



# The Convoluted Profits of Academic Publishing

One company is changing the way research papers are being shared, but some professors worry about trusting the for-profit website.

**LAURA MCKENNA** December 27, 2015 **EDUCATION**

Richard Price always had an entrepreneurial bent. He started a cake business in his mum's kitchen during a summer break from his doctoral program at Oxford, eventually converting it into a sandwich-delivery service after realizing people only ate cake once a week. Then, when one of his philosophy papers took three years to get published, Price channeled his business interests into a new venture aimed at streamlining that academic process.

After finishing his DPhil (the English equivalent of a Ph.D.), Price raised venture capital in London and moved to San Francisco to start [Academia.edu](#) in 2008. On this site—which includes a social-networking function and allows users can “follow” others with similar interests—academics post drafts of papers, lecture notes, conference speeches, and published articles. With roughly [30 million registered users](#), [8 million uploaded papers](#), and [36 million unique monthly visitors](#), it has become the one of the most widely used websites to read academic research for free.

But lately, some have questioned whether academics should entrust their research to this for-profit website. And while there is a growing commitment to open-access research, there's little consensus about the best way to achieve that goal. Traditionally, [most of the research](#) produced at American universities hasn't been accessible to the general public. To read a scholarly paper on leukemia or political theory or Jane Austen, you needed a university ID card or you had to pay roughly \$10 to \$30, even if that paper was directly or indirectly funded with taxpayers' dollars. Those paywalls essentially siloed research in the Ivory Tower.

The convoluted profit model behind academic publishing frustrates many within higher education, too. Subsidized by their universities, professors write, evaluate, and edit scholarly research—work that they largely do for free but can be essential for job security and promotions. And under that profit model, those same universities often pay publishers and database companies [billions](#) for access to the very research that their faculty produced. [As I wrote in \*The Atlantic\* in 2012](#), this is not a rational process. While new, online journals (like the [American Political Science Association's proposed open-access](#)

publication) circumvent the traditional publishers, the most prestigious periodicals for the most part still use this model.

Paywalls and the costs of academic publishing have helped drive the open-access movement, which has gained momentum since Aaron Swartz hacked into the MIT mainframe in 2010 and downloaded 4.8 million academic articles from the JSTOR database. Now, the government requires that all research funded with National Institutes of Health grants be listed on PubMed, which is free to access, within a year of publication. The National Science Foundation is slated to have a similar requirement soon. The British government has ordered even broader mandates. Several private grantees, including the Gates Foundation, also have open-access rules.

In response to these pressures, several universities and disciplines have created websites or “repositories” where faculty members can upload their papers; some professors post their information on their personal websites, too. Then there are the third-party repository and social-networking sites like Academia.edu, including Mendeley and ResearchGate. Tools like Google Scholar, meanwhile, help aggregate and organize this research.

Academia.edu has grown in parallel with the open-access movement since the 26-employee company launched, largely thanks to the \$17.7 million in venture capital Price raised over time and word of mouth; the company doesn't pay for marketing. Moreover, its visitors include both academics—some of whom, Price said, are logging in every day—and nonacademics. “What we're seeing is that the general public wants to read scholarly papers,” he said.

Academia.edu is more comprehensive than other repositories, compiling into one place research from all academic disciplines and hundreds of universities. With more than 1.6 million tags to facilitate the search process, the website's user-friendly design also enables scholars to post their material easily. Scholars can even monitor how many people download their articles. Users create profiles for themselves and “follow” scholars; they can also consult a news feed that updates them on the latest uploaded papers and comments from others in their network. If a user's favorite international-relations scholar posts a new paper on trade agreements in China, she'll get a notification on her newsfeed. Then there's the “sessions” function, which allows scholars to upload drafts of their articles and solicit comments within a 20-day window, similar to an online seminar. Six thousand sessions take place daily, with some receiving hundreds of comments (the typical paper gets about 15 to 20), according to Price. Because of features such as these, several papers have gone “viral,” he said.

For Price, opening up research to the general public and the entire world is a moral obligation. While most of the audience at Academia.edu is American, a large number come from overseas, and in some countries, universities can't afford the subscription fees to American journals. Price said he talked to a scientist from the University of Nairobi, for example, who conducted research for years without proper access to American work, until he joined Academia.edu.

