



# Lessons from the Campaign against Elsevier

## *“We won, but how did we win?”*

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### Abstract

Reed Elsevier withdrew their involvement in the arms exhibitions business due to a campaign by academics and medics between 2005 and 2007. This article reviews the history and strategy of the campaign from my perspective as an academic and someone who was involved in the campaign from the beginning. I identify factors which may have influenced decision makers at Reed Elsevier, situational factors which assisted the campaign, and strategic choices made by the campaigners. I suggest that this last category may offer some general lessons for successful campaigning against corporations. Specifically these were, first, having a persistent core of individuals and groups who actively pursued the campaign; second, taking advantage of the strong interconnections within and between academic and medical networks; third, that the global reach of Elsevier created a global and diverse community of stakeholders who could lay claim to an interest in the corporation's actions. I conclude optimistically by affirming the value of small victories against corporations.

### Introduction

Elsevier is one of the world's leading academic and medical publishers. Reed Exhibitions is an international business specialising in organising trade and



consumer events. On their books are nine of the world's major arms fairs, including Defence Systems & Equipment International (DSEi) which they have organised biennially since 1999. The connection between the two companies is their parent company, Reed Elsevier. Through Reed Elsevier two global industries are brought into contact: the world community of academics, medical and education professionals who write, review, edit and purchase Elsevier's books and journals; and the international trade in arms and torture equipment, the network which supports war and oppressive regimes while fuelling conflict, human rights abuses and underdevelopment across the world.

But this is more than the familiar depressing story about how corporate globalisation connects the most disparate things without regard for ethical contradictions. On 1st of June 2007, after a campaign of just two years, Reed Elsevier announced that they would stop organising arms fairs, stating *'the defence shows are no longer compatible with Reed Elsevier's position as a leading publisher of scientific, medical, legal and business content.'*

It was the action of anti-arms trade activists, academics and medics that created this incompatibility --- an incompatibility at first strongly denied by Reed Elsevier. For many involved in the campaign the success in changing the behaviour of a large corporation was unexpected (*'We've won! We never normally win!'*). This essay is an attempt to address serious questions that remain after the notional campaign victory: we won, but how did we manage it? What factors produced Reed Elsevier's public climb-down? Can general lessons be taken from the campaign and generalised to other attempts to influence corporations?

The account presented here of the campaign, and the analysis of the reasons for its success, is a partial and personal one. I was involved in the campaign from the beginning and played a role in coordinating the response of academics and medics. There was, however, no formal campaign committee that I could belong to, nor a 'subscription' style campaign headquarters. Diverse groups and individuals were involved in the campaign, all acting quasi-autonomously. It is beyond my limited perspective of things, and the scope of this article, to present a confident and comprehensive analysis of the campaign<sup>2</sup>. I will, however, try and describe the history of the campaign, outline the different strategies adopted by the different actors, including myself, and attempt a preliminary analysis of the reasons for the success of the campaign. This I do in the spirit of producing an accessible account of the campaign rather than a more measured sociological account.

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<sup>2</sup> Such a comprehensive analysis has been initiated by Kevin Gillan of Manchester University. He would like to hear from anyone involved in the campaign against Elsevier. Email: [kevin.gillan@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:kevin.gillan@manchester.ac.uk)

## What happened?

Campaign Against the Arms Trade (CAAT) is a small NGO based in the UK. In April 2005 they launched a campaign against Elsevier, as part of their efforts to close down DSEi. As a supporter of CAAT, I received notification of the launch of this campaign, and, at about the same time, I received a publicity circular from Elsevier suggesting I subscribe to *The Lancet*, one of their flagship publications and a perhaps the world's most famous medical journal. Putting two and two together to make trouble, I immediately decided to write to CAAT to check that they were aware of *The Lancet's* connection to DSEi; to the chair of Reed Elsevier, Jan Hommen, to see if he could justify organising DSEi while his company had a corporate social responsibility policy claiming that Reed Elsevier 'seeks to play a positive role in our local and global communities' and to the editor of *The Lancet*, Richard Horton, to see what he thought of all this. As far as I am aware this was the first action by academic aimed at Reed Elsevier as a publisher *per se*, and the first time a connection had been made between the DSEi arms fair and *The Lancet*. The reply from Reed Elsevier was unequivocal: *Exhibitions such as DSEi serve a legitimate purpose...Reed Elsevier does not intend to adjust its policy* (personal communication, 12 July 2005).

