

# The Hub-Bub about Sci-Hub



By *Chuck Dinerstein, MD, MBA* — February 13, 2017



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One of the things I miss most about graduate school is access to the library and journals. Researching a topic meant reading primary documents and following the links and references to better understand a discussion or its historical, philosophic or scientific underpinnings. My first response in reading a science article is often to return to primary sources. Primary sources are unfiltered.

But now, with graduate school in the rear view mirror, when searching for an article I find this.

## Choose an option to locate/access this article:

Check if you have access  
through your login credentials  
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This presents the difficult decision of whether reading

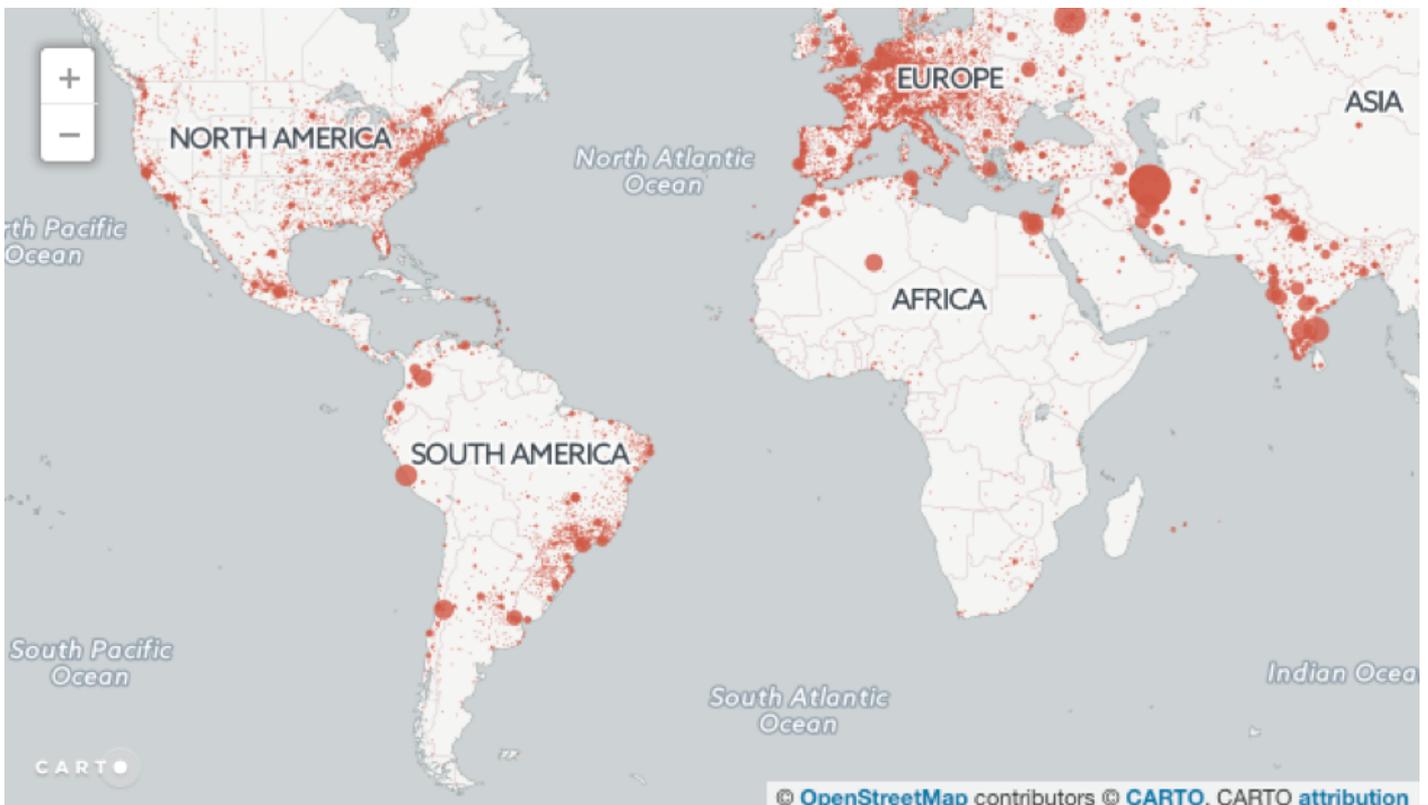
the original is worth the price. Perhaps for the one excellent article, the answer is yes, but then how do you know before you purchase it, that it is worthwhile or even what you are looking for. Solving this dilemma for herself and others is a student of science I had no familiarity with – Alexandra Elbakyan, a 29-year-old graduate student from Kazakhstan and the creator of sci-hub. In the words of [Ars Technica](#) <sup>[1]</sup> “... Sci-Hub, a Pirate Bay-like site for the science nerd. It’s a portal that offers free and searchable access ‘to most publishers, especially well-known ones.’”

