aesthetic experience, with the figures embedded nicely into two-column pages of text. But are these niceties worth the price of denying the knowledge in these papers to all the researchers, policymakers, businesses, and citizens around the world who don't have access to the journals?

And do we really need publishers' formatting service when areas of physics and social science have done without it for decades, communicating mainly by preprints posted on sites like arXiv.org?

It is true, however, that in certain fields we can have our figure-formatted flan and let everybody eat it too. In some of the sciences, in some countries, there is enough money in the sector to pay for gold open access publication, where the publishers are paid per article to produce an attractive PDF that anyone can immediately read and use without restriction.

But in much of the arts and the humanities, funding is too scarce to support paying a fee to publish each article.

Fortunately, many hundreds of open access journals are published entirely by academics and libraries who have set aside the resources and time to make it happen, such as the Online Journal of Analytic Combinatorics edited by my friend Mark...
Wilson and the *International Journal of Innovation in Science and Mathematics Education* at the University of Sydney.

As the open-source software tools that support such efforts improve, this solution will become more widespread. But starting such journals, and making them viable, takes time. As the cognitive scientist and open access promoter Stevan Harnad is fond of pointing out, posting preprints can be done today.

Almost a year ago, many people were inspired to act by the tragic death of a "hacktivist" who worked for, among other things, open access to research publications. That activist was Aaron Swartz and soon after his suicide some called, like today, for researchers to post publisher-owned article PDFs to the web. This #PDFtribute captured the well-meaning efforts of many scholars. But being illegal, this initiative cannot be scaled up by institutions.

Let’s get behind solutions that the whole community – individual scholars, university leadership, and governments – can turn into everyday practice.

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