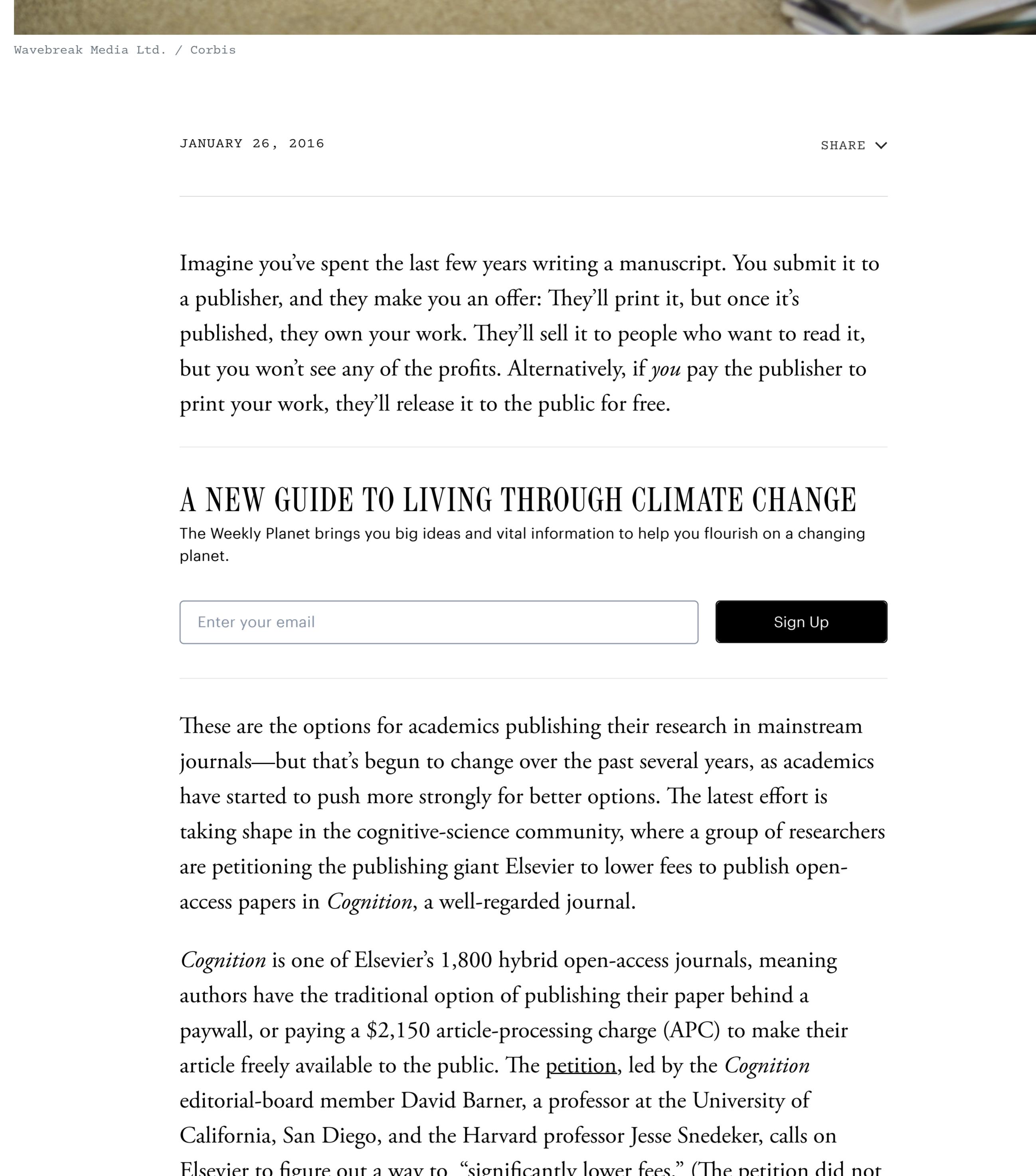


SCIENCE

Academics Want You to Read Their Work for Free

Publishing an open-access paper in a journal can be prohibitively expensive. Some researchers are drumming up support for a movement to change that.

By Jane C. Hu



Wavebreak Media Ltd. / Corbis

JANUARY 26, 2016

SHARE ▾

Imagine you've spent the last few years writing a manuscript. You submit it to a publisher, and they make you an offer: They'll print it, but once it's published, they own your work. They'll sell it to people who want to read it, but you won't see any of the profits. Alternatively, if *you* pay the publisher to print your work, they'll release it to the public for free.

A NEW GUIDE TO LIVING THROUGH CLIMATE CHANGE

The Weekly Planet brings you big ideas and vital information to help you flourish on a changing planet.

