

Elsevier purchase SSRN: Social scientists face questions over whether centralised repository is in their interests



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*The Social Science Research Network (SSRN), an online repository for uploading preprint articles and working papers, has been recently acquired by publishing giant Elsevier. **Thomas Leeper** looks at what this purchase, and for-profit academic services more generally, mean for the scholarly community. Many regular users may not be aware that SSRN has been run by a privately held corporation since its founding in 1994.*

Elsevier, one of the world's largest scientific publishers, **announced yesterday** that they have purchased Social Science Electronic Publishing, Inc. Unremarkable though this may sound, Social Science Electronic Publishing was until now the owner of the Social Science Research Network, an online service hosting more than 500,000 working and conference papers contributed by over 300,000 authors from across the social sciences. SSRN's articles are preprints, made available before publication for free to readers anywhere in the world.

Elsevier's acquisition of SSRN and with it an enormous archive of scholarly content reflects a continued expansion of the publisher's business model beyond traditional print journals. The publisher has increasingly involved itself in a broader range of products and services, including the popular **Mendeley** reference manager (**which it acquired in 2013**) and various efforts at producing and distributing open access journals that are financed by author-paid article processing charges (APCs).

Two things about the deal stand out. First, Elsevier may be the most loathed academic publisher in the world, a reflection of its size, ubiquitousness, and success at maintaining a high-profit business model despite pressure for greater public access to publicly funded scientific research. More than 16,000 researchers have signed on to **a boycott** of publishing in or performing peer review service for Elsevier-published journals, in protest of the high costs of Elsevier journal articles despite the uncompensated labor of authors, reviewers, and

editors. While Elsevier practices a for-profit model much like other academic publishers, the fees it charges to libraries, individual end-users, and authors (in the form of APCs) and **the greater than 30% profit margin it earns on that revenue** have led to sharp criticism by academics and high-profile organizations like **the Wellcome Trust**.

The for-profit publishing model more broadly has spawned dissent, like The High Cost of Knowledge boycott, but also **a highly publicized guerilla effort** by a Kazakhstan-born graduate student to distribute Elsevier's (and other publishers') content for free on a website called Sci-Hub. Readers without access to the content locked behind Elsevier's paywall – mostly from countries outside Europe and North America – use the site to share and download articles. Elsevier has equated that sites tactics to **piracy**.

Second, yesterday's acquisition links Elsevier to an immensely popular service that many of its users likely never recognized as a for-profit corporation. SSRN has been hugely successful, especially in Law and Economics, where it rivals the physical science's **arXiv** in popularity. With papers authored by leading scholars, "eJournals" edited by the same, and paper downloads hosted by the Chicago Booth, Stanford Law School, and elsewhere, the site gives an impression of being a purely academic entity. Yet since its founding in 1994 SSRN has been run by a privately held corporation with claims of an after-dividends **annual budget in excess of \$1 million**.

Social scientists who have relied on SSRN as a central repository for sharing preliminary research findings now face a question of whether an Elsevier-owned service makes sense. SSRN has long enforced a permissive, revocable license for content shared to the site, meaning authors retain copyright and can subsequently publish their articles as they see fit. Elsevier has promised to retain the existing licensing, but has in the past been incredibly strict in its enforcement of copyright, which authors are required to **relinquish to publish** in Elsevier journals. In 2013, the publisher leveraged this copyright transfer policy to force authors to **remove copies of their own articles** from Academia.edu.

Providing governments, journalists, and the general public with free and unrestricted access to research findings has become a dominant refrain in ongoing conversations about scientific impact. Yesterday's move may offer the possibility of a substantial corporate investment in a valuable public service, or a turning point for SSRN and its users from a vital scientific resource into yet another means for Elsevier to extract profit from academics' voluntary contributions. The purchase of SSRN is also a vivid reminder that advocates of open science practices need to wrestle with whether the end goal of making science widely and freely available for the world can be achieved with the support of for-profit entities that have a substantial stake in the preservation of traditional closed access publishing.



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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Impact blog, nor of the London School of Economics.

This post originally appeared on the **LSE Impact blog**.

