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Mathematicians Organize Boycott of a Publisher

By **THOMAS LIN**

More than 5,700 researchers have joined a boycott of Elsevier, a leading publisher of science journals, in a growing furor over open access to the fruits of scientific research.

The protest grew out of a provocative [blog post](#) by the mathematician Timothy Gowers of Cambridge University, who announced on Jan. 21 that he would no longer publish papers in any of Elsevier's journals or serve as a referee or editor for them.

Last week 34 mathematicians issued a [statement](#) denouncing "a system in which commercial publishers make profits based on the free labor of mathematicians and subscription fees from their institutions' libraries, for a service that has become largely unnecessary."

The signers included three Fields medalists — Dr. Gowers, Terence Tao and Wendelin Werner. The statement was also signed by Ingrid Daubechies, president of the International Mathematical Union, who then resigned as one of the unpaid editors in chief at the Elsevier journal Applied and Computational Harmonic Analysis.

"We feel that the social compact is broken at present by some publishing houses, of which we feel Elsevier is the most extreme," Dr. Daubechies said. "We feel they are now making much larger profits at a time when a lot of the load they used to take has been taken over by us."

While joining the boycott was her own decision, Dr. Daubechies said the International Mathematical Union was debating whether to take a position.

The defecting scientists represent a small fraction of the roughly 600,000 authors Elsevier says it publishes. In an [open letter](#) responding to some of the grievances, Elsevier said it was "proud of the way we have been able to work in partnership with the research community to make real and sustainable contributions to science."

Still, David Clark, the senior vice president in charge of Elsevier's mathematics journals, acknowledged that the boycott had drawn attention.

"When one prominent person raises concerns, other people will raise concerns, too," he

said in an interview. “We certainly want to hear those concerns.”

For 2010, Elsevier reported a 36 percent profit on revenues of \$3.2 billion. “It’s a secure, viable business, which is a good thing,” Mr. Clark said.

The most recent flashpoint in the dispute was the [Research Works Act](#), a bill introduced in Congress in December that would prohibit federal agencies from requiring open access to research, even if it is financed by taxpayers.

On Thursday, a competing bill, the [Federal Research Public Access Act](#), first drafted in 2006, was reintroduced in Congress.

“The Research Works Act was the straw that broke the camel’s back for many people. Also for me,” said Dr. Daubechies (pronounced DOHB-shee), a Duke University mathematician known for her work on wavelets that improve the quality of compressed images.

Mr. Clark, of Elsevier, said: “We’ve seen a lot of pushback on this issue. As a publisher, we never like a government mandate that says you should do this in this way.” But he also acknowledged: “We left a lot of editors feeling annoyed and confused. And we really shouldn’t have done that.”

Dr. Daubechies said she was contacted by Mr. Clark and was willing to talk, but did not want the company to think, “now we have vented and now we have calmed down.”

Dr. Gowers, of Cambridge, said his original blog post was intended not as a way of “starting a campaign but making my own position public.” But he added, “It had so much momentum that it seemed wrong to squander that momentum.”

He said he hoped the boycott would lead to more alternatives to commercial publishers.

“You can expect movement on that within the next few months,” he said.

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: February 18, 2012

An article on Tuesday about a move by mathematicians to boycott Elsevier, a leading publisher of science journals, misspelled the given name of one of the signers of a letter laying out the reasons for the boycott. He is Terence Tao, not Terrance.

