Against the Grain

Epistomolgy- Three Ways of Talking About Sci-Hub Library Patrons

T. Scott Plutchak

A requirement of the grant was that the library promote the collection via various methods. While the LibGuide accounted for one method, more direct methods were employed. The Outreach and Instruction Librarian and the Education Librarian visited many school campuses in the Killeen, Copperas Cove, and Lampasas Independent School Districts where they talked with teachers, librarians, and administrators about the ERC collection. They also attended PTO and family reading nights on several school campuses in order to touch base with parents.

Collection Outcomes and the Future

As a direct result of promotion of the collection, the library has been contacted by many elementary, middle school, and high educators with requests for visits and programs. The requests vary from a classroom full of children to several classrooms. While some requests have been for librarians to visit schools, more have been for schools to bring students to the university campus for presentations and programs. The programs have ranged from a couple hours long single sessi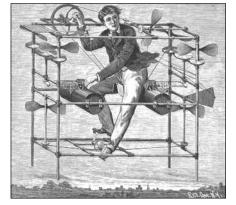on to a half-day, multi-station visit. Educators often asked for certain topics such as animals, math, and STEM. At times, librarians were scrambling to purchase materials to fulfill these requests.

To better accommodate these requests, a second Special Projects grant request was submitted to **TSLAC** in 2017 to fund pop-up library programming. The grant was awarded, and this allowed the library to develop a menu of diverse programs on topics that educators can select from. Funds were available to purchase the necessary materials and supplies to conduct the program to a group of children. Programming topics include forensic entomology, computer password security, circuits with electricity and lights, poetry appreciation, rocket science, and the study of rock art in anthropology. Materials and supplies to support each pop-up program were assembled into mobile storage containers and cataloged as a single item in the ERC collection for check-out and use.

Not surprisingly, the entire ERC collection has proven to be popular with all types of patrons, including students, faculty, staff, homeschooling parents, ISD teachers, tutors, and parents of tutored children. The University Library hosts several children's camps — such as STEM and reading enrichment — during the summer, and the ERC items are heavily used as part of the curriculum. During 2017 the collection made up 6.7% of the library's entire circulation. During the first half of 2018, the percentage has gone up to 8.4%. As more items are added to the collection, that statistic is expected to increase.

To see the collection, please visit the Little Warrior webpage and click on Manipulatives: *http://tamuct.libguides.com/c.php?g=482741&p=4218950.* 🦃
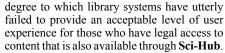

Epistemology — Three Ways of Talking about Sci-Hub

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I was wrong about **Sci-Hub**. Although **Elbakyan** started it in 2011, it wasn't until **Elsevier's** injunction in the fall of 2015 that it started getting wide-spread attention. Then came a flurry of articles in the general and specialty press, claiming either triumphantly or with an incontrovertible sense of doom that it presaged the fall of traditional subscription publishing. I yawned. Pirate sites for subscribed scholarly content are hardly new. I figured this was just the latest. After some hand-wringing and legal skirmishes, that'd be the end of it.

Not so. The arguments over **Sci-Hub** continue unabated, banking across three interlocked themes: that **Sci-Hub** poses a significant, and still largely underappreciated, security risk to the computer systems of institutions of higher education; that **Sci-Hub** surfaces the moral dilemmas and tensions created by a copyright regime that makes it difficult for many individuals to get access to the journal articles that they need to further work that benefits society; and that **Sci-Hub** reveals the

degree to which library systems have utterly failed to provide an acceptable level of user experience for those who have legal access to content that is also available through **Sci-Hub**.

A post by **Andrew Pitts** in the *Scholarly Kitchen* details the security issues. According to **Pitts**, "**Sci-Hub** is not just stealing PDFs. They're phishing, they're spamming, they're hacking, they're password-cracking, and basically doing anything to find personal credentials to get into academic institutions. While illegal access to published content is the most obvious target, this is just the tip of an iceberg concealing underlying efforts to steal multiple streams of personal and research data from the world's academic institutions."[1] The long and typically unilluminating comment thread reveals how controversial this claim remains.

