

Some thoughts about Sci-Hub

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Late last week, I was contacted by an online contact asking if I would be interested in participating in an interview:-

Do you want to be possibly interviewed by the Chronicle of Higher Ed about and Sci-hub?

Being well aware of [#icanhazpdf](#) and [Sci-Hub](#), I agreed. Sci-Hub is certainly a hot topic at the moment.

"n" of [#icanhazpdf](#) tweet requests in the last 24 hours. 5

"n" of tweets about Sci-Hub in the last HOUR alone. 68

- © Gr@h@m Steel (@McDawg) [February 14, 2016](#)

It wasn't practical to speaker with the reporter at that time so I emailed them back suggesting that they email me a few questions and I would respond.

I heard back a few days later and got to work at formulating my responses. This took quite a bit longer than I had anticipated.

The report at [The Chronicle of Higher Education](#) is due to be published week ending 19th February and I will link to it here as soon as I have found it. The Chronicle is a subscription publication. However, a fair percentage of articles can be read without a subscription and I hope that will be the case here.

++UPDATE++ THE CHRONICLE ARTICLE HAS NOW COME OUT AND YOU [CAN READ IT IN FULL HERE](#).

From experience of doing interviews, I am fully aware that only a portion of what I wrote will be used. As such, I thought I would blog our Q&A discussion in verbatim.

QUESTION: In [your article](#), you write that open access has become the new norm and social media is the tool driving it. I'm wondering, what is Sci-Hub's role in open access?

Sci-Hub is not open access. Maybe it's a bit of grit in the oyster, helping to rock the boat. I completely

agree with [Dr Martin Eve](#) who [recently tweeted](#) "I can't condone and I don't think it's the answer, but it is a symptom of the problem. Pure open access business models would be immune to it".

QUESTION: Now that Elsevier is suing Sci-Hub there is much more attention drawn to academic piracy. In your opinion is Sci-Hub challenging the traditional pay to publish/pay to access model?

Subscription journal workarounds have been around [for many years](#). Sci-Hub is the most recent one and has received much attention over the last 12 months or so via social media, blog posts and broad media coverage. I'm not sure it's "challenging" these models *per se* (because it uses .edu proxies i.e., legitimate journal subscription accounts), but it has become an extremely effective way to access literature that is beyond the reach of most. Other than the legal aspects of the dispute with Elsevier, I sense there are also technology based ones.

With regards to Sci-Hub generally, Richard Smith-Unna summarized matters succinctly in this tweet:-

Let's face it, LibGen and SciHub are popular because they solve a problem Elsevier should have solved: disseminating knowledge.

- @ Rik Smith-Unna (@blahah404) [June 10, 2015](#)

QUESTION: Many librarians I've spoken to say that academic publishing is working off a broken system. Do you agree? If so, who is it up to to fix it? What will it take?

There are several reasons that academic publishing is working off a broken system. The [ongoing serials crisis](#). Addiction to [Journal Impact Factor](#) and most recently, expensive Article Processing Charges, [e.g. here](#). However the publishing landscape continues to evolve. I would like to see academics, librarians and research funders taking more of a leading role in matters rather than the publishers. Some such as [Björn Brembs](#) even question the need for [publishers at all](#) !

QUESTION: Are you familiar with how Sci-Hub's model works? Does the fact that it uses university credentials to scrape papers from Elsevier and other journals put librarians who work at those university in an awkward position?

Yes, I am aware of how the model works. This is not mentioned on the Sci-Hub platform, but is elsewhere such as [the Wikipedia page](#) about it. Many in the librarian community are aware of Sci-Hub and other methods of bypassing the modern interlibrary loan (ILL). A detailed paper titled [Bypassing Interlibrary Loan Via Twitter: An Exploration of #icanhazpdf Requests by Gardner & Gardner et al from 2015](#) is noteworthy.

QUESTION: Is there a tension between academics and publishers? Is that how open access emerged?

The open access movement traces its history at least back to the 1950s. Widespread access to the internet in the late 1990s and early 2000s fueled the movement. Post internet, open access was initially seen as a threat by traditional subscription based publishers and more recently, an opportunity.

QUESTION: You've studied open access thoroughly. To you, what does the future look like for Sci-Hub? If it disappears, do you expect something else will take its place?

The future of Sci-Hub is uncertain. It does have shades of the Napster era. See [Napster, Udacity, and the Academy](#) by [Clay Shirky](#). That said, as [The Library Loon](#) states in her recent blog post [Next moves in the Sci-Hub game](#) "*Sci-Hub has come as close as anything to Napsterizing paywalled journals yet actually surviving the experience*". Pressure on the system will continue until we have full open access in place.