

Warning shots

Websites offering pirated papers are shaking up science

Musicians and moviemakers are not the only ones to suffer from internet piracy

RECORD companies and film studios have had to learn to live with internet piracy. Despite their best attempts to close sites or co-opt them, pirated copies of their wares are easily available. Increasingly, the same is true of scientific papers. On June 21st a court in New York awarded Elsevier, a big scientific publisher, \$15m in damages for copyright infringement by Sci-Hub and the Library of Genesis, two websites that offer tens of millions of scientific papers and books for anyone to download.

Both sites are increasingly popular with scientists, who use them to dodge pricey paywalls and subscriptions. Alexandra Elbakyan, who founded Sci-Hub in 2011, did not turn up for the trial (nor did the people behind LibGen). But she did send a letter outlining her reasons for starting the site. While at university in Kazakhstan she needed access to hundreds of papers for her studies. But the only way to get them, she said, was to pay \$32 per paper, which she described as “just insane”. Having discovered other academics using the internet to trade copies of papers they could not pay for, she set up Sci-Hub to streamline the process.

An analysis of Sci-Hub’s server logs, published in *Science* in 2016, found its biggest users were people in Iran, India and China. Such middle-income countries do not qualify for the subsidies big publishers provide to users in the poorest nations, but their universities nevertheless may not be able to afford subscriptions. Not every downloader was cash-strapped, though. Americans were the fifth-biggest users.

Ms Elbakyan sees the website as a way to make the fruits of science available to researchers whose institutions cannot afford steep fees as well as to anyone else interested. She thinks of it as a radical version of “open access”, the idea that research—which is, after all, mostly funded through taxes—should be published in a way that makes it available to everyone. Unsurprisingly, publishers have little patience for such arguments. Elsevier argues that there is more to publishing than simply shovelling papers online and that work such as editing and arranging for reviews has to be paid for.

Both Sci-Hub and LibGen are based in Russia, beyond the reach of America's courts. Nonetheless, the American Chemical Society, which publishes several journals, announced on June 28th that it had launched a lawsuit of its own. Provided Ms Elbakyan does not travel to America, that lawsuit seems equally unlikely to succeed.

Ms Elbakyan, though, may soon receive an invitation to visit America that does not come through legal channels: she has been tipped as a possible inaugural winner of the Disobedience Award, run by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). The award was founded partly to commemorate Aaron Swartz, a former MIT student who also believed that academic papers should be freely available. After downloading millions of them from JSTOR, a paywalled repository, he was charged with hacking. He killed himself in 2013, shortly before his trial. If she does win, Ms Elbakyan would presumably not attend the ceremony, although the magic of the internet might allow her to accept the gong remotely.

Source: The Economist