Elsevier is probably the largest publisher of academic research, an industry making “a combined \$10 billion last year, much of it funded by university research libraries” Libraries fund this monopsony through subscription fees and produce profits of around [30%](#) <sup>[2]</sup>

Elsevier, for its part, sued Elbakyan for computer hacking and copyright infringement. In fairness, they do offer some free-access (for about 5% of the 400,000 manuscripts they published annually.)

So who uses Sci-Hub? According to an article in [Science](#) <sup>[3]</sup>, nearly everyone.

Over the six months leading up to March, Sci-Hub served up 28 million documents. More than 2.6 million download requests came from Iran, 3.4 million from India, and 4.4 million from China. The papers cover every scientific topic, from obscure physics experiments published decades ago to the latest breakthroughs in biotechnology. The publisher with the most requested Sci-Hub articles? It is Elsevier by a long shot—Sci-Hub provided half-a-million downloads of Elsevier papers in one recent week.”



Map shows downloads from Sci-Hub (size equate to number of downloads)

Based on Sci-Hub's server logs and despite the court ruling for Elsevier:

*“Over the 6-month period, 74,000 download requests came from IP addresses in New York City, home to multiple universities and scientific institutions. There were 19,000 download requests from Columbus, a city with less than a tenth of New York’s population, and 68,000 from East Lansing, Michigan, which has less than a hundredth. These are the homes of Ohio State University and Michigan State University (MSU), respectively.”*

John Bohanon, the author of the Science article, conducted an on-line survey of Sci-Hub. While cautioning that 60% of the respondents used Sci-Hub and were inclined in their direction, among the findings were the following:

- 87% did not feel it was wrong to download pirated papers
- 51% used Sci-Hub because they did not have access to the papers, 17% found it easier to use than the publishers’ systems.

In an accompanying [editorial](#) [4] by editor in chief of Science Journals Marcia McNutt stated:

*“Scientific nonprofit societies do indeed understand the need to continue addressing research accessibility by those in challenged regions, but through legitimate means. For those who have such avenues but choose to pirate a paper*

*instead, ask yourself whether it is worth risking the viability of a system that supports the quality and integrity of science.”*

For the rest of us, we can consider the words in [Nature](#) [5] who thought ElKabab was among the top ten people in science for 2016. “But we suspect and hope that Sci-Hub is currently filling toll-access publishers with roaring, existential panic. Because in many cases that’s the only thing that’s going to make them actually do the right thing and move to open-access models.”

Often the discussion around Sci-Hub alludes to the role of Napster in changing the distribution of music. Remember when there were stores that sold LPs and CDs? The analogy to Napster may be ill-fit. It was when the artists and their fans found they could go around the record companies that disruptive change occurred. It will require an effort by author-scientists and their audience for Sci-Hubs vision “to remove all barriers to science” to be realized.

For those of you who want a more in-depth consideration of academic publishing, its costs, benefits, and stakeholders I would take a look at [Scholarly Publishing and its Discontents](#) [6].

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**Source URL:** <https://www.acsh.org/news/2017/02/13/hub-bub-about-sci-hub-10848>

**Links**

[1] <https://arstechnica.com/tech-policy/2016/04/a-spiritual-successor-to-aaron-swartz-is-angering-publishers-all-over-again/>

[2] <http://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0127502>

[3] <http://www.sciencemag.org/news/2016/04/whos-downloading-pirated-papers-everyone>

[4] <http://science.sciencemag.org/content/352/6285/497.full>

[5] [http://www.nature.com/news/nature-s-10-1.21157?WT.mc\\_id=TWT\\_NatureNews](http://www.nature.com/news/nature-s-10-1.21157?WT.mc_id=TWT_NatureNews)

[6] <http://www.digitopoly.org/2017/02/02/scholarly-publishing-and-its-discontents/>