In September 2005 an open letter from academics and medics, organised by CAAT, was published in *The Lancet*. The letter and the supporting editorial by *The Lancet* attracted world-wide media attention. In March 2006 there was a similar open letter in the *Times Literary Supplement*, signed by authors including Will Self and Ian McEwan, which highlighted the association between the Elsevier organised The London Book Fair and the arms trade.

These publicity successes, I sense, turned the campaign from a small concern into a 'public' cause. From this point on the campaign involved academics, medics, librarians, those involved in publishing and, of course, anti-arms fair activists without it being clear exactly who was doing what. A number of groups and individuals in different arenas pursued their own actions simultaneously.

I continued my attempts to raise academic awareness. In August 2006 I launched an online petition of Elsevier for academics and medics, which was eventually to receive about 2000 signatures<sup>3</sup>. Nick Gill, a mathematician, started a boycott petition around the same time<sup>4</sup>. Within geography there was significant activity, fermented by Paul Chatterton and Dave Featherstone. Several contributors withdrew from the *Encyclopaedia of Human Geography*, published by Elsevier.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://idiollect.org.uk/elsevier/petition.php>

<sup>4</sup> <http://cage.ugent.be/~npg/elsevier/>

The Elsevier journal *Political Geography* published a comment by Chatterton & Featherstone (2007) and responses concerning the involvement of Elsevier, and hence academics, in the arms trade. In March 2007 an open letter was published in the Times Higher Education supplement signed by 140 academics from around the world (Stafford et al, 2007).

The medical community responded most strongly to the issue (Tebbutt & Boddy, 2006; Harms et al, 2006; Cowden, 2006; Mackie & Slim, 2006; Pless, 2006). Discussions continued behind the scenes between *The Lancet* and Elsevier. In March 2007 the *British Medical Journal*, another leading medical journal (not published by Elsevier) published a damning editorial, in which they called for a full boycott of publishing in Elsevier's journals (Young & Godlee, 2007). This followed a call to arms by a former editor of the *British Medical Journal* in the *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine* (Smith, 2007). The following week *The Lancet* responded with another editorial and open letters from a range of different organisations across the medical community, including the Royal College of Physicians (Lancet, 369, 987-990). The Lancet editorial stated

On the question of arms exhibitions, we have found that a growing number of our Elsevier colleagues, who have long standing relationships with scientific societies and authors, are questioning Reed Elsevier's decision to continue in this business. At a time of fierce debate over author-pays open access journals and open archiving, Reed Elsevier, many of them say, needs to be making strong alliances, not creating new enemies.

Within Elsevier, and among those working on Elsevier-published journals such as *The Lancet*, there was support for the campaign. 59 of The Lancet's 83 editorial consultants signed an open letter addressed to Reed Elsevier's CEO (Attaran et al, 22 March 2007). One editor at the Lancet threatened to resign. Another editor, of the Elsevier journal *Neurocomputing* signed my petition after I included comments about the journal, Elsevier and the arms trade in the biography of the article I was publishing (Stafford & Wilson, 2008; you'll note that I obviously wasn't participating in a boycott of Elsevier – more on this later).

Campaign Against The Arms trade continued their campaign, acting as a coordinating hub for the loose network of people concerned with the campaign. These included contacts at the Lancet, academics like myself and Nick Gill, as well as arms-trade activists not-specifically involved in academia or medicine. The London Catholic Workers began a weekly vigil of Reed Elsevier's corporate headquarters in London in the summer of 2006. In February 2007 the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust announced their disinvestment of £2 million worth of shares in Elsevier due to ethical concerns. F & C Asset Management also disinvested due to Elsevier's arms fair involvement. There were no other major disinvestments but actions coordinated by Nick Gill and CAAT resulted in the Co-

operative Bank opening dialogue with Elsevier over the issue. CAAT activists holding token shares attended Reed Elsevier’s AGM on April 19th, 2007, dominating the questions by asking about Elsevier’s involvement in the arms trade.

