

In which a Science editorial demonstrates the ineffectiveness of OA activism

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In her recent [editorial](#) on Sci-Hub (an initiative I [support](#)), editor-in-chief of *Science Magazine* Marcia McNutt wrote:

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.

The editorial is essentially trying to make the somewhat tenuous but not implausible case that using sci-hub may lead to subscription cancellations which, in turn, may lead to scholarly societies (like those of Dr. McNutt's employer, AAAS) to miss revenue they need in order to pay for important services (such as paying Dr. McNutt's salary/compensation). While I would tend to hope (against better judgment) that sci-hub could indeed lead to subscription cancellations via the mechanisms detailed in the editorial, I essentially disagree with everything else. This is precisely why it serves as a great example of what is wrong with the approach behind the editorial, which, coincidentally, is an approach the open access movement has been deploying to a large extent over the last two decades as well.

The observation that sci-hub is being heavily used also in universities which have decent access to the literature demonstrates two points which are not mutually exclusive:

1. Even at rich institutions, access is still an issue.
2. Sci-hub is more efficient than what the institutional infrastructure offers.

Both insights entail that sci-hub fills a need researchers have. I would tend to go out on a limb and prognosticate that it is rather unlikely that simply asking researchers to forgo that need because AAAS needs money to pay Dr. McNutt will have much of an effect on the behavior of said researchers.

It will likely be analogously effective to ask researchers to forgo the need to rank people by the journals they have published in, or the need to publish their work in prestigious (toll-access) journals, or the need to write their grant application now and instead spend some hours filling in forms and uploading their preprint, postprint, data or whatever to yet another site with yet another login and password, for the lofty goals of serving science or to allow a high-school kid in Afghanistan to read your paper.

In fact, open access and data deposit mandates exist precisely for the same reason Dr. McNutt's plea will go largely unheeded. Imagine if *Science Magazine* would impose a mandate that you could only publish with them if you signed a contract never to use sci-hub and to open your browser history files to prove it.

I once also thought such pleas were the only way to accomplish reform and I was convinced the pleas would certainly gain more traction and lead to actual change if only they were backed up by data. So I took the opportunity when asked by a colleague and collected the [data on journal rank](#). A year later I [found out](#) that even data have no effect.

After 12 years of pleading along with the open access community, I now have arrived at the conclusion that rather than pleading, maybe we should implement an [infrastructure](#) that

actually serves the needs of researchers the way sci-hub does for access. If we had that infrastructure, pleas to subscribe to *Nature* or to use journal rank or to submit to *Science Magazine* would probably be about as effective as we in the open access movement have been in the last 21 years.