

Restricting access to science is unethical.

Alan Betts (June 7, 2016)

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The recent article (1) and editorial (2) in Science on the rise of the web-site Sci-Hub, which has made open-access to the scientific literature a reality, raise critical issues that need broader discussion. I myself have no access to most of the scientific literature behind paywalls, as do many of my scientific colleagues here in Vermont. I opted out of academia nearly 40 years ago, as I could see that the financial interests of institutions took priority over scientific research. This has made it possible for me to be scientifically productive at perhaps half the cost to society, and as an individual with zero overhead, the National Science Foundation funded me for decades on five-year grants. My work has never been impeded by lack of 'legal access', because scientists have always freely shared papers, regardless of who holds copyright, knowing that without this the scientific enterprise would swiftly collapse.

So what are the broader issues that the editorial by Marcia McNutt (2) avoids discussing?

Society funds scientific research in the public interest, yet this research has not been freely available to the public. With the collusion of academia, scientists, in order to publish their research, have had no choice until recently but pay large fees from public funds, and surrender copyright to publishers. Libraries, which only academics can access, then pay the same publishers a second time for access to the scientific literature. This cozy system ensures that access to knowledge is controlled by the academic club, where both academia and publishers can exploit students, faculty and society for financial gain. Society loses from this restricted access, and a parallel information world has arisen on the web with little scientific basis.

I am a climate scientist, so the ethical problems are obvious. Our industrialized societies are transforming the planet, setting us on a path to wipe out untold species on Earth, and drive hundreds of millions of people from their homes, and many to their deaths. No amount of rationalization can justify limiting access to critical environmental science, just to protect business-as-usual for science.

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References

1) J. Bohannon, Science, 352, 508-512, DOI: 10.1126/science.352.6285.508 (2016)

2) M. McNutt, Science, 352, 497, DOI: 10.1126/science.aaf9419 (2016)