

Web freedoms fuel 'academic spring' journal protest

Updated 10:33 14 February 2012 by [Jacob Aron](#)

Inspired by a University of Cambridge mathematician, over 5000 academics have agreed to boycott publishers Elsevier, vowing not to peer-review or submit papers for any of its scientific journals.

The protest comes at a time when mathematicians in particular are embracing new ways of working online, with some using web tools such as blogs and wikis both to [solve proofs collectively](#) and to distribute the results to their peers.

The researchers supporting the boycott, more than 1000 of whom are mathematicians, object to the journals' pricing and the company's support for several proposed US laws – including the controversial [SOPA and PIPA anti-piracy bills](#). Elsevier, which is based in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, rejects the criticisms from the protesters and says it is "troubled by the distortions and misstatements of fact that have been advanced".

Elsevier is owned by the transnational Reed Elsevier, as is Reed Business Information, publisher of *New Scientist*.

Bill battle

The protest began last month when Timothy Gowers, a mathematician at the University of Cambridge, [wrote a blog post](#) objecting to what he called Elsevier's "very high" prices and its practice of "bundling" journals, which he says prompts university libraries to spend money on titles that they may not want.

Other mathematicians joined the cause, creating the website [thecostofknowledge.com](#) to declare they would no longer support Elsevier. Since then academics from other disciplines have joined the protest, and earlier this week 34 mathematicians, including Gowers, [published a more formal statement](#) explaining the reasons behind the boycott.

As well as criticising Elsevier's pricing, the statement also objects to the company's support of three proposed US laws: the SOPA and PIPA anti-piracy bills and the [Research Works Act \(RWA\)](#), which aims to prevent government-funded researchers from being required to publish in open-access journals.

The former two bills are also supported by many other publishers. The latter is supported by the Association of American Publishers, though some scientific publishers, [including the journal Nature](#), oppose it.

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In response to the protest, Elsevier has [produced its own statement](#).

It says that the cost of downloading an article has never been lower than it is today, and points out that libraries are never forced to take bundled packages. "They always have the option to purchase individual articles, subscribe to titles, or subscribe to sets of journals," writes the company. "Most choose large collections, however, because they get substantial volume discounts that offer more titles at a lower cost." *New Scientist* is sometimes included in such bundles.

Elsevier also emphasises the benefits of the work it does. "The essence of our work is to create and sustain journals that make it possible for researchers to have their work efficiently reviewed, enhanced, validated, recognized, discovered and made highly accessible, in perpetuity, to readers in



Power to the peer reviewers (Image: Pali Rao/Getty Images)

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virtually every country of the world." The statement adds: "It's work that is both complex and investment-intensive."

Elsevier has also [defended its support for the RWA](#), emphasising that there are costs to publishing research, in addition to doing the research. "The RWA's purpose is simply to ensure that the US government cannot enshrine in law how journal articles or accepted manuscripts are disseminated without involving publishers," writes Elsevier.

Academic spring

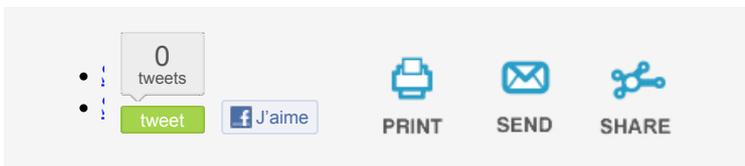
Gowers suggests that the protest has become particularly popular with mathematicians because many have become used to new ways of working. They share information online through blogs and wikis, for example, and so no longer need traditional journals. "It has become a more central part of a large section of mathematicians' lives," he says. The [Polymath project](#), which allows mathematicians to solve proofs collaboratively online, came out of a blog written by Gowers in 2009.

Although there are already other alternatives to traditional journal publishing, these suffer from their own problems. Open-access journal publishers, such as the [Public Library of Science](#), allow anyone to read papers for free, but the costs of publishing fall to the authors. This may prevent cash-strapped academics from sharing their work. Other paper repositories, such as the physics preprint server [arXiv](#), let users read and publish for free, but don't provide any form of peer review.

Whatever the fallout from the boycott, it is clear that mathematicians are on the march. Have they been influenced by other protest groups over the past year, from the [Occupy movement](#) to the [Arab spring](#)?

"I think there's something in the air and people have obviously been very tempted to draw that analogy – I have myself," says Gowers. He thinks that the power of the internet to connect people is the common element. "It has become very much easier for grass-roots movements to start up."

When this article was first posted, the third paragraph began: "The researchers supporting the boycott, who are mainly mathematicians but count more than 1000 signatories from other disciplines among their ranks, object to..."



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