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## Publisher draws researcher boycott

Nearly 9,000 researchers have signed a petition protesting Elsevier, a publisher of journals.

By **Jeff Hargarten** March 29, 2012

University of Minnesota researchers have joined an international boycott against a major scientific publisher.

Since February, nearly 9,000 researchers worldwide have signed a petition protesting Elsevier, a publisher of science journals, for its high prices, business practices and support for controversial legislation.

The Cost of Knowledge petition asks researchers to refrain from publishing through Elsevier and having involvement in editing its journals.

Researchers are required to read the works of other researchers as part of their jobs — something the petitioners feel Elsevier makes difficult.

Founded in 1880, the Amsterdam-based publisher sells the medical reference dictionary Gray's Anatomy and about 20,000 books, as well as publishing about 2,000 journals, including biology journal Cell and The Lancet, a major medical publication.

Peter Olver, head of the University's School of Mathematics, and Doug Arnold, a math professor, were among the 34 researchers who signed the petition's statement. About 40 University faculty and staff members also signed, along with professors, department heads and researchers from Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Harvard University, Stanford University and many other schools abroad.

Representatives from Elsevier did not comment on researchers' specific complaints. The publisher has addressed the concerns from researchers in recent press releases, which specifically address its support of the Research Works Act.

### The price of free

Elsevier's subscription prices for its journals are among the researchers' primary complaints.

The cost of publishing journals has been decreasing for years, yet the amount being spent by universities on library journals "seems to be growing with no end in sight," the petition's statement said.

While accessing research publications usually costs hundreds of dollars (priced per page) for publishers like Princeton University and the American Mathematical Society, Elsevier's prices can be in the thousands of dollars, according to a study Arnold conducted that's due to be published in a mathematical journal.

Researchers typically give away the copyrights on their work to scientific publishers in exchange for peer review and distribution of their research to the scientific community. But peer review is also conducted for

free by the same researchers who contribute to scientific journals. The final product is then sold back to the

... by the same researchers who contribute to scientific journals. The final product is then sold back to the universities that provided the content for free.

“This ends up in situations where you, the author of a paper, simply cannot access your own paper because you have [no] clearance for that,” said Roberto Alamino, a researcher at Aston University in Britain.

Because of Elsevier’s high prices, many university libraries have to purchase discount bundles, which may include many unwanted titles, Olver said.

“Not surprisingly, many mathematicians have in recent years lost patience with being involved in a system in which commercial publishers make profits based on the free labor of mathematicians,” the petition’s statement said.

What started with mathematicians has reached researchers in a broad spectrum of fields.

“We absolutely need journals,” Arnold said. “It’s our responsibility to read other researchers’ work, and we need access or else we can’t do our jobs.

“They’re taking advantage of our free labor.”

### **Keeping public research free**

The petition also targets Elsevier’s political involvement.

The publisher supported the Research Works Act — the latest in a string of congressional proposals to reverse current federal policies ensuring taxpayer-funded research is made freely accessible online.

“We oppose in principle the notion that governments should be able to dictate the terms by which products of private sector investments are distributed, especially if they are to be distributed for free,” said a Feb. 3 press release from Elsevier defending its backing of the bill.

The petition also opposes the publisher’s support of the Stop Online Piracy Act and PROTECT IP Act. Both bills were shelved by lawmakers in late January following mass online protests.

In response to criticism, Elsevier withdrew its support of RWA on Feb. 27 — the same day co-sponsor Rep. Darrell Issa, R-CA, announced he would not pursue the legislation any further. Similar legislation also failed to gain traction in 2008 and 2009.

As the petition gained signatures, Elsevier issued a press release explaining its withdrawal from RWA, stating its journal authors, editors and reviewers were concerned by the company’s backing of the bill.

“We are ready and willing to work constructively and cooperatively to continue to promote free and low-cost public access through a variety of means, as we have with research funders and other partners around the world,” the release stated.

### **Digital transitions**

The digital revolution is changing the way research is disseminated.

As publications switch to digital formats and distribution costs drop, the industry is being forced to change, Olver said..

“The fact is that the Internet allowed it to happen, and publishers are realizing that they are losing their importance,” Alamino said.

Elsevier has started allowing more open access to digital copies of its archives, Arnold said. As

mathematicians, both Arnold and Olver have needed to access journals dating back a century or more.

“Elsevier also owns all of its back issues,” he said. “Why not make them all available?”

### A matter of ethics

Researchers have also criticized Elsevier’s ethics.

The company has been accused of publishing research from pharmaceutical companies for money and printing “junk research,” Arnold said.

A study by The Lancet linking vaccines to autism in 1998 was retracted by the journal in 2010.

Another journal, Chaos Solitons and Fractals, printed about 270 papers by its own editor in chief that were likely not subject to peer review, Arnold said.

### Making an example

The boycott of Elsevier could just be the beginning.

There are many other publishers with business practices criticized by researchers, but Elsevier is a starting point, Olver said.

“Elsevier is just [a] symbol of something bigger,” Alamino said. “It might seem unfair to pick up just one of the publishers, but one must start somewhere.”

To Olver, what distinguishes Elsevier is that other publishers “seem to have their heart in the right place.”

“Scientists must be aware that we have to be treated with respect and, more than that, that we have the right and the duty to demand that,” Alamino said.

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