The forward arrived in my inbox at 11:58 on 1<sup>st</sup> of June, six minutes after Crispin Davis, Reed Elsevier CEO, emailed his staff to say

We are announcing today that we plan to exit the defence exhibitions business. Over the last year or so it has become increasingly clear that growing numbers of important customers and authors, particularly in the science and medical markets, have very real concerns with our involvement in this sector. They believe strongly that our presence here is incompatible with the aims of the science and medical communities. I am also very aware this is a view shared by a number of our employees.

We’d done it, we’d achieved our campaign goal<sup>5</sup>. In the rest of this article I focus on the motivations of my actions during the campaign, and I will present a view of the core reasons for the campaign’s success.

## Strategy

This discussion of my personal motivations during the Elsevier campaign serves two purposes. Firstly, it goes some way to allowing the reader an impression of my political inclinations and of my reading of the context in which the campaign occurred. Secondly, it is beyond the scope of the present article to fully investigate the motivations of the various actors in the campaign. Only my own motivations are readily available, so I present them as somewhat representative of the typical academic involved in the campaign.

Something that served as an inspiration for me during the Elsevier campaign was a phrase of Alistair McIntosh’s, from his book ‘Soil and Soul’: “Dig where you stand”. This highlighted, for me, the importance of campaigning on issue I was personally implicated in. The correspondence of this is, of course, that you should look around your own immediate milieu and try and address what needs fixing there as a first political step. I felt that Elsevier were making academics complicit in the arms trade and that this was something we, collectively, could take a stand on and where I, personally, could effect a difference.

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<sup>5</sup> Two alternative summaries of the campaign history are available at <http://www.caat.org.uk/campaigns/armsfairs/reedelsevier.php> and <http://www.dea.org.au/node/199> the first by Anna Jones who coordinated the campaign within CAAT, the second by Colin Butler of *Doctors for the Environment Australia*.

The strategy for my campaigning, which was similar although not identical to others involved in the campaign was one of awareness raising and engagement. I wrote letters, articles, contacted people --- and I let Elsevier know I was doing this and asked for their response. I wasn't interested in a personal boycott of Elsevier journals. Too often a boycott strategy is a substitute for a real demand for change, a individual, consumption-focussed mode of political action that is ultimately individuating and thus disempowering. I would have supported a boycott if there had been a mass movement against Elsevier, but at this stage there wasn't and a boycott would have been personally costly without impacting on Elsevier's business. I didn't want to mistake personal cost for effectiveness. Similarly, I didn't feel the need for radical direct action. When there is an obvious target or a pressing need direct action can be vital, but with Elsevier the connection was too indirect, the problem too chronic to make direct action an obvious first choice of strategy

The awareness raising was key because if we were claiming to speak on behalf of the academic and medical communities then we needed to make sure that these communities were aware of what we were saying, at the very least, and ideally that we were correct in our evaluation of the sentiment they would possess. Our rhetorical strategy should be to insist that the hypocrisy of Elsevier needed to be justified, that we had nothing against the company but they were "a publishing company with an arms trade problem" (a phrase due to Alec Patton, activist and campaigner).

This strategy supports a wider program of the delegitimisation of the arms trade. When CAAT launched a clean investment campaign in the early nineties it compiled extensive lists of both charities and religious organisations which had arms-trade investments. Currently there are so few identifiable examples in these two categories that CAAT has wound up these lists, now concentrating clean investment campaigning on Universities and Local Authorities (Ian Prichard, CAAT Researcher, personal communication). Corporate ethical investment policies, such as that held by the Co-operative bank, are becoming more common and can include a ban on investment in arms manufacturers and traders. At the time the Elsevier campaign began the corporation was a rare example of a non-arms company with a significant involvement in the arms-trade, but for which the arms trade wasn't itself a major part of its portfolio.