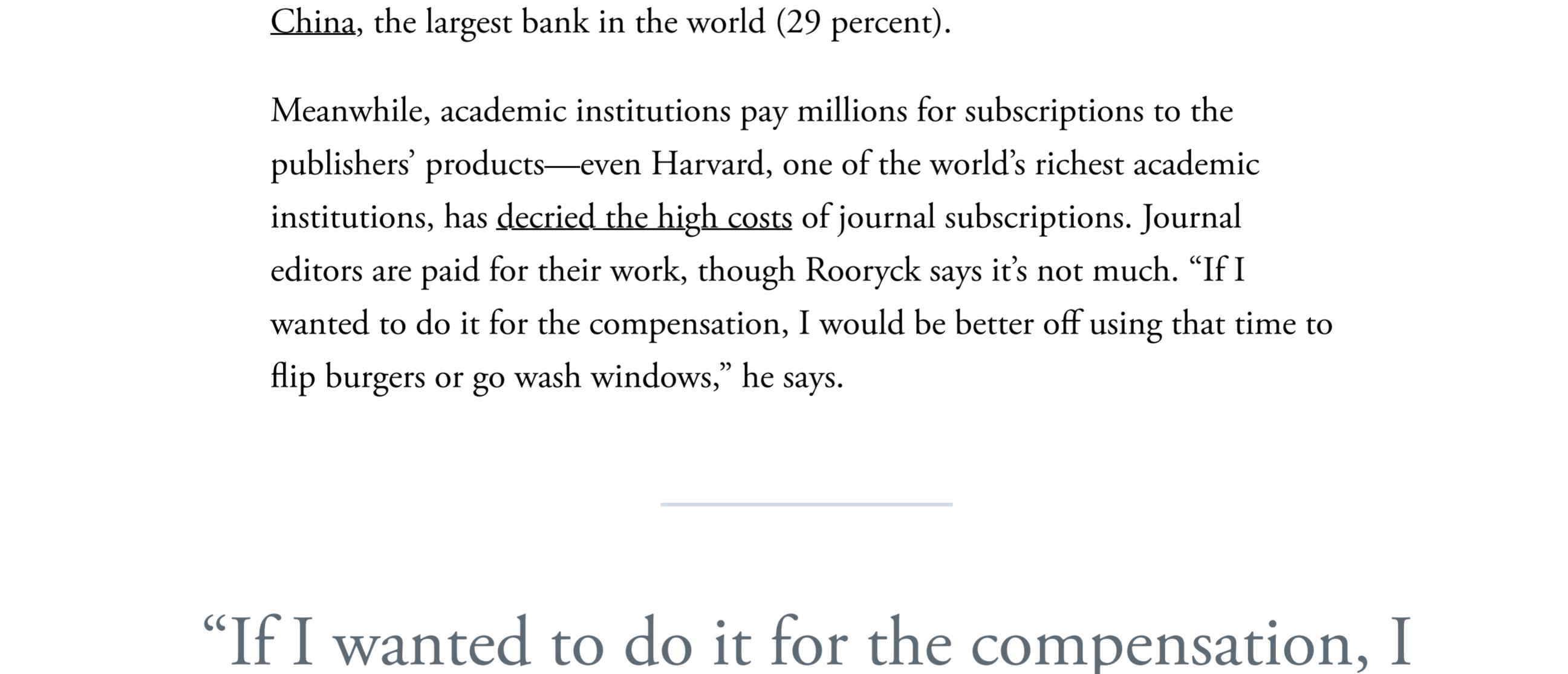
Enter your email

Sign Up

These are the options for academics publishing their research in mainstream journals—but that's begun to change over the past several years, as academics have started to push more strongly for better options. The latest effort is taking shape in the cognitive-science community, where a group of researchers are petitioning the publishing giant Elsevier to lower fees to publish open-access papers in *Cognition*, a well-regarded journal.

Cognition is one of Elsevier's 1,800 hybrid open-access journals, meaning authors have the traditional option of publishing their paper behind a paywall, or paying a \$2,150 article-processing charge (APC) to make their article freely available to the public. The [petition](#), led by the *Cognition* editorial-board member David Barner, a professor at the University of California, San Diego, and the Harvard professor Jesse Snedeker, calls on Elsevier to figure out a way to "significantly lower fees." (The petition did not specify an exact figure.) In less than a week, the petition racked up signatures from more than 1,200 people, including Noam Chomsky and at least 10 members of *Cognition*'s editorial board.

ADVERTISEMENT



"The *Cognition* community is bubbling with discussion both within the editorial circles and among contributors and readers, too," Barner wrote in an email. "We see this as a healthy process that is best left undisturbed by further action on our part." Now that the petition is out there, in other words, Barner and Snedeker are relying on organic conversations within the academic community to help their movement pick up steam.

The *Cognition* petition builds on momentum from a recent shake-up at *Lingua*, another Elsevier journal. Last November, all of *Lingua*'s six editors and 31 editorial-board members [resigned](#) after Elsevier rejected their requests for lower APCs, the right for authors to retain copyright over their own work, and, most radically, ownership of the journal. In their letter to Elsevier, the board asked that ownership of the journal be transferred to the collective of editors at no cost, and for the right to move the journal to a different publisher with six months' notification.

