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Elsevier's Publishing Model Might be About to Go Up in Smoke

Academic publishing is a very good game indeed if you can manage to get into it. As the publisher the work is created at the expense of others, for free to you. There are no advances, no royalties, to pay. The editing, the checking, the decisions about whether to publish, these are all also done for free to you. And the market, that's every college library in the world and they're very price insensitive indeed.

Back when physical, paper, copies of the journals were an essential part of any scientists' life the cost structure could, perhaps, be justified. It is expensive to typeset, proofread, complex texts and then print them in numbers of hundreds or perhaps low thousands. However, now that everything is moving/has moved online then the amounts charged for access to the journals seems less defensible. More like the exploitation of a monopoly position in fact.

No, there isn't a monopoly on scientific journal publishing: but there is on the last 50 to 60 years' worth of papers that have been published and are now copyright of said publisher. This is leveraged into the power to make college libraries pay eyewatering amounts for subscriptions.

There's not much new about this analysis and investors in [Reed Elsevier](#), the owners of Elsevier, either do or should know all of this.

However, there's something happening that might change this, for Reed Elsevier shareholders, quite delightful position. That is, a revolt of the academics who provide both the papers and the readership.

A start was made by British mathematician Tim Gowers, in a blog post [here](#). That wasn't the very start, but it looks like one of those pebbles that starts the avalanche rather than the one that just tumbles down the hillside. And there's a great deal to be said for a scientific post which references [Spike Milligan's](#) superb book, *Adolf Hitler, My Part in his Downfall*.

[As he says:](#)

"I am not only going to refuse to have anything to do with Elsevier journals from now on, but I am saying so publicly. I am by no means the first person to do this, but the more of us there are, the more socially acceptable it becomes, and that is my main reason for writing this post,"

There is now a petition running for academics to sign up to this, [here](#).

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Judging by the reaction of one of the academic blogs, [Crooked Timber](#), this is going to spread far beyond just mathematics or even the hard sciences. A minor regret of mine is that having only ever published one paper I'm not important enough to join in.

I have a feeling that this will indeed lead to some fairly major changes in the way that Elsevier is able to run its journal publishing division. At least, I rather hope so, for the entire cost base and financial structure is outmoded in this internet age.

There's a wider lesson here too though. Consumer sovereignty isn't just some theoretical abstraction. However great the lock your business model might impose on the actions of those consumers, however great the collective action problems in trying to escape your grip, it is possible for them to do so if they get sufficiently riled up to really try. Perhaps this particular effort won't in fact work: but remember it as a lesson.

Even though academics must publish in order to get/keep their jobs, get promoted, even though they must have access to what others have published in the journals, even though they're not directly paying for the service, it is possible to spark off a (nascent, to be sure) revolt even here, if your business model is thought to be *too* unfair.