

# Study explores peer-to-peer research sharing communities

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## Pirating Papers

Study looks at the reasons why people pirate scholarly articles from peer-to-peer research sharing communities -- it's more convenience than ideology.

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### By

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Peer-to-peer research sharing looks a lot like sharing of other forms of media, a new study suggests. While some researchers are personally opposed to copyright, others pirate research simply for the sake of convenience.

Piracy been around for decades, but the sources of pirated music, movies and more have multiplied over the years, expanding beyond platforms such as Napster and the Pirate Bay. Today, many users search for copyrighted scholarly papers on Facebook, Reddit and Twitter or repositories such as Library Genesis (LibGen) and Sci-Hub.

Carolyn Caffrey Gardner and Gabriel J. Gardner, librarians at the University of Southern California and California State University at Long Beach, respectively, recently explored the motivations of the people who use those sites. Their paper, "Fast and Furious (at Publishers): The Motivations Behind Crowdsourced Research Sharing," will [appear](#) in an upcoming edition of *College & Research Libraries*, a publication of the Association of College and Research Libraries.

"Peer-to-peer article sharing is a multicausal scholarly communication dilemma with roots that go beyond document delivery to the legal bedrock that is our current copyright and intellectual property systems," the paper reads. "If our sample is representative of the sharing population, the typical user is not a scientist toiling away in the developing world locked out of the scholarly community due to 'the cost of knowledge.' Rather, she is a social or hard science researcher who has academic library privileges but prefers crowdsourced methods of obtaining access ...."

The researchers distributed their survey on the Reddit community [Scholar](#), where users share and request articles, as well as on Twitter using the hashtag [#ICanHazPDF](#), a common way to crowdsource research. The results, collected from the 252 people who responded to at least one of the 14 questions in the survey, reveal two main categories of users.

Most of the survey respondents said they turn to peer-to-peer sharing to obtain research because of its convenience. Access and speed registered as the top reasons, while only 11 of the 148 respondents said they were motivated by ideology. The respondents who said they provide pirated articles were slightly more likely to cite ideology -- 32 of 104 picked that option -- though more respondents (58) said they were motivated by a sense that they were giving back to the peer-to-peer sharing community.

In an email, Carolyn Gardner said she was not surprised that people searching for research and those searching for media share similar motivations, even if the pirated content is used for different purposes. "One is for work, lifelong learning, research, publication and the other more for entertainment," Gardner said. "Both communities certainly

have some overlap.”

The findings come with some significant caveats. In addition to the small sample size (as low as 93 respondents on one of the question), the survey results include no responses from users in China and Iran, the top two countries driving traffic to LibGen and Sci-Hub. Researchers and institutions in those countries may truly lack the funds to pay for scholarly publications, leading many to turn to piracy.

The survey results also hint that much of the sharing takes place in private -- for example by email between scholars -- instead of out in the open on social media platforms. Nearly half of all respondents (102 out of 216) said they use services other than BitTorrent, interlibrary loans, the Open Access Button, Reddit or Twitter to obtain scholarly materials (though sites such as LibGen and Sci-Hub, which were not broken out into their own options, likely make up a portion of those respondents, the authors acknowledged).

“What is neat about peer-to-peer research sharing is that it is out in the open, and that this allows for communities to form around it,” Gabriel Gardner said in an email. “There are email Listserv communities where people share research, but Reddit and Twitter allow anyone to participate, so they level the sharing playing field that was previously available only to people in the know about email groups.”

LibGen and Sci-Hub have for years been engaged in a lawsuit brought by publisher Elsevier, which has sought to shut down the sites for copyright infringement. The case has pushed piracy in research to the forefront and also stoked some antipublisher sentiment.

When asked about their feelings on copyright, however, most survey respondents (67 or 160) said they simply don't care. That group is still outnumbered by respondents whom Gabriel Gardner described as being disaffected with the publishing “status quo,” including those who argue that information should be free (48), say piracy doesn't violate copyright (24) or feel animus toward publishers (30).

“We had many eloquent antipublisher or anticopyright comments, some of which were multiple paragraphs, bordering on mini manifestos,” Gabriel Gardner wrote. “One thing that we don't discuss at length in the paper is that we didn't get any responses that would indicate that everything is fine.”

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