He refers to hybrid journals as "double-dipping journals" because they profit from both APCs and subscriptions.

After leaving their positions at *Lingua*, the editors started a new open-access journal called *Glossa*. The new journal charges a \$400 APC to authors, and waives that fee for authors who do not have the funds. *Lingua*'s APC, by contrast, is still \$1,800, the same as it was before the previous editorial board's departure. In a [statement](#) issued in November, Elsevier said that a \$400 APC is "not sustainable."

However, the company does have [several titles with \\$500 APCs](#), so I asked David Clark, Elsevier's senior vice president of publishing, how the company determines those prices. He explained that the price for each journal depends in part on "the appetite" from different fields; presumably, a more well-funded field will have more money available to pay APCs. According to Elsevier's website, it also depends on factors like "competitive considerations" and "market conditions," like how much other competing companies are charging.

Johan Rooryck, the former editor-in-chief of *Lingua* and the current editor-in-chief of *Glossa*, refers to hybrid journals as "double-dipping journals" because they profit from both APCs and subscriptions. Though Elsevier's official policy states that the company does not charge subscribers for open-access papers, many scientists share Rooryck's view of hybrid journals as a money grab. Last February, some vented their frustrations by poking fun at the company with the hashtag #ElsevierValentines (one highlight: "Roses are red / Violets are blue / We've gone open access / So authors pay too!").

Scientists' frustration is compounded by indications that academic publishers are turning a tidy profit from their labor and free contributions (peer reviews, like the articles themselves, are given to journals for free). Elsevier, Springer, and Taylor & Francis have all [reported profit margins](#) around 35 percent, more than Facebook (27 percent) or the Industrial & Commercial Bank of China, the largest bank in the world (29 percent).

Meanwhile, academic institutions pay millions for subscriptions to the publishers' products—even Harvard, one of the world's richest academic institutions, has [decried the high costs](#) of journal subscriptions. Journal editors are paid for their work, though Rooryck says it's not much. "If I wanted to do it for the compensation, I would be better off using that time to flip burgers or go wash windows," he says.

"If I wanted to do it for the compensation, I would be better off using that time to flip burgers or go wash windows."

Hot on the heels of the *Lingua* situation, the *Cognition* petition comes at a particularly awkward time for Elsevier. The company has drawn considerable criticism from scientists and libraries over the last few years. In 2012, more than 12,000 researchers vowed to boycott Elsevier for supporting the Research Works Act (RWA), a bill that would have made it illegal for federal grants to require grantees to publish the work in open-access journals. Members of the academic community saw this as a move to protect big publishers' business interests while restricting open-access options. More recently, Elsevier was hit with another wave of negative publicity for issuing takedown notices to scientists sharing copies of their published research on their personal websites and on Academia.edu, a social-networking site for academics.

Now, *Glossa* supporters are encouraging colleagues not just to submit to *Glossa*, but also to abandon *Lingua*, which they now call "zombie *Lingua*."

"*Glossa* is the new *Lingua*—same [editorial] processes, same team, same editorial board, same editors. Only the name changes," says Rooryck. On blogs and online message boards, *Glossa* supporters have been rallying their colleagues to refrain from submitting, reviewing, or editing papers for *Lingua*. Scores of authors are moving their *Lingua* submissions to *Glossa*; Rooryck says that thus far, between regular submissions and a *Lingua* special issue, authors have pulled around 100 papers from *Lingua* and transferred them to *Glossa*.

Harry Whitaker, the interim editor-in-chief of *Lingua*, disapproves of the *Glossa* editorial board's approach. "What's the point of trying to tear down *Lingua*?" he asks. "It doesn't add anything to whatever luster *Glossa* may acquire."

Whitaker, who founded two other Elsevier journals and has a combined 50 years of editorial experience with the company, came into his new position after he heard about the former *Lingua* board's actions and contacted Elsevier to express his dismay. "I disagreed with just about everything they were doing," he said. He came out of retirement to sign a new contract with Elsevier in early January, and has since recruited several interim editors. He says that he and his editorial staff have received a fair amount of animosity from *Glossa* supporters.

But Whitaker stands firmly in favor of for-profit publishing; noting that publishers' profits allow them to invest in new projects. (Elsevier gave Whitaker funds to found two new journals—*Brain and Cognition* and *Brain and Language*.) Plus, he says, profits ensure longevity. "That's one of the many reasons I support the idea of a publisher that makes money," he says. "*Lingua* will be here when I retire, and *Lingua* will be here when I die."

The fate of *Cognition*, meanwhile, remains to be seen. Barner and Snedeker plan to submit their petition to Elsevier on Wednesday. "The battle has been taken from a very small region—linguistics—to a much larger one," says Rooryck. Barner and Snedeker are staying silent about their long-term plans, but their request sends a clear message to publishers: Scientists are ready for change.