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## Editorial

## From a New Deal to Projekt Deal: Time for solidarity with German scholars

The commercial scientific publishing model is broken. The basic problem is simple. We scholars give the products of our labour—our research papers, reviews, and so forth—for free to for-profit corporations.<sup>1</sup> These corporations then sell the same products of our labour back to us, via libraries. This arrangement might be acceptable if the publishing industry charged only modest fees or contributed some fundamental quality to the work. But they do neither. No matter how much they say they care about knowledge, their main priority is—as with any for-profit corporation—maximizing returns for private investors. In pursuing this goal, they employ creative means to extract resources from the public purse to pay for exorbitant journal fees—funds that otherwise could be invested in public research and education. In the process, the publishing corporations intensify a perverse focus on impact factors, citation counts, ‘clickbait’ articles and academic branding, rather than genuine engagement. All this degrades the quality of academic work and serves to undermine the conditions in which many of us work.

Simply put, the publishing industry works against the interests of the scholarly community. And yet, as with other perverse political economies, we academics are deeply implicated in this unjust situation. Although many curse the status quo, we actively reproduce it through our collaboration—above all, by continuing to contribute the products of our labour freely. Despite widespread frustration, it has proven difficult even to get critical scholars to agree on a course of action that would challenge the model. Particularly frustrating is that untenured scholars are basically trapped in the system, forced to reproduce their own exploitation in order to survive in academia.

Is there a way out? One strategy is to try to improve the practices at individual journals—to carry the fight forward, so to speak, one journal at a time. To this end, we and other members of the *Geoforum* editorial board tried to address these problems years ago with Elsevier, our corporate publisher. We demanded that Elsevier return some of their stupendous profits to the community that creates the journal. We were part of the *Geoforum* Editorial Board that collectively co-authored a demand for ‘New Deal’ in 2012, which included the following excerpts:

[T]here is a growing movement among academics to boycott [Geoforum’s publisher,] Elsevier (...). Even among those who will stop short of an outright boycott, there are serious questions and concerns circulating about the company’s business model and practices.... [T]he boycott movement raises longstanding concerns about the relationship between the academics who edit, review for and contribute to this journal on the one hand, and the publisher on the other. Many of these concerns have been articulated in previous board meetings without satisfactory resolution. They were raised once again at the [2012 Editorial Board] meeting in New York. (...) At their core, our concerns center upon whether or not Elsevier is providing us with enough value to justify the relationship. Elsevier owns the rights to Geoforum and operates the journal, as one would expect from a corporation, with an attention to profitability. On the other hand, the journal is created through many acts of unpaid labor contributed by authors, reviewers, board members, and Editors (though the latter do receive a modest stipend). Collectively we contribute a considerable gift to one another, but also to Elsevier. And Elsevier is a very profitable company. According to the Economist magazine, the company’s profit rate in 2010 was ~36%. Naturally, this profit was generated from many sources, not only geography journals. Yet still, this figure leads us to ask: what exactly do we receive in return for our gift, the contribution of our unpaid labour to Elsevier?

Editorial Board of *Geoforum*, 2012: 657

A lot of water has passed under the bridge since 2012. Elsevier responded immediately and tried to placate the editorial board by promising us much (not all) of what we asked for. Many of us thought things would improve. But they didn’t, not much. Some of what they promised, they failed to deliver; the rest they have sought to control. Trust has broken down. Through their actions, Elsevier has made it clear that it cannot depart from an exploitative publishing system from which they benefit so much. Our conclusion is that further discussion with them is useless and self-defeating. Meanwhile, Elsevier’s profit rate sits above 30%, just as in 2012, far higher than the average corporate profit rate. And the fundamental question—why should we give our free labor time to a private corporation that charges exorbitant rates to our universities?—has gone unanswered.

Recently, however, the debate over academic publishing has been struck by a political earthquake. Its epicenter lies in Germany.

### *Projekt Deal*

By far the most important and exciting moves to confront the old, exploitative model and to begin moving towards a new publishing model are unfolding in Germany. Recently, almost 200 higher education institutions, including the universities of Bayreuth, Heidelberg, Potsdam and many

<sup>1</sup> Here we leave aside not-for-profit options, which are a minority in our field.

others, have cancelled their licence agreements with Elsevier and united in a consortium entitled 'Projekt Deal'. Their aims:

[To] conclude *nationwide licensing agreements* for the entire portfolio of electronic journals (E-journals) from major academic publishers from the 2017 licence year. The intention is also to bring about *significant change* to the status quo in relation to negotiations, *content* and *pricing* in the process. The effects of a consortium agreement at the national level should relieve the financial burden on individual institutions and bring wide-scale, lasting improvements in access to scholarly literature for academics. An open access component is also planned.<sup>2</sup>

What is particularly important is that they have taken up a collective stance (not a journal-by-journal attempt at renegotiation): a common project to create a better deal for the scholarly community.<sup>3</sup> In support, many prominent scholars, including Nobel prize winner Paul Crutzen, have stepped down from their editorial positions at Elsevier journals.<sup>4</sup>

These Universities, libraries, and scholars have taken up the mantle for the international scholarly community, forcefully confronting Elsevier and proposing a new economic publishing arrangement. They are paying a considerable price for their principled position. Not only have many of these institutions already given up access to Elsevier journals (including this one), they have also devoted valuable social resources to confronting a major multinational corporation. As with every social struggle, the individuals and institutions involved here have different agendas, ranging from a better pricing deal to disengaging with the commercial model entirely. Nevertheless, they have united to produce a significant national movement that promises to transform the basic relationship between scholars in Germany and the publishing industry. What will transpire in the end depends on complex power plays that we are not in a position to predict.

But one thing is certain. Like other Elsevier journals, because of the absurd and exploitative political economy governing the industry, *Geoforum* is at risk of disappearing in Germany. This provokes two questions to the *Geoforum* community: do we want *Geoforum* to be available in Germany? And are we prepared to stand in solidarity with the scholarly community in Germany? These questions are new but the underlying issues are not. The principled actions by German libraries and Universities have only raised them with fresh intensity.

As a community and as individuals, we have two broad options. The first, which we have all be enacting passively, is to continue to do nothing. In this scenario, we will continue to produce a journal that is no longer accessible to a nation of scholars. The second option is to act in solidarity with our German colleagues. This means, at a bare minimum, educating ourselves on Projekt Deal and reflecting critically upon our experiences working with (and struggling against) Elsevier. But we should go further and prepare to leave Elsevier if the corporation cannot accommodate Projekt Deal. Why continue to create a journal that is inaccessible to our colleagues in Germany and undermines our academic colleagues everywhere? We need to actively support and broaden this movement. Let us seize the moment: divest our labour from the old model and apply it instead to build a new one.

### Acknowledgments

The authors thank Robert Fletcher, Alex Loftus, Ursula Münster, Daniel Münster, and Scott Prudham for their conversations and contributions to this essay. We are solely responsible for any errors.

### Reference

Editorial Board of *Geoforum*, 2012. A new deal. *Geoforum* 43, 657–658.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.projekt-deal.de/about-deal/>; see also <https://www.projekt-deal.de/vertragskundigungen-elsevier-2017/>.

<sup>3</sup> See <https://www.projekt-deal.de/vertragskundigungen-elsevier-2017/>.

<sup>4</sup> See [https://www.projekt-deal.de/herausgeber\\_elsevier/](https://www.projekt-deal.de/herausgeber_elsevier/).