

The Scholarly Kitchen: what's hot and cooking in scholarly publishing

## Elsevier Acquires SSRN

Posted by [Roger C. Schonfeld](#) · May 17, 2016



Today, [Elsevier is announcing that it has acquired SSRN](#), the preprint and publishing community that focuses on social sciences and law. I had a chance to speak yesterday with Gregg Gordon, president of SSRN, Jan Reichelt, co-founder of Mendeley, and Tom Reller, a senior Elsevier executive, about the acquisition. Elsevier has been pursuing a strategy of reducing the share of its revenues coming from content and increasing the share coming from analytics and other services, [as its chairman Y.S. Chi described clearly at the Research Library UK conference in 2014](#). Among other things, the SSRN acquisition is another step in Elsevier's path towards data and analytics.

SSRN is first and foremost a site where content is discovered and distributed. Through its working papers and preprints, SSRN is a hub for the early versions of research across many social sciences fields, plus law and some of the humanities as well. It is free to authors for article deposit and free to readers for downloading, and Elsevier has committed that this will not change.

Beyond this content platform aspect, SSRN also sees itself as a community. Some 300,000 authors have contributed papers to SSRN (an average of approximately two each), and, because of the author pages and other features that distinguish it from a publisher, SSRN sees itself generating a substantial amount of interaction between authors and readers, including the development of meaningful collaboration opportunities.

Finally, SSRN is also something of an "institutional repository" for banks, academic departments, and other academic units that are trying to distribute their materials broadly. This, along with a subscription-based alerting service for relevant new submissions, are its revenue sources. SSRN had one of the early freemium business models for an open access service.

In a number of ways, Mendeley is the linchpin for this acquisition. When Mendeley itself was acquired by Elsevier in April 2013, there was much [discussion](#) and [debate](#) about whether Mendeley should continue to be trusted by scientists under Elsevier's umbrella. Over the past three years, Reichelt shared with me that Mendeley has grown its user base from 2.5 million to 5 million. The team of 50 Mendeley employees that Elsevier acquired has grown to some 200, and they are focused on digital product development well beyond Mendeley itself. This group will be working closely with SSRN following the acquisition.

Although Mendeley has been to all users, it clearly has strengths in the STM fields, so SSRN will now provide it with an opportunity to acquire a new user population as a result of a variety of integrations between the two services. We should expect these to include connections between SSRN author pages and Mendeley professional profiles, and workflow connections that allow Mendeley collaborative groups to submit papers for distribution and perhaps eventually review and publication. There will also be other opportunities to strengthen SSRN for its authors, with plans to link preprints on SSRN with Scopus, bringing analytics about article "performance" to SSRN authors, and to bring improved links between working papers and preprints with their eventual published versions.

More generally, this acquisition plainly indicates Elsevier's interest in the open access repository space. This is not a repository filled with published journal articles but rather with working papers and preprints. What other such repositories are privately owned or otherwise available for purchase?

Given the nature of the emphasis that Elsevier has been making on data and analytics, we should expect to see over time other integrations between an article repository like SSRN and Elsevier's other services. There is a wealth of information in the usage logs of services like SSRN that could help guide editors trying to acquire manuscripts for publication or that could assist business development efforts for journal acquisitions. Also important to watch are SciVal, Pure, and some of Elsevier's

other “[research intelligence](#)” offerings. SSRN has extracted and made use of the references in its papers, and its usage data are already used to calculate top papers, top authors, and top organizations. SSRN data will have value for generating “performance” data for papers, authors, and organizations.

According to Gordon, SSRN has been at least cashflow positive for 13 years, although to look at it visually one might suspect that the site has not received the capital investments that it deserves. Reller shared that, for Elsevier, this acquisition is certainly not about immediate revenue but rather about a longer-term investment in communities and data. Presumably, the stability of other parts of Elsevier’s business provides the ability to make such investments with a longer time horizon than some other types of investors might be able to tolerate. Over time, it will be possible to see if communities and data have the economic value that Elsevier’s strategy seems to anticipate.

Elsevier is building a substantial data and analytics service, not only through tools that are professionally curated, such as Scopus, but also those that are filled with content contributed by scholars and their institutions. Critics have expressed substantial concerns about data being used for advertising purposes, where the potential for actual harm is indirect at best. But are there limits on the purposes to which data gathered up by Mendeley and now SSRN can be put? Critics might bemoan that such data are being aggregated at all, but is there a scenario where the contributions to an open access repository are analyzed in ways that diverge from the interests of the contributors? The connections with Elsevier’s research intelligence offerings are interesting in this respect.

By acquiring an open access service with its focus in the social sciences, Elsevier is further building out its capacity to provide workflow services, data, and analytics to the scholarly community. Some might see this development as good for open access, given the nature of the investment that Elsevier is planning to make in the SSRN, while others may be concerned to that over time an open repository is somehow co-opted. Smart observers will be trying to puzzle together what it means that Elsevier is growing in its ability to shape its own future as a workflow, data, and analytics enterprise, well beyond its roots in publishing. Finally, universities, their libraries, and other publishers, should have on their minds some of the policy and governance issues around the data that Elsevier is accumulating and the uses to which they may be put.