



## You've signed on to the Boycott, now what?

### A SPARC Guide for Campus Action

#### **Purpose**

In light of the recent, failed attempt to abridge access to scholarly articles via the Research Works Act (RWA), a growing number of researchers have expressed their frustration with the status quo in scholarly publishing, and are interested in learning about concrete actions that they can take to effect positive change. SPARC has prepared this resource for our members, to help you to engage your faculty and researchers, and talk with them about options for taking such action.

#### **Background**

In late 2011, The Research Works Act (RWA) was introduced into the U.S. House of Representatives. The text was short and to the point:

*No Federal agency may adopt, implement, maintain, continue, or otherwise engage in any policy, program, or other activity that--*

*(1) causes, permits, or authorizes network dissemination of any private-sector research work without the prior consent of the publisher of such work; or*

*(2) requires that any actual or prospective author, or the employer of such an actual or prospective author, assent to network dissemination of a private-sector research work.*

The aim of the proposed bill was clear - in essence, the Research Works Act would repeal the [2008 law](#) that mandated PubMed Central deposits for NIH-funded research. The bill, which was introduced by Carolyn Maloney (D-NY) and Darrell Issa (R-CA), was immediately endorsed by Elsevier (for more on this, [click here](#)). The RWA was also supported by the Association of American Publishers (AAP), although this endorsement was issued without the explicit advice and consent of individual AAP members.

The Research Works Act was quickly met by a firestorm of criticism— not only from librarians, but also researchers and academics. Their primary objections centered on the notion that commercial publishers were seeking to restrict the free exchange of information. For decades, the scholarly journal publishing model has been defined by the free labor and intellectual property that authors, editors, and reviewers provide to publishers, while many commercial publishers, in turn, charge

hefty subscription fees for scholars to be able to read their own work. The immediate and visceral negative reaction among the scholarly community to the RWA (and Elsevier's front-and-center support of it) has been viewed by many as a tipping point. One tangible response among scholars has been [the call for a boycott of Elsevier](#).

The boycott, organized by academics, calls on colleagues to no longer **author, edit, or referee** for Elsevier journals. In this way, the boycott's organizers argue, Elsevier will no longer be able to harvest the value of the scholarly community's work. To date, thousands of active scholars have signed onto the boycott.

Once they have signed the boycott pledge, many scholars find themselves asking "what do I do next?" This document is intended to provide practical options for boycott signatories, as well as those who support the principles of the boycott. It enumerates a set of actionable activities that will contribute towards remaking the scholarly communication ecosystem into a more efficient, more open, less costly environment.

## Next Steps

For scholars keen to translate their ideological support for the Elsevier boycott into action to help create a more equitable publishing system, there are a number of concrete steps they may consider taking. As more researchers adopt the recommendations below, the cumulative effect will have a dramatic impact on the dissemination of scholarly information.

- **Consider the Benefits of Open Access Journals.** Open access journals provide free, immediate, online availability of peer-reviewed research results, permitting any users to read, download, copy, distribute, print, search or link to the full text of these articles, crawl them for indexing, pass them as data to software or use them for any other lawful purpose. Open access journals are a marked departure from the traditional scholarly publishing business model. By authoring, reviewing, or editing for an open access journal, you are applying your energies to a publication that will not perpetuate the high barriers to access and predatory pricing that typify the worst elements of the current commercial publishing system. [The Directory of Open Access Journals](#) offers a comprehensive directory of open access journals who follow quality control guidelines.

Open access journals use a funding model that does not charge readers or their institutions for access. Often, these publications employ a model in which accepted articles are published with the support of an upfront, one-time article processing fee, typically in the \$1,000-\$2,000 range. Note that a number of prominent institutions will defray the publication fees for their faculty who choose to publish in open access journals. [SPARC maintains a list of these schools](#) and their policies.

Some scholars have expressed concerns that the "author pays" model is tantamount to vanity publishing. Like other forms of publishing, open access publications exhibit a range of selectivity, peer-review rigor, impact, and reputation. As with all journals, authors should

carefully weigh issues such as editorial reputation, speed of publication, and the ability of interested parties to read published articles in deciding where to submit a manuscript. Open access journals such as [PLoS One](#), [Molecular Systems Biology](#), and [Optics Express](#) are among the top-ranked publications in science. In biology, for example, [PLoS Biology](#) has the highest impact factor in the ISI Journal Citation Reports. [The University of Oregon offers additional](#) information on high-impact open access journals.

- **Examine the Subscription Prices Charged by Journals.** Your energy and skills support the journals for which you author, referee, and edit. Is this time well spent, or are you helping to perpetuate an inefficient system? One way to determine this is to look at what these journals charge libraries. Are these costs well above the norm for your discipline? You can easily find out by looking at the [Library Journal's annual Periodical Pricing Survey](#). You can also browse and compare journal prices at [www.journalprices.com](http://www.journalprices.com). If you observe that the journal or journals you support with your labor are charging high prices, consider switching to lower-cost or open access alternatives.
- **Know Your Rights.** As an author, you may sometimes find it a necessity to publish in certain commercial journals. In this event, ensure that you are retaining broad reuse rights for your intellectual property. From the date of conception, copyright always belongs to the content creator. In the case of scholarly publishing, it is often assigned by the creator (the author) to the publisher at the time of manuscript acceptance. The publisher provides a boilerplate agreement that authors sign and return. You should not sign any publication agreement that unduly restricts your right to post a copy of your paper in an institutional or discipline-specific repository, on your personal website, or anywhere else where your peers might benefit from it. The same advice applies to electronic click-through agreements that may be part of the journal's manuscript submission system.

