DEBATE

Should academic institutions recommend using Sci-Hub?

Some say Sci-Hub damages the reputation of open access; others say it doesn’t, and it’s actually an important step on the road to achieving it. Two people with contrary convictions debate the topic.

I'm an open-access enthusiast, so there's absolutely no question that open access to scientific publications is our goal. The sheer popularity of Sci-Hub serves to underline the necessity of achieving it. But even though the platform offers easy access to research literature, I can't with a clean conscience advise researchers to use it. This is because Sci-Hub provides this access in a pretty questionable manner. It circumvents the

In Switzerland, downloading from Sci-Hub for personal use is explicitly permitted by copyright law. That includes saving, reading and quoting from its content. Academic institutions can and ought to refer people to it.

Given the current lawsuits against Sci-Hub, however, there is no denying that it makes much of its content available without the
paywalls and access restrictions imposed by publishers, and disregards copyright. What’s more, it accesses documents using institutional data that are provided by researchers. That’s actually very worrying for reasons of data security.

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In many respects, today’s scholarly publishing system is essentially dysfunctional. It’s in urgent need of transformation. But such transformation is predicated on the individual decisions taken by the scholars and scientists working in the cycle of knowledge generation and dissemination. In other words, it depends on where they decide to publish, for whom they write reviews, and how they manage their own copyrights. I think it’s essential that they should develop a better understanding of these issues. In my opinion, Sci-Hub undermines this process, and prevents researchers from realising the necessity of achieving real open access.

This is about much more than just accessing consent of the publishers that hold the rights to it. So criticism of Sci-Hub is justified. But any ethical concerns in this regard have to be weighed against the absurd business model of the publishers themselves in which academic institutions are not just the consumers, but also the producers of the content. Authors give away their work to publishers in the form of manuscripts and peer reviews, while access to the resultant publications is then bought back by their university libraries at an inflated price.

“Ethical concerns about Sci-Hub have to be weighed against the absurd business model of the publishers themselves”.

Academic institutions tolerate the fact that their members regularly give publishers the exclusive distribution rights to their work, but without any financial compensation. That’s legal, but questionable. So it’s a kind of compensatory justice if those same institutions are prepared to turn a blind eye when their members obtain literature free of charge on Sci-Hub. That, too, is legal, though again questionable.

But it would be in the interests of the scholarly community – and well within its
publications. It’s about the sustainable re-use of scholarly literature: whether for data mining, for teaching, or for the further development of the content itself. Such comprehensive re-use is regulated by open licences such as the CC licences. And it’s essential that authors retain the use rights to their own publications.

Sci-Hub might enable easy, convenient access to research literature, but it does not contribute to the sustainable transformation of the academic publishing system that we need so urgently. On the contrary, it’s slowing it down.

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