

For the 1,000th Time: Who Will Own (and Mine) the Scholarly Record?

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[Category: all-posts, uncategorized]

Elsevier is a massive, for-profit publisher headquartered in Amsterdam. They make a lot of money aggregating faculty work product for cheap and selling it back to universities at a huge markup. Their mission is to maximize shareholder value and profit.

Elsevier just bought SSRN, a widely used repository of social science research articles, especially preprints. A lot of smart people, including Kevin Smith on this blog, have weighed in on this development. SSRN users aware of Elsevier's profits-first practices are nervous. The excellent Authors Alliance has put together a list of principles they believe SSRN must adhere to in order to maintain the trust of the authors who post work there. One of our favorite takes, Christopher Kelty's blog post [here](#), explains why Elsevier probably bought SSRN, and why we should be nervous. The acquisition is probably not so much about the individual papers as it is about possession of a trove of research for data mining about scholarship. Possession may be 9/10ths of the law, but it's 10/10ths of data mining. If you don't have the data, you can't do the mining. Now Elsevier's got the data, and the academy will get to use it only on Elsevier's terms.

What's the path forward, in the long run, if we take this concern seriously? If you're an author with the ability to post your work freely in places like SSRN, and you're thinking of jumping ship, where should you go?

The first step to recovery, as is so often the case, is to stop hurting ourselves.

Some of SSRN's users are asking, not unreasonably, "What should we build now to replace SSRN?" This is a natural question, but we think it's misconceived if it leads to a bespoke fix that might well repeat the weaknesses and limitations of SSRN.

Thankfully no one has suggested publicly that Academia.edu or ResearchGate are viable alternatives for the SSRN community. This points to the growing awareness by scholarly authors like [Ian Mulvaney](#) that these publicly listed concerns are likely next on the block for consolidation and purchase. He seems to agree with Kelty that the motivation behind this merger-mania is really to commoditize (data about) the researcher.

Many of us in the Library world have looked to discipline-specific repositories as a potential ally in mission-driven openness. When discipline-specific commons are supported by universities and disciplinary communities (like [arXiv](#)), they can be equal or superior to institution-specific commons, especially for early review and collaboration. When they aren't (like SSRN, or [BEPress](#)), ownership and sharing rights to their contents can never be assured. However, the arXiv model only really works for 35

content outside of the commodification stream. Physicists are quick to point out that no one is lining up to buy their pre-prints, so arXiv continues unhindered. In other disciplines, preprints have not gotten a strong toehold (biology's nascent [bioArXiv](#) and [ASAPBio](#) efforts), or aggregation of scholarship only happens at the citation level (PubMed) or not at all.

If we want dependable access to papers *and* the promise of open access to a huge, aggregate trove of papers that could support powerful research *about* research, the better option is to look to existing, university-owned infrastructure. Institutional repositories are becoming ubiquitous in the US and are already supporting sustainable, mission-driven alternatives that can easily provide one of the core services SSRN provided - easy, open access to research. In time, they will also be able to provide its other core service: good aggregate data about access, re-use, "impact," and much more. And, crucially, the academy, collectively, will have possession of this trove, and we can make it available for scholarly uses beyond one-at-a-time upload or download, including testing, refining, and forking tools to crawl the scholarly record and learn more about research.

We sometimes jokingly refer to our institution's repository as a "repository of last resort" since the only criteria for deposit are 1) you have rights to share your work, and 2) you created the scholarly work as a member of our institutional community. It would be much better, though, if we and our users considered the IR the *first* place they put their papers. Even if you do deposit your work elsewhere, as long as the work is in an academic repository, rather than a proprietary vault like SSRN, we can harness the Internet and open linking to add your paper locally without a separate deposit. Libraries are pretty good at protecting stuff long term, too—the very first content at UVA to go into the [Academic Preservation Trust](#) long-term preservation environment was the entire [Libra](#) institutional repository.

Most importantly, the wide cross-section of institutions collaborating on the Association for Research Libraries' [SHARE](#) initiative understand it is about the Data, Stupid, and not just research data, but data *about* research. Academic institutional and discipline-specific repositories are not competing with each other when they are the building blocks of a "**free, open, data set** about research and scholarly activities." When these players are connected and preserved through research library-driven efforts like SHARE and APTTrust, conflicts of interest about who owns scholarship fade from view.

This isn't a zero-sum game. We agree with Mulvaney that all of the people we've met who work at Elsevier (like, um, Ellen's husband!) are good people with researchers' interests at heart. By all means, Elsevier should develop services that help researchers and institutions meet our missions. But something as crucial as collecting, preserving, and studying the scholarly record cannot be left to private interests alone. Research libraries are building a network of repositories owned by the academy, preserved for the academy, and accessible to the academy on terms consistent with the core values of scholarly inquiry. Depositing your papers with us is your best insurance policy against (another) for-profit monopoly on the scholarly record.