

Case study

Accessing pirated papers for research

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Johanna, a prominent researcher at a European university, works at a research institution. Although its academic library has subscribed to several crucial journals in Johanna's field of research, there are still some relevant sources missing due to budgetary constraints. To access these unavailable papers, Johanna turns to Sci-Hub, a website described as a "shadow library" on Wikipedia, which provides free access to millions of research papers and books, regardless of copyright restrictions.

Alexandra Elbakyan created Sci-Hub in 2011. The website is widely used, serving approximately 400 000 requests per day in 2019, as the site itself reported. According to Sci-Hub's website, their database contained 88 343 822 research articles and books as of 2 June 2022. Some advocates of open access have praised Elbakyan's efforts. The prominent natural science journal *Nature* picked her as one of its Top 10 people in science who mattered in 2016¹. According to the journal: "Few people support the fact that she acted illegally, but many see Sci-Hub as advancing the cause of the open-access movement, which holds that papers should be made [legally] free to read and reuse". Michael Eisen, a biologist at the University of California, expressed his admiration to *Nature*, stating, "What she did is nothing short of awesome. Lack of access to the scientific literature is a massive injustice, and she fixed it with one fell swoop". However, many publishing companies have sued Elbakyan, arguing that her actions are illegal.

Johanna shares Eisen's sentiment. When faced with arguments that Sci-Hub violates copyrights, Johanna highlights her belief that the current academic publishing model is morally flawed. She argues that since most research is funded by the public it is unfair for people to have to pay to access the results. According to Johanna, this creates a situation where individuals are essentially paying twice for the same information. Critics acknowledge that Johanna's point has some validity but argue that it does not justify either Johanna's use of pirated papers or Elbakyan's activities.

Questions for discussion:

1. Evaluate the argument provided by Johanna in her defence of using Sci-Hub! Can you add any other reasons why she might be right?
2. What reasons can you mention for Johanna being wrong? Evaluate the arguments pro and contra Johanna's view on the issue!
3. What makes Sci-Hub so popular? Using Sci-Hub violates copyrights, but it seems clear that a simple ban on using it doesn't work. What would be the best solution to this problem at the policy level?

¹ Van Noorden, R. (2016). Alexandra Elbakyan: Paper pirate. *Nature*, 540, 512.
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