In the past, the biggest challenge to this website came from the publishers. Two years ago, the publisher Elsevier demanded that authors, Academia.edu, and several university websites remove its copyrighted articles from the Internet. For a while, according to Price, Elsevier was sending them hundreds of take-down notices per day. But it stopped, he said, because it was against its interest as a publisher to alienate academics. And regardless, the practice of putting published articles online was already a common practice.

Lately, challenges have come from within the academic community, even among advocates for open access. Take [Kathleen Fitzpatrick](#), the director of scholarly communication at the Modern Language Association, who oversees [The Commons](#), a social network of 5,600 MLA members, and the recently launched [The Core](#), a repository of papers and research for the MLA that effectively competes with Academia.edu. Open access is “good for the public and good for the researchers,” Fitzpatrick said, citing the growing belief that the public should have access to scholarly work.

Fitzpatrick recently critiqued Academia.edu on her [blog](#) and at a recent [academic conference](#). Because Academia.edu is funded with venture capital, she said, it will be required to make a profit at some point; otherwise, it will be sold and mined for parts—or shut down. She believes it’s risky for academics to rely on this platform: “What will become of their work in the long term?” And if it doesn’t shut down, the website will profit from work that the professors are doing voluntarily. She also finds it “extremely problematic” that the website uses a .edu domain, which was registered before the government restricted the use of the domain to postsecondary institutions and organizations accredited by agencies recognized by the Department of Education. Some users, she suggested, might be misled by its domain name and not realize that they are working with a company rather than a school.

Scholars should think seriously about Academia.edu’s business model and consider other options, Fitzpatrick argued, acknowledging the website’s large audience and other positive aspects. “Networks like MLA Common and Core are managed by scholars for scholars,” she said. “[They’re] governed by [their] members rather than investors’ goals.”

Still, Price believes that collaboration between for-profit and nonprofit organizations is the best way to achieve total open access—and he says he’s a big fan of Fitzpatrick’s efforts at the MLA. “When you are trying to innovate, you need lots of different talents ... The more the merrier!” he said, pointing out that Google, which is a common tool for researchers, is also a for-profit enterprise.

And based on its popularity, it would appear that lots of Academia.edu users are satisfied. [David Watkins](#), an assistant professor of political science at the University of Dayton, a private Roman Catholic research university in Ohio, has uploaded a number of his published and unpublished articles, works in progress, and conference papers to Academia.edu; he’s even posted a draft syllabus. The comments he’s received are “like the comments you get at a conference—like a really good conference.”

“I would like as many people as possible to read my work, in part because it’s nice to be cited by fellow academics,” continued Watkins, who also writes for the political blog “[Lawyers, Guns, and Money](#).” “I would like people who don’t have access to university libraries to get it.” The public, he emphasized, should have access to research, especially if the scholar receives government grants for the research. Moreover, he’s learned that the public wants to read his work and other academic research. “There are intellectually curious people everywhere.”

And Academia.edu’s for-profit model doesn’t concern Watkins. While academics all know the current model has problems, he said, universities haven’t been able to solve this problem on their own. So, if this company creates this free, popular website, he won’t complain. He said, “Academia.edu might be a parasite, but not all parasites are harmful.”

In the next few years, Price aims to improve the accuracy of the [peer-review process](#). Scientific studies in published journals often can’t be [replicated again in follow-up experiments](#). “We used to think that the peer review system was accurate. It’s not.” He thinks that with more eyes on research and various tools, like [weighted authority](#) of commenters, they can improve the quality of research. He would like to have

all research accessible and free to the world. He also wants to increase the speed of the publication process—an interest that actually jump-started the idea behind Academia.edu.

Price is convinced that the old systems of paywalls and information silos are quickly eroding. “We’re moving to a future where all research is going to be open access.”

This debate about where academics should entrust their research—a private company or an academic-run website—is the growing pains of a paradigm shift. Academia is slowly moving beyond the publishing model of paywalls and high cost subscription fees. Professors, as evidenced by the millions who use Academia.edu, are increasingly sharing their work with the world. We’re in a transition period, where different solutions are being tested, where various individuals are trying to create order out of chaos, where one clear path hasn’t yet been chosen. The public has demanded free, online access to music, magazines, and newspapers. Now, that same demand is driving change even within the most traditional of institutions—higher education.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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