A delegitimisation strategy operates in a different sphere from some, 'protest-focussed', campaigns. Non-violent direct-actions such as blockades and sabotage can be effective campaigning tools (Doherty, 1999; Wall, 1999), but they run the risk of reinforcing the interpretative frame of establishment vs minority; a frame which, from my naive personal assessment, many activists cherish their casting in. (On interpretive frames in politics see Gillan, 2006; Lakoff, 2004). A strategy of delegitimisation assumes both the moral high-ground and tacit majority support. Rather than focus on physical and economic disruption, it is natural for

such an approach to be characterised by awareness raising, engagement and lobbying for change within existing channels (such as shareholder votes, or legislative change). It should be noted that Elsevier showed a willingness to engage from the beginning. My first open letter, written as an individual but published publicly on the internet, was swiftly replied to by the company<sup>6</sup>.

### **Why did it work?**

My first thoughts on hearing of Crispin Davis’s announcement were of joy, but also of frank amazement. Although the campaign was obviously begun and carried out with the belief that it could be won, the experience was still something of a shock. In discussion a number of campaigners echoed my own thoughts: “Wow, I didn’t expect that, we never normally win!” Some of us activists, it seems, can get so used to their love of hopeless causes that the objective success of a campaign takes second place to its value as a kind of moral testimony. As celebratory emails poured in from around the world, it was obvious to me that the victory against Elsevier was important as an example of a large corporation changing its behaviour, a success that was obviously highly symbolic when many anti-corporate campaigners become accustomed to perpetual disappointment.

But after the initial euphoria had worn in, an additional reason for the importance of the Elsevier campaign occurred to me. This victory had been relatively quick and relatively easy (compared, for example, to some anti-corporate campaigns that last for decades). Perhaps it would be possible to extract features of the situation that led to success and generalise them? What lessons are there for other campaigns against corporate misbehaviour, such as the actions of Shell in the niger-delta? The short remainder of this article is a consideration of possible reasons for the victory over Elsevier. With time and further research it might become clearer which of these factors was most important, but for now I present this analysis as a provisional overview from someone who was involved from the beginning of the campaign.

Obviously there is a nexus of proximal reasons for the success of the campaign: negative publicity, disinvestment (and the threat of further disinvestment), stakeholder unrest, perhaps even old-fashioned persuasion. These are the sorts of reasons that would have motivated the decision makers in Elsevier to decide that disinvestment from the arms trade was the best option. Factors such as these are the immediate mechanisms of change that corporate campaigning must retain focus on if they are to be successful.

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<sup>6</sup> You can follow our correspondence here <http://idiolect.org.uk/notes/?cat=15>

There are also a number of fortunate situational factors which assisted the campaign. One is the ease of the adjustment that was demanded of Elsevier. The defence exhibitions business was only 0.5% of Elsevier's global revenue. Presumably somebody in Elsevier made a cost-benefit analysis of keeping the exhibitions business (ongoing negative publicity, worker unrest, disinvestment, etc) vs selling it (avoiding those things, forgoing a source of income) and concluded that it was better sold off. A second, quite different, factor was the rhetorical ease with which the contradiction between, on the one hand the humanitarian and intellectual values of medicine and academia and, on the other, the arms trade could be made. Perhaps also the average medic or academic is more predisposed to both the emotional and political arguments against supporting the arms trade in its current form. By paying attention to situational factors such as these it should be possible to identify in advance issues on which corporations can be more easily persuaded.

Beyond these proximal and situational factors there are also a number of strategic factors which are responsible for the campaign victory. These are factors which reflect choices made by those involved in the campaign about what was important. These factors, I believe, could be equally worthy of attention in similar campaigns.

