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Senior scientists promise to boycott journals

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A group of leading American scientists is promising to boycott scientific journals that refuse to make research articles available free of charge. The scientists have joined a campaign to promote the unfettered exchange of scientific information and establish a web-based public library for science.

So far more than 160 scientists have signed an online petition that encourages scientists from around the world to pledge their support to the campaign. The petition will be published in its final version in May next year with a proposed boycott beginning in September 2001. Included in the list of signatories are PubMed Central co-founder Harold Varmus - president of the Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center - and Stanford geneticist David Botstein.

The supporters of the initiative believe that it will "vastly increase the accessibility and utility of the scientific literature, enhance scientific productivity, and catalyze integration of the disparate communities of knowledge and ideas in biomedical sciences." Campaigners aim to prevent the published record of scientific research, much of it paid for with public funds amounting to tens of billions of dollars a year, from being "permanently controlled and monopolized by publishers." The organizers of the initiative hope to make research articles freely available through an international online public library, once publishers have had a six month "lease" to recover their costs and earn a fair return for their contributions to the publication process.

Commenting on the initiative in the *Library Journal Academic Newswire*, Karen Hunter, senior vice president of Reed Elsevier's ScienceDirect database was skeptical, "I don't think they'll find much support", she said. Although sympathetic to the issue of accessing research already archived by publishers, she says that negotiations within the publishing industry should go some way towards alleviating the problem. Hunter also suggested a problem of funding a resource to collect research in one central, free library, "Who would fund it? Government?"

Another person who is skeptical about the initiative is Stevan Harnad, professor of cognitive science at Southampton University and one of the world's leading advocates for freeing the refereed journal literature online through self-archiving. Harnad's concerns focus on the methods employed by the campaign leaders, especially, he comments, in light of the other options available, "I am opposed to making this conditional in any way on first changing either journals or author-submission practices. Such preconditions are unnecessary, ineffectual, and would in fact be counterproductive."

References

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