

The Price of Knowledge

Alexandra Elbakyan, a graduate student from Kazakhstan, has attracted international praise—and a slew of lawsuits—for her creation of a website called Sci-Hub, which illegally hosts and distributes millions of research papers for free. Sci-Hub allows users to upload articles from scientific journals that can be downloaded by anyone.

Under current publishing conventions, university libraries negotiate expensive contracts with publishing companies like Elsevier and Wiley-Blackwell for access to the scientific journals they publish. If researchers are not connected to a university, or are members of one that cannot afford to pay, they must pay an individual fee to access an article, which can range from \$20-\$50 per article.¹ These costs for researchers can add up quickly. Sci-Hub allows readers to bypass publisher paywalls and go directly to the research they are looking for.

Supporters of Sci-Hub argue that free access to research democratizes education and levels the playing field for scholars who do not work for well-resourced universities. According to Michael Eisen, a scientist at University of California, Berkeley, this also speeds up scientific discoveries, by making it easier for more researchers to build on each other's work.² Some Sci-Hub defenders also complain that publishing companies like Elsevier operate with profit margins of over 30 percent, while the scientists who produce the research do not receive a cut of the profits. Elbakyan herself claims that Sci-Hub “never received any complaints from authors or researchers.”

Publishing companies have been quick to file lawsuits against Elbakyan and Sci-Hub, claiming that no matter her intentions, this website breaks the law, and encourages users to steal their intellectual property. Alicia Wise, an employee at Elsevier, argues that defenders of Sci-Hub get things wrong: “as if somehow stealing content is justifiable if it's seen as expensive... It's not as if you'd walk into a grocery store and feel vindicated about stealing an organic chocolate bar as long as you left the Kit-Kat bar on the shelf.” Publishing companies also argue that they perform a valuable service for the academy and the public, and that sites like Sci-Hub undermine their ability to publish high-quality science.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is the value of scientific research? Should it be available to everyone?
2. Is it permissible for researchers to download articles from Sci-Hub?
3. Is it permissible for people who have access to well-resourced research libraries to upload papers to Sci-Hub?
4. What are the similarities and differences between Sci-Hub and websites that allow users to illegally download music or movies?

¹ <https://ed.stanford.edu/in-the-media/sci-hub-research-piracy-and-public-good-op-ed-john-willinsky>

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/13/opinion/sunday/should-all-research-papers-be-free.html>

