

Subscription Journal Workarounds

Gaining access to peer reviewed literature is beyond the financial reach of everyone outside of elite research institutions: subscription prices of scholarly journals increased faster than inflation rate for several decades.^[1]

This situation is known as the “price crisis” in scholarly publishing, and it’s hurting the average citizen. At the very moment that most of us carry access to a global information network in our pockets, our ability to tap into the world’s knowledge is eliminated. And it’s not an accident. It’s on purpose.

Scholarly publishers are accustomed to years of sky-high profit margins with little scrutiny. That’s changing. In August 2011, well known Guardian columnist, George Monbiot wrote a compelling piece titled **Academic publishers make Murdoch look like a socialist**.^[2] More recently, in April 2014, Professor Tim Gowers published a lengthy (but detailed) blog post titled **Elsevier journals - some facts**.^[3]

Student scientist, Jack Andraka, wrote a guest post for the PLOS student blog titled Why Science Journal Paywalls Have to Go.^[4]

“I soon learned that many of the papers I was interested in reading were hidden behind expensive paywalls. I convinced my mom to use her credit card for a few but was discouraged when some of them turned out to be expensive but not useful to me. She became much less willing to pay when she found some in the recycle bin!”

In light of the above, without access to the literature, small businesses, startups, recent graduates, students, the general public have to use various methods to bridge the knowledge gap. In some ways, there is a 'black market for scholarly journals'. In around 2007, on the social media site FriendFeed (FF), a room called References Wanted was created to “document the harm caused by closed/toll-access publication”.

However, this then also developed into a P2P resource for sharing PDF’s, and very efficiently so. After FF was acquired by Facebook in 2009, it (generally) became much less widely used.

P2P sharing of PDF’s then became much more widespread on Twitter by using #icanhazpdf requests which started in 2011^[5]. “Rightly or wrongly using #icanhazpdf infringes copyright, but its practice is fiercely defended by many” wrote Jean Liu in her 2013 post, Interactions: The Numbers Behind #ICanHazPDF.^[6]



In November 2013, an initiative was launched by two UK students called Open Access Button^[7]. “The Open Access Button, a safe, easy to use browser bookmarklet that you can use to show the global effects of research paywalls - and to help get access to the research you need”. The latest version of the button includes an auto generated email request to authors for their research paper to be made open access.

It is quite unusual for researchers not to share their work when directly asked. I have used this strategy >1500 times with a positive response rate of 90%.

Launched in 2011, but relatively not known about until early 2015 was/is the entity known as Sci-Hub^[9]



Sci-Hub is the first known website to provide automatic and free access to paywalled academic papers on a massive scale. Before Sci-Hub people used to request and share research papers manually by direct email to paper authors or other academics. Around the same time Sci-Hub started, online research forums and social networks were available, like the [#ICanHazPDF](#) Twitter tag. Manual sharing counts for hundreds of papers per day being distributed. The Sci-Hub website claims serving thousands of requests every day.^[10]

One of the most elaborate and moving cases of working around paywalls to gain access to life-saving research is Sharon Terry's story^[8].

To conclude, until Open Access becomes the norm, via the web and the use of social media, various methods have to be deployed to gain access to (oftenly, publicly funded), literature that is locked away behind publishers pay-walls.

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- [3] gowers.wordpress.com/2014/04/24/elsevier-journals-some-facts
- [4] blogs.plos.org/thestudentblog/2013/02/18/why-science-journal-paywalls-have-to-go
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