



Free access to scholarly e-books and articles? Thank you, but no, thank you

4 minutes to read

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Academic publishers have begun to offer free access to their content. They present this action both as a positive response to global quarantine measures and as an active response to COVID-19 research.

For a couple of months now, I have been receiving discount vouchers, access codes and even free access to their databases as a “reward” for responding to surveys and evaluating articles or book proposals. But I have never used those vouchers – which cover neither the full price of the books nor delivery to Argentina – or those access codes – which require the user to log in... and I never remember my password.

Do we really need publishers’ generosity right now?

The truth is, my reading and downloading practices have not changed much since the beginning of this free access strategy, because I keep on looking for the articles I need in the same places: [Sci-Hub](#), [Library Genesis](#), [ResearchGate](#), and even the [no-longer-cool Academia.edu](#). In the worst-case scenario, I can always write to the authors to request the texts I want to read, and I will probably receive them in a very short time, along with kind questions and words of encouragement for my work. I am currently writing this column for DiggIt Magazine as a result of an exchange of this kind.

Accessing articles through these codes, logins, etc. thus has no appeal to me. Doing so would deprive me of collaborating with other researchers. Not doing so is a good way to resist the increasing mercantilization of academic publishing.

How I wrote my PhD thesis

When I was writing my PhD thesis back in 2008, neither my research institution (the Argentine National Council for Scientific and Technological Research – CONICET) nor the universities I was affiliated with provided access to scientific databases. Thus, my access to updated scientific literature was limited to:

a) traveling: when my colleagues or I were awarded a grant to visit a foreign university, we would photocopy books or download articles for the whole research team; any friend we could make during those travels would be key to future access to publications;

b) local publications: mostly books published by universities or commercial publishers that could be purchased at conferences or bookstores, which is why Latin American publications at that time cited so many articles and books written in Spanish;

c) open access journals or databases, many of them from Latin American universities and organizations, such as [Redalyc](#), [Latindex](#) or [SciELO](#). These resources were opposed to commercial publishers and were often pejoratively viewed as third-rate platforms, especially by first-world central countries (as described in [the infamous article](#) by Jeffrey Beal). Moreover, we used to be very attentive to pirating opportunities. For instance, once a year (generally in October or November), Sage Publishing would open up their database to allow people to download a certain number of articles, and many of us would download entire journals to share later with our colleagues and friends on CDs.

Twelve years later, institutional access to bibliographic databases in Argentina is not much better: although CONICET has subscribed to a few, they can only be accessed through IP recognition, and institutions lack adequate spaces and infrastructure for all their members. If all of us researchers went to our shared offices at the same time, we simply would not fit.

Did publishers suddenly realize that scientific knowledge should benefit everyone, and not be used commercially to make a profit?

Today, however, my thesis students do not need this precarious, partial IP access to databases, because they have far better options: academic social networks (such as ResearchGate and Academia), institutional repositories and collections of working papers (such as [Tilburg Papers in Culture Studies](#)), and piracy. Library Genesis and Sci-Hub are two of the main resources for their research, as they provide free access to up-to-date scholarly books and articles.

These resources, in their own way, are no different from the strategies I would use in the days when I was writing my own thesis: students in US universities lend their IPs to enable others to access databases, and help download, archive and share publications globally, with no personal gain – on the contrary, at their own risk.

So, do we really need publishers' generosity right now?

Publishers' generosity: why now?

What is the reason for this unexpected generosity? Did publishers suddenly realize that scientific knowledge should benefit everyone, and not be used commercially to make a profit? Did they recognize that they have an immoral business model which relies on the work done for free by thousands of scientist around the world who [write and review for them](#)? Did governments realize [how stupid](#) it is to fund scientific research with public money and then pay again to access the results of that very same public-funded research?

I have a hypothesis: publishers are afraid that, ultimately, scientists will inevitably realize that they are unnecessary. Not all scientists, of course, since [many of us already manage without them](#) thanks to our third-world survival tactics. Perhaps the reason for their current generosity is that they realize that first-world scholars, too, might now need to use these tactics. Having lost access to their institutional libraries, IPs and credentials, thousands of scholars around the world are trying to access articles and books. And if commercial publishers do not offer this access, scholars will go elsewhere. Because we are scientists, we want to know, we want to share – and we are resourceful.

So, if academic piracy is new to you, you should give it a try.

And if you are a commercial publisher offering me free access to your content, here is my answer: thank you, but no thank you.