

Social-sciences preprint server snapped up by publishing giant Elsevier

The Social Science Research Network says that it will continue to offer free submissions and downloads under its new owner.

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After trying without success more than a decade ago to set up preprint servers — where academics share their papers before peer review — science-publishing giant Elsevier is now buying one. It is paying an undisclosed sum for the [Social Science Research Network](#) (SSRN), one of the world's most popular repositories of research in economics, law and the social sciences.

Analysts say that the acquisition, [announced on 17 May](#), exemplifies the morphing business strategy of what is arguably the world's largest scientific-journal publisher. As well as selling its subscription content through libraries, Elsevier is starting to attract more academics to its sites by providing services such as online scholarly social networks and preprint servers.

"It seems the obvious direction to take in a context where content is increasingly freely available," says Michael Jubb, a scholarly-publishing consultant in London. He points to the rise both of open-access publishing and of [piracy sites, such as Sci-Hub](#), as drivers of the trend.

"Elsevier is now getting closer and closer to researchers with business models that don't involve libraries," says Joe Esposito, a publishing consultant in New York City. "The positioning is well thought out: lock up revenues to the legacy publishing business, move into areas where piracy is not much of an issue, create deeper relationships with researchers and become more and more essential to researchers even as librarians become less so."

Fluid transition

Tens of thousands of academics routinely upload working papers to the SSRN, which is "super-important to economists", says Mark McCabe, an economist at the Questrom School of Business at Boston University in Massachusetts. The SSRN will continue to offer free submissions and downloads after it is acquired by Elsevier, says Gregg Gordon, chief executive of the small, private firm Social Science Electronic Publishing. The company, which founded SSRN in 1994 from its headquarters in Rochester, New York, makes money with the network by offering some premium services, such as selling subscriptions to regular e-mail updates of the latest research.

Gordon says that the purchase will allow the SSRN to add social-networking and research-workflow tools for its users. These would be along the lines of those offered on research-collaboration platform Mendeley, a London-based start-up that Elsevier purchased in 2013.

The Mendeley purchase attracted some criticism from academics who were angry that a large publisher — which in 2012 attracted widely publicized boycotts over its prices — had bought the popular networking site. McCabe expects that there might be a similar reaction to the SSRN deal, although economists and legal scholars have been more indifferent to the finances of their journals and online servers, he says.

The SSRN is unusual among preprint servers in its ability to succeed for many years under the ownership of a for-profit firm. Besides Elsevier, other for-profit firms — including the publisher of *Nature* — have in the 2000s tried and failed to establish long-lasting preprint servers.

The granddaddy of all preprint servers today, the physics and mathematics site arXiv, is operated by Cornell University Library in Ithaca, New York, and funded by a host of institutions, including the Simons Foundation in New York City. It has no plans to be acquired by a publishing firm or any for-profit entity, says Paul Ginsparg, a physicist at Cornell who co-founded it 25 years ago. "I always felt that it was an advantage that arXiv was not aligned with any particular publisher (or any academic ideology for that matter), making it more natural to ingest preprints that could simultaneously go to any publisher," he says.