Elbakyan's been vague about how the credentials that she uses are obtained. Some appear to be voluntarily provided by authorized users who support the Pirate Queen's efforts to undermine the big commercial publishers. In response to charges like

Pitts's she denies that **Sci-Hub** engages in phishing, but she doesn't deny that phishing attacks might result in credentials that **Sci-Hub** uses.[2]

No matter how the credentials are obtained, the security threat remains. **Elbakyan** claims that whatever credentials she has possession of are used only for the purposes of obtaining articles for **Sci-Hub**, but it's impossible to verify this. Certainly an interested hacker knowing of a trove of university credentials would want to get their hands on them, despite what **Elbakyan** might want.

The ambiguities and evasions provide fertile ground for dark conspiracy theories. There are few institutions anymore where the credentials used to access library resources are only used for that purpose. Universities are typically under constant cyberassault. From credit card info to bank account numbers to research data (some of it highly classified), there is a substantial market for the data that can be scraped from a university's servers. Maybe this is what **Elbakyan** and whoever is enabling her are really after!

The comments to the aforementioned *Scholarly Kitchen* article wade deeper into the conspiracy swamp: **Elbakyan** couldn't possibly operate as she has without at least the tacit approval of the Russian security forces.

Maybe she's just their unwitting pawn. None of this is verifiable, of course. Which doesn't stop the speculation.

The security questions are serious, but don't draw the most chatter from those who choose to weigh in on **Sci-Hub**. Most commenters want to talk morality. That **Sci-Hub** is operating illegally according to all international copyright laws is beyond dispute, but boring. Few will deny that one doesn't have an ethical responsibility to obey unjust laws. Indeed, your ethical responsibility may be to refuse to obey such laws. So for those who consider subscription publishing and the corporations who provide most of it to be a blight upon humanity, the course is clear. Here's **George Monbiot**, the *Guardian* columnist, in one of his typically unhinged rants about the perfidiousness of the scholarly publishing industry, "…as a matter of principle, do not pay a penny to read an academic article. The ethical choice is to read the stolen material published by **Sci-Hub**."[3] But that's standard **Monbiot**. What can you do?

In somewhat less fevered fashion, **Jan Velterop** chimes in, "Let me just say that legality is not necessarily a good guide for morality. Plenty of things were legal historically, later to be seen as immoral. Or as unsustainably classed as illegal. The millions of downloads from **Sci-Hub** may at one point be seen as millions of 'votes' for the approach of making scientific knowledge freely available to everyone. Civil disobedience now; the norm later."[4]

I agree with him on the truism that we mustn't mistake "legal" for "moral." But then he has to invoke civil disobedience.

Maybe I'm overly sensitive, having lived in the American Deep South these twenty-five years. Here in Birmingham, the fire hoses and jail cells and bombings are scarcely a generation away, well within painful living memory. In those days, in these places, civil disobedience was a public act, requiring substantial reserves of courage and conviction. You drew attention to the act of breaking the law and showed that you were willing to suffer the legal consequences. You put yourself on the line in order to highlight the wrongs and to mobilize society to correct them. Perhaps **Elbakyan** can claim to be acting in the spirit of civil disobedience. She, at least, has been publicly outspoken about what she is doing and why, and about her desire that **Sci-Hub** serve as a catalyst to overturn what she believes are unjust copyright laws. But most of the thousands of **Sci-Hub** users aren't engaged in civil disobedience. I'm not inclined to harshly judge those who use **Sci-Hub** because they don't have an affordable legal option. Unquestionably, some of **Sci-Hub's** users are engaged in research that has a potential benefit to society, and they can't pursue that line of work without access

to the material that they can't get any other way. In the balance between breaking the law and pursuing ends that are good ends, this law breaking might be seen as the lesser wrong. But don't equate it with civil disobedience.