A first factor was the existence of a core group of individuals and organisations who were willing to sustain interest and pressure. A number of individuals within the academic, medical and editorial communities obviously made the issue of Elsevier and arms trade a personal concern, initiating actions and paying close attention to developments in different areas. Organisationally, The Lancet editorial team obviously also actively pursued the issue, acting out of a feeling of moral obligation, rather than just reluctantly responding to outside pressure. CAAT provided a coordinating hub for different parties, as well as a press office and similar resources. Campaigning can be boring, protracted and arduous. In the gaps between 'events' few incentives exist, but it is vital that the campaign is kept going. This is not only so that the campaign can respond to new developments but also so that the target corporation is persuaded that their wrongs won't be easily forgotten as time moves on. The Elsevier campaign was lucky enough to have groups and individuals who would, in Milan Kundera's words, keep alive the flame of "memory against forgetting". It didn't matter that they were relatively small in number, their persistence made them disproportionately effective.

A second vital factor was that the audiences for the campaign were coordinated in pre-existing communities, which were heavily interconnected and within which there are sub-networks. Both the academic and medical fields are international communities with powerful interests --- powerful enough to challenge a global corporation. These international communities decompose into subgroups by region and field and are sustained by learned societies, conferences, key journals



email lists and visits. These networks mean that if an issue, like that of the campaign against Elsevier's involvement in the arms trade, becomes salient enough to gain the interest of a single individual then they are able to spread it widely both within their key community and to other groups they are involved in. A consequence of this network organisation is that the campaign seemed to take hold in particular fields where a critical threshold of interested parties found each other; critical geography, medical publishing, and librarians and mathematicians to a lesser extent. Because the Elsevier campaign recruited early on individuals from within the academic and medical communities it was able to contact those communities in a style and with a tone that was appropriate for them, spreading within existing networks rather than trying to create *de novo* a new community around the campaign.

A third factor for the success of the campaign was its global reach. This, in turn, is a reflection of the global nature of the multinational against which the campaign was directed. Elsevier's multiple interests meant that they had stakeholders across the world and in seeming unrelated professional sectors. This meant that they had multiple vulnerabilities --- surely a key factor in how they would have weighed negative publicity and the possibility of future negative publicity. An exhibitions company that only took contracts for the defence sector wouldn't be concerned in the same way by widespread media publicity, nor would it be likely to generate the same kind of publicity as a massive multinational like Elsevier.

### **What use victory?**

The defence exhibitions have not been stopped, it is merely that Elsevier are in the process of selling of that arm of the business<sup>7</sup>. Although this is a victory, it is only a part of the process of closing down the arms fairs altogether. As many of the more trenchant critics of the currently global economic order would insist, this change is a single behaviour of a single corporation is not a sustainable solution to the myriad problems corporations are implicated in. Joel Bakan (2004) argues convincingly that the institutional rational that defines the modern corporation is pathological, creating them so that they fundamentally cannot take account of any humane values, being motivated solely by the pursuit of profit.

What, then, is the point of rearranging the interests of a single corporation, as with Elsevier and the arms fairs? There are at least two reasons why victories like these against individual corporations are a source of hope. One is that no

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<sup>7</sup> As of the time of the revision of this paper (May 2008) Reed Elsevier still had not entirely disinvested from arms exhibitions. Whether this is stalling on their part, or represents unexpected difficulties with finding a buyer for Reed Exhibitions, is not clear.

conceivable system of global economic order would persist free of injustice without individuals and groups with special interests paying close attention and campaigning for change. Campaigns such as the one against Elsevier will always be necessary in some form, so it is fallacious to argue that the limited scope of the campaign makes it valueless.

A second reason, and related to the above point, is that positive change is a good thing, even if the scope of effect is limited. This is not true, of course, if you subscribe to the view that any palliative action is regressive since it delays an inevitable revolution in the global order. If, however, you are not a firm believer in such a revolution, or you believe that it is impossible to predict what form the economic order will take after the revolution then such campaigns are vital because, in addition to affecting positive change, they may form the seeds of a better society. We may not have a complete view of how such a better society would be arranged but we are at least sure that it involves more communities, more knowledge and fewer arms fairs.

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