

Boycott is defined in the dictionary, as ♦withdrawal from commercial or social relations [♦] or refusal to buy or handle goods as a punishment or protest. ♦ The word originates from Charles C. Boycott, an Irish land agent who was the target of such a strategy by Irish peasants in the late 19th century to get rents reduced. Today, a boycott is being formed against those journals that do not agree to make their research papers freely available 6 months after publication. The most facile reaction is to say ♦yes♦ to the invitation that you most likely will receive in the near future and to join the movement ♦and indeed it may be the correct reaction. However, I suggest looking a little closer at some aspects to this call.

The prospect of their work being published, read and widely cited is the driving force for scientists in academic research and anything that militates against it is anathema. Logically, scientists respond to the calls to ♦free the literature♦ or advertisements proclaiming the ♦freedom of expression♦ with feelings that some of them last felt in the 1960s. If one believes that all publishers ♦commercial or non-profit♦ are the ♦enemy♦, there is indeed no alternative.

The petition from the West Coast of the USA has therefore had a positive response from a growing number of scientists, who by signing, agreed that after September 2001 they will not publish, purchase, referee for or advise any journal that has not agreed to make its articles freely available after 6 months. In other words, a boycott. The beneficiaries will be the electronic providers of journal material, such as PubMedCentral or E-BioSci. If you can wait 6 months for an article, then all you will have to do is to go to these sites and the information is yours at no cost♦if the movement works.

However, it might be wise to consider the consequences of this proposal. The first question is: why 6 months? If a 6-month limitation will not deter libraries from renewing subscriptions then why do the publishers not move in that direction themselves? Surely it is in their interest that their papers are more widely read. In fact, the publishers do not know what will happen if the rules on the availability of material get changed. If they do not know this, it is unlikely that the proponents of the boycott do. Also, they fear that an even shorter period of grace will be ♦proposed♦, if electronic publishing should prove to be successful and the movement gains momentum.

Making material available for free might indeed do damage to the publishers. There is, of course, a group of scientists who will welcome the idea that the publishers will take a few hits. Indeed, some publishers have presented themselves as targets for such attacks by generating large profits from scientific research. However, it is not clear that their journals will be the ones that get hurt. The shrapnel from this fight will more likely pierce the weaker armour of the smaller, specialist journals published or controlled by scientific societies. Clearly, I write with a bias as *EMBO* falls into this category. I also write as an editor with the experience of publishing a journal. After the launch of a new journal, there is a period of continual loss of money until the journal becomes established. Such a risk will only be undertaken if there is a reasonable chance of making profits later. If the 6-month period proves to be too harsh for some journals, there will be no new investments. A culling of the existing journals will give rise to something close to a monopoly as the large publications survive and, along with this, produce a constellation of satellite journals.

The loser in this situation will be the scientific non-profit societies that publish the specialist journals. In the European countries, these societies are smaller than in the USA and often their only source of income is the profit from the journal. In the USA, large societies are the norm, which allows them to cover part of their costs through the registration fees of their meetings. Perhaps this explains the predominantly American push for this boycott.

In addition, there are substantial costs associated with the organisation of quality peer review, refereeing and editing. If subscriptions fall, these costs will have to be passed on to the authors. Consequently, some authors will be excluded from publication because of a price barrier associated with the submission of an article. Furthermore, scientists who look for positions as postdoctoral fellows will be well advised to inquire if the primary investigator of the laboratory has signed the declaration because this could limit the choice of journals for future articles.

I also wonder why the target is merely the journals that publish primary research papers. If the aim is to allow information to be freely available, the logic of excluding review articles and data banks, which are increasingly becoming a source of information for scientists, is puzzling.

I sincerely wish that the goal of all articles being freely available would be achieved as quickly as possible. We have to encourage and cajole the publishers to move in this direction. As they gain experience from the consequences of this move, they will be able to make informed decisions and take further steps towards greater availability. But in summary, I see this as a more complex issue than is presented by the Stanford group. Scientists have a major role to play in ensuring that this movement occurs, but the methods and language that are employed must be tailored to match the complexity of the situation.