The data (such as they are), however, appear to show substantial use by people who have perfectly legitimate access through institutional systems.[5, 6] Their ability to pursue their work is not materially hampered by limiting themselves to obtaining articles through legal means. Their use of **Sci-Hub** doesn't rise from a conviction that they have an ethical obligation to strike a blow against the immorality of the subscription system. It's convenient. They're like drivers who regularly exceed the speed limit. Those drivers aren't engaged in civil disobedience to overturn unjust traffic laws. They just don't see the speed limit as being important enough to suffer the inconvenience of obeying it.

The fact that so many people find **Sci-Hub** to be a significantly less inconvenient way of obtaining articles than using the legal means available to them leads to the third theme of **Sci-Hub** chatter. It shines a garish light on existing library and publisher systems and their failure to develop the kind of seamless access to research material that was promised decades ago, at the dawn of the digital age.

I remember doing focus groups with clinicians years ago when we were trying to improve our document delivery options. They wanted one click. Here's an article I need. Let me get to it with the minimum of fuss. Going to a separate website and entering the info the library's systems required and waiting an hour or more to get the article was intolerable. You can leave **Sci-Hub** open in a browser window, copy and paste a doi, and you have the article. How can libraries compete with that? How can publisher sites compete with that?

If the moral argument against infringement was stronger, people might be more willing to sacrifice some of that easiness, but it's not. We've done an excellent job of vilifying publishers. Small wonder then that people in the researcher communities show few qualms about using a pirate site to get what they need. They're the good guys, after all.

So where does that leave us? Whatever your feelings on the ethics, the security issues should give you pause. While there's no evidence that simply using **Sci-Hub** on an individual basis poses a security threat, the compromised credentials, however they are obtained, certainly do. But it's pretty clear, people being people, that as long as **Elbakyan** can keep her servers and their mirrors operating, people are going to keep using it. Appeals to the security dangers might reduce the willingness of people to volunteer their credentials, but that's hardly going to stop the hacking and it isn't going to prevent someone from using **Sci-Hub**. The legal argument is insufficient. Whether one views their use of **Sci-Hub** as a

noble exercise of civil disobedience and a blow against an unjust system, or just the equivalent of doing eighty on the interstate, people will keep making use of **Sci-Hub** as long as it's so much easier than anything legitimate that librarians and publishers have put together.

The death knell for music piracy (not that music piracy has been completely eradicated) was iTunes introducing $.99 songs with an easy to use interface. Close enough to free and simpler than jumping through the hoops to get illegal versions. **Sci-Hub** will thrive until we can come up with something comparable. Unfortunately, much of the focus by publishers and network security folks has been geared toward making it harder to crack into university systems by adding more hoops for authorized users to jump through. To the extent that these efforts make authorized use even more difficult, they'll only serve to further incentivize people to use **Sci-Hub**.

The daily news regularly reports on massive security breaches at large companies with substantial resources for network security. It's unlikely that universities are going to discover the magic impenetrable firewall. As long as it's substantially easier to get articles from **Sci-Hub**, it will thrive. Develop systems that make it easy to access articles legitimately and **Sci-Hub** will wither. That's the challenge. 🐾

Endnotes

1. **Pitts, Andrew**. "Guest Post: Think Sci-Hub is Just Downloading PDFs? Think Again." *The Scholarly Kitchen*. September 9, 2018. *https://scholarlykitchen.sspnet.org/2018/09/18/guest-post-think-sci-hub-is-just-downloading-pdfs-think-again/*

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3. **Monbiot, George**. "Scientific publishing is a rip-off. We fund the research — it should be free." *The Guardian*. September 13, 2018. *https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/sep/13/scientific-publishing-rip-off-taxpayers-fund-research* .

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5. **Bohannon, John**. "Who's downloading pirated papers? Everyone." *Science*. April 28, 2016. *https://www.sciencemag.org/news/2016/04/whos-downloading-pirated-papers-everyone* .

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