

[The Elsevier boycott one year on](#)

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A few days ago was the anniversary of the beginning of the [Cost of Knowledge boycott](#) of Elsevier. It seems a good moment to take stock of what the boycott has achieved and to think about what progress has or hasn't been made since it started. This post is a short joint statement by many of the people who signed the original Cost of Knowledge statement last year. At some point in the not too distant future I plan to write a longer post giving a more personal view.

The Elsevier boycott: where do we now stand?

In the first few months after the boycott started, the number of signatories grew very rapidly. The growth is now much slower, but this was to be expected: given that, for understandable reasons, no editorial boards of Elsevier journals were ready to take the drastic step of leaving Elsevier, it was inevitable that further progress would depend on the creation of new publication models, which takes time and work, much of it not in the public eye. We are very pleasantly surprised by how much progress of this kind there has already been, with the setting up of Forum of Mathematics, a major new open-access journal, and the recent announcement of the Episciences Project, a new platform for overlay journals. We are also pleased by the rapid progress made by the wider Open Access movement over the last year.

In one respect the boycott has been an unqualified success: it has helped to raise awareness of the concerns we have about academic publishing. This, we believe, will make it easier for new publishing initiatives to succeed, and we strongly encourage further experimentation. We believe that commercial publishers could in principle play a valuable role in the future of mathematical publishing, but we would prefer to see publishers as "service providers": that is, mathematicians would control journals, publishers would provide services that mathematicians deemed necessary, and prices would be kept competitive since mathematicians would have the option of obtaining these services elsewhere.

We welcome the moves that Elsevier made last year in the months that followed the start of the boycott: the dropping of support for the Research Works Act, the fact that back issues for many journals have now been made available, a clear statement that authors can post preprints on the arXiv that take into account comments by referees, and some small price reductions. However, the fundamental problems remain. Elsevier still has a stranglehold over many of our libraries as a result of Big Deals (a.k.a. bundling) and this continues to do real damage, such as forcing them to cancel subscriptions to more independent journals and to reduce their spending on books. There has also been no improvement in transparency: it is as hard as ever to know what libraries are paying for Big Deals. We therefore plan to continue boycotting Elsevier and encourage others to do the same.

The problem of expensive subscriptions will not be solved until more libraries are prepared to

cancel subscriptions and Big Deals. To be an effective negotiating tactic this requires support from the community: we must indicate that we would be willing to put up with cancelling overly expensive subscriptions. The more papers are made freely available online (e.g., through the arXiv), the easier that will be. Many already are, and we regard it as a moral duty for mathematicians to make their papers available when publishers allow it. Unfortunately, since mathematics papers are bundled together with papers in other subjects, real progress on costs will depend on coordinated action by mathematicians and scientists, many of whom have very different publication practices. However, a statement by mathematicians that they would not be unduly inconvenienced by the cancelling of expensive subscriptions would be a powerful one.

We are well aware that the problems mentioned above are not confined to Elsevier. We believe that the boycott has been more successful as a result of focusing attention on Elsevier, but the problem is a wider one, and many of us privately try to avoid the other big commercial publishers. We realize that this is not easy for all researchers. When there are more alternatives available, it will become easier: we encourage people to support new ventures if they are in a position to do so without undue risk to their careers.

We acknowledge that there are differing opinions about what an ideal publishing system would be like. In particular, the issue of article processing charges is a divisive one: some mathematicians are strongly opposed to them, while others think that there is no realistic alternative. We do not take a collective position on this, but we would point out that the debate is by no means confined to mathematicians: it has been going on in the Open Access community for many years. We note also that the advantages and disadvantages of article processing charges depend very much on the policies that journals have towards fee waivers: we strongly believe that editorial decisions should be independent of an author's access to appropriate funds, and that fee-waiver policies should be designed to ensure this.

To summarize, we believe that the boycott has been a success and should be continued. Further success will take time and effort, but there are simple steps that we can all take: making our papers freely available, and supporting new and better publication models when they are set up.

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