"Wallets with a Serious Case of Stockholm Syndrome": Sci-Hub and the Future of Scholarly Communication

Graham Steel[1]

[1]Affiliation not available

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Following Aaron Swartz's tragic suicide in 2013, there was a brief flurry of attempts to honor his legacy by increasing public access to research articles. Swartz had successfully accessed millions of articles from MIT's licensed JSTOR database, in a way that drew the ire of JSTOR (which eventually dropped charges), MIT (which arrested Swartz), and the federal government (which alleged numerous violations of the Computer Fraud and Abuse Act).

People argued that the way to remember Swartz was to provide immediate, complete, non-embargoed access to research articles. Not reports to grant funders about progress along the way, not mere summaries of the results - but the actual papers from actual journals, complete with their DOIs and page numbers.

Indeed, in 2013 - well after the Internet had transitioned from a novel technology into an essential part of everyday life - we were still debating about how to maximize access to the fruits of a publication process that dates from the 1600's. Activists claim that all of the scholarly literature should be free, publishers claim they add significant value to this literature that is worthy of compensation.

We are still having this debate in 2016, and if trends continue we will keep doing so for decades more. The great unleashing of the literature called for after Swartz's death has not come to pass. There is too much money to be made in the current scholarly publication system - in which the only way to have immediate access to papers is to be affiliated with an institution rich enough to afford this, or to live in a poor enough nation that it is not an attractive market for publishers anyway.

Legally, the current system rests on a transfer of copyright from the authors of papers to publishers - with that transfer complete, the publishers then bundle articles into journals and license them back to libraries. These licensing terms carry costs that greatly exceed the rate of inflation, which is by now a very well-documented phenomenon. This is because journals are "inelastic" and "non-substitutable"; there is less ability to shop around on the basis of content, as each journal fills a unique niche. Meanwhile librarians feel duty bound to subscribe to all the leading titles in a field, leading inexorably to monopolistic pricing.

That pricing does not affect researchers, who are the consumers of scholarly work, because they do not pay it. The upshot is that the only balance sheet negatively impacted is that for the library. Hence we find that librarians, in the immortal words of John Dupuis, feel like "wallets with a serious case of Stockholm Syndrome."

Open access journals, which are available without subscription or licensing barriers, most certainly improve access compared to subscription journals. But they are not necessarily any cheaper for libraries, especially those that foot the bill for the author processing charges (APCs) that sustain open access journals. As T. Scott Plutchak has often observed, access and affordability are two separate issues.

Everything I've written so far should be very familiar to observers of the scholarly communication scene, perhaps mind-numbingly so. The uneven balance of power between librarians and researchers, and ergo between librarians and publishers, are long-established sources of resentment in libraryland.

Enter Sci-Hub, a radical disruption with perhaps enough power to compel solutions to this intractable impasse.

What is Sci-Hub? A repository of academic papers that are supposed to be behind pay walls. To date Sci-Hub has collected more than 47 million academic research papers. It does so through bypassing the many access control mechanisms meant to restrict this content to authorized users. (Whether this comes via "donations" of institutional log-in credentials or phishing scams is unclear.) This effort necessarily involves infringing on copyright, but Sci-Hub founder Alexandra Elbakyan argues that she observes a higher law by making these papers available to all interested readers.

In a sense Sci-Hub's approach is a refinement and improvement of the process Aaron Swartz utilized with JSTOR. As Graham Steel notes, Sci-Hub's approach is much more effective at file sharing than the once upon a time cutting edge #ICanHazPDF.

Publishers are outraged. Elsevier successfully sued Sci-Hub in US court last year, seeking the site's demise. After a brief pause last year (prior to the lawsuit's conclusion), as of today Sci-Hub continues unabated. Elbakyan is from Kazakhstan, and the site's servers are not in the United States. It also relies on sophisticated programming that bounces between servers around the globe. For all these reasons it would be very difficult to halt Sci-Hub on a permanent basis. Even if Sci-Hub itself did cease operations, another similar site could easily emerge in its place.

The genie is out of the bottle. The writing is on the wall. [Insert similar metaphor here]. If nothing else, Sci-Hub proves that the days of making money from regulating access to PDFs of journal articles is over.

Or does it? As observers of this controversy have noted, academic libraries are not going to cancel their journal licenses thanks to the newfound availability of articles on Sci-Hub. Those licensed packages are the lifeblood of Sci-Hub‑which penetrates ostensibly secure university networks in order to fetch and cache articles‑in any case. And of course an institutional actor such as a library would not make decisions based on a third party's practices that infringe on copyright.

For these reasons Angela Cochran, Director of Journals at the American Society of Civil Engineers, is seeking common cause with librarians. In a much-discussed post on the *Scholarly Kitchen*, Cochran lays out the case against Sci-Hub and expresses her dismay that librarians and open access advocates have not spoken out against Sci-Hub's "piracy." Cochran is right that the methods used by Sci-Hub could put many other institutional computer systems at risk, which is why librarians and others should be concerned.

But Cochran is not familiar with that feeling of librarian Stockholm Syndrome that John DuPuis so aptly described. I've long raged against having to think about and deploy access control mechanisms within the libraries where I have worked. I became a librarian in order to maximize access to information, not to meter it out stingily. But dem's the breaks baby cakes. Part of being an academic librarian today involves providing uncompensated copyright enforcement for publishing interests, in order to reinforce values you do not even believe in.

Hence Cochran's disillusionment. I suspect many academic librarians and open access advocates

support Sci-Hub's ends if not its means. (Perhaps I am wrong on the library front, this ultimately depends on whether a librarian perceives themselves as a "soldier or revolutionary" in Rick Anderson's formulation). If Cochran wishes to find common ground with the greatest number of librarians in the wake of Sci-Hub, I suggest seeking this in discussions of building a future for scholarly communication that serves the interests of publishers and librarians alike. Pointing a finger at Sci-Hub in outrage will not do the trick.

There is pathos in all this. Sci-Hub's posting of PDFs would be a trivial event if PDFs were not where the action still is for scholarly communication. In a Web-centric world PDFs should be yesterday's news as a means of sharing knowledge.

This is why it's high past time for publishers and librarians to work together to move beyond the PDF, a topic I will explore more fully in a future post. Sci-Hub's ultimate service, I hope, will be to speed this conversation along.

Marcus Banks is a health sciences library director.