This may mean modifying the publication agreement through use of an author's addendum, advice for which may be found [on the Science Commons website](#). No reputable publisher will retaliate against an author who makes such a request. In the unlikely event the publisher expresses a reluctance to modify its standard agreement, you should remind them that there is no evidence of financial or other material harm to publishers as a result of these modifications.

- **Choose Referee Assignments Carefully.** Peer review is the quality control cornerstone without which the academic journal as we know it would not exist. Refereeing for high-priced journals perpetuates their disproportionate role in the dissemination of research. Consider setting aside more of your valuable time to referee papers for open access journals, which will be available to every potential reader. Also contemplate declining to review for journals that don't allow authors to post their work in an open archive or that are too expensive to access. A summary of publisher policies may be found at the University of Nottingham's [Sherpa/RoMEO website](#).

- **Leverage Your Influence as an Editor.** Journals trade on your good name and reputation by listing you as an editor or editorial board member. Be certain you approve of their policies. Does the journal's publication agreement allow authors to deposit their works in open archives (such as an institutional or disciplinary repository)? Does your publisher allow for delayed free access to older content (>6 months)? Does it provide an "open choice" plan so that authors can pay for their articles to be immediately accessible for free, and, if so, does it reduce subscription prices commensurate with the revenue it takes in from this plan? If you are not satisfied with the publisher's responses to these questions, discuss your frustrations with your editorial colleagues. There are numerous cases of boards applying collective pressure to change policies deemed unsatisfactory and limiting.

If these efforts fail, consider whether it is feasible and desirable to launch a low-cost or open access alternative to this journal. There are a number of successful examples in which entire editorial boards have resigned their positions to launch a fairer-priced or open access journal covering similar terrain: *The [Journal of Machine Learning Research](#)* and *[ACM Transactions on Algorithms](#)*. The collective influence editorial boards hold within scholarly publishing should not be underestimated. This is a dramatic way to impact the dynamics of the industry. The effort required to launch alternatives to high-priced publications may appear daunting, but a wealth of resources exist to smooth the path. Contact [SPARC](#) for details.

- **Investigate Available Campus Publishing Initiatives.** Many university libraries, presses, and academic computing departments have launched initiatives to explore new models for scholarly communication. These programs are intended to promote the open dissemination of both new and traditional forms of research. The advent of the Elsevier boycott provides an opportunity to leverage and expand upon these endeavors. Meet with your department's liaison in the library to better understand what your institution is doing in this regard. Are they providing tools to help faculty launch open access or low-cost journals? What other technical and infrastructure support is available on campus? Go to [SPARC's website](#) for more information about how universities are supporting faculty looking to engage in constructive publishing activities.
- **Promote a Wiser Tenure and Promotion System.** A common refrain among scholars is that they cannot alter their publication activities for fear that their tenure and promotion status will be negatively affected. Established journals often have higher citation counts and impact factors than newer alternatives. If you wish to create change within the scholarly publishing world but share these concerns for your professional advancement, speak with your department chair or college dean. If possible, involve your university librarian, who is likely to be an expert on scholarly communication issues. Improving the means and rewards of scientific dissemination is a goal that university administrations can and should support.
- **Advocate for Campus Open Access Policies.** Many academic institutions are taking steps to capture the benefits of open access by building digital repositories to distribute faculty scholarly articles and other research outputs. Individual authors have taken steps to retain the rights they need to allow their work to be made freely available via their institution's

repository. Additionally, faculties at an increasing number of institutions are adopting resolutions endorsing policies to encourage open access to scholarly articles. As both a major research funding source and the primary target for journal subscriptions, institutions are uniquely positioned to play a role in advancing scholarly publishing alternatives. Your library and administration may already understand that your school has the leverage to ensure that the research it funds can be made available in ways beyond the narrowly-defined means allowed by some commercial publishers. Work with them to understand what is happening at other institutions and how your campus can benefit from an open access policy. For additional information and resources to get the conversation started, [visit SPARC's website](#).

- **Engage in the Larger Policy Debate.** As the Research Works Act demonstrates, the struggle between those who want to expand access to research and those who seek to restrict it will continue to play out on the legislative field. At present, the focus of this debate is the Federal Research Public Access Act (H.R. 4004 and S. 2096), a bill that would ensure free, timely, online access to the published results of research funded by 11 U.S. federal agencies. The bill, known as FRPAA, would require those agencies with annual extramural research budgets of \$100 million or more to provide the public with online access to research manuscripts stemming from such funding no later than six months after publication in a peer-reviewed journal. The bill gives individual agencies flexibility in choosing the location of the digital repository to house this content, as long as the repositories meet conditions for interoperability and public accessibility, and have provisions for long-term archiving. If you agree that this is a desirable goal, consider contacting your congressional representative and expressing your support. You might also work within your academic institution or professional society to issue a public statement of support for FRPAA. For other ideas on how to advocate for legislative change, see the [Alliance for Taxpayer Access site](#).



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