

# Cites & Insights

Crawford at Large

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## Intersections

### What's the Big Deal?

Traditionally, Big Deals haven't been about open access—and, as I've demonstrated in various 2013 and 2014 publications, Big Deals have damaged libraries by siphoning off unsustainable portions of their budgets. (I'm not providing links because some items are no longer available.)

This roundup isn't primarily about Big Deals as such. Most of it is about a cancelled Big Deal and what that cancellation *might* mean for the future of open access and scholarly publishing—or might not. That's the fourth and longest section, preceded by three relatively brief sections.

Possibly worth noting what I'm *not* covering (and not tracking): Plan S, DEAL, and similar situations. I have opinions about the feasibility of achieving OA by propping up legacy publishers and guaranteeing them continued outrageous profits, but that's a different story.

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### Big Deals: A Few Older Items

Warning: some of these items are about my writing—specifically, the *Library Technology Reports* May/June 2014 issue, “Big-Deal Serial Purchasing: Tracking the Damage.”

#### *Politics, Economics, and Screwing the Humanities*

This post by Wayne Bivens-Tatum appeared [January 18, 2013](#) on *Academic Librarian*. He discusses some Rick Anderson comments (I won't recount, but it's worth reading in the post itself) and goes on to a prime example of librarians setting aside beliefs and values in the interests of pragmatism: the Big Deal. Then he gets to the heart of the post:

[O]ver time these inflexible packages have taken up more and more of the library budgets until many libraries have had to “gut” their book budgets, some to an extent where they have almost no money to spend

on monographic purchases at all. We need to remember that book budgets aren't just gutted. Librarians *choose* to reduce spending on monographs to purchase journal packages that increase in price and decrease the flexibility of library budgeting, and that choice has consequences for library patrons that librarians rarely want to tell those patrons.

If anyone "benefits" from this arrangement, it's scientific researchers, because the highest-priced packages and journals are all for science, technology, and medical journals, not relatively inexpensive journals in the humanities. So over time, we've seen library support for scholars shift from what was perhaps more or less even or fair funding across the board to funding which struggles to cope with science journal costs and damns any programs that are monograph-heavy, which most humanities programs are. Some of these libraries try to support PhD programs in English, history, philosophy, or music with tiny monograph budgets while still entering into the Big Deals on science journals with the major vendors.

Now, the big question for discussion was, "To what degree is it appropriate to sacrifice the short-term good of our patrons in the pursuit of long-term economic reform in scholarly publishing (or vice versa)?" But let's spin that another way. To what extent has it been appropriate to sacrifice the short and long term good of patrons in the humanities for the short term good of not having to resist price increases or rethink journal packages that slowly squeeze monograph budgets to death? Are historians or literary scholars or musicologists less deserving because they're not in the sciences? If so, why bother to offer PhDs in programs that aren't adequately, or even fairly, supported by the library? If anything, humanists need library support more than scientists. For scientists, libraries hold the report of work done in a laboratory, but for humanists the library is the laboratory.

The humanities are under attack on most campuses it seems, and will never win the fight for recognition if the standard is economic productivity, which many people seem to think is the only standard by which to measure a society, a university, or a human life. But if we're looking at library budgets fairly, with an eye to all the stakeholders who rely on the library for scholarly research, we shouldn't pretend that going along with Big Deals because they're affordable if we severely reduce monograph budgets isn't screwing over a lot of the scholars that libraries should be serving. Putting the economics of science publishing ahead of scholarly publishing as a whole has done a disservice to the humanities and any monograph-heavy field. So, as a humanities librarian, if I do what I can to resist that assault by encouraging open-access scholarly publishing whenever and wherever I can, I'm not just making a professional (not personal or political) decision based on how I think scholarly publishing should operate, I'm *also* making a professional decision to support the work of scholars in the humanities who have been shortchanged at so many libraries over the past 20 years. Those patrons have needs, too.

I don't have anything to add here—except to say that this is still just as relevant, but Big Deal prices have continued to escalate faster than inflation and almost certainly gutted humanities budgets even more.

### *Walt Crawford's Big Deal and the Damage Done*

Wayne Bivens-Tatum posted this on [May 2, 2013](#) at *Academic Librarian*, and despite my great and unmatched ego (I'm writing this on October 7, 2019, if that isn't obvious), I wouldn't quote from a brief and positive note—except for WBT's response to a Michael Hughes comment saying “It seems Jeffrey Beall takes issue with your analysis, Walt” and linking to a post on a now-defunct blog (actually, somebody else has restarted the domains and seems to be repeating Beall blogs under their own name). WBT's response is excellent:

I took a look at that post. It seems to me that Crawford and Beall are writing about two different issues. If by the “serials crisis” you mean that libraries are having to drop subscriptions, then yes, that's over and the Big Deals stopped the practice of being able to drop subscriptions to save money. Walt is showing how the percentage of library spending has moved significantly to ejournal content at the expense of everything else, including monographs. These are different issues. Yes, libraries have more access to scholarly journals. They also have less access to everything else.

Of course, the serials crisis *wasn't* over—eventually, libraries would have to drop all subscriptions to independent journals and those from smaller publishers as the Big Deals swallowed up more and more of their budgets—but the point's a good one.

### *The Big Deal's Damage*

This “Peer to Peer Review” column by WBT appeared [May 9, 2013](#) in *Library Journal*—and since it's the extended discussion that the unquoted portion of the previous item points to, I'll mostly just point to it. (The current web version has almost all the text in one enormous paragraph; I'm guessing that's a web-interface problem, since I'm fairly certain WBT wouldn't write it that way.)

If you read it—and it's quite good, despite the monolithic paragraph—do read the comments, especially the reflexive “pure bilge” one and responses to it.

### *The Big Deal*

This post by David Rosenthal, on [June 25, 2013](#) at *DSHR's Blog*, is largely commenting on an Andrew Odlyzko article (linked to) on OA, big deals and libraries, with some additional commentary. It's a tough one to comment on, partly because Odlyzko has for many years struck me as one who believes that academic libraries' and librarians' only worthwhile function is to acquire scholarly articles for faculty. Naturally, he sees Big Deals as

making libraries irrelevant, and I don't see much to suggest that Odlyzko thinks that's a bad thing. And, of course, Odlyzko praises Big Deals for making *so many more articles* available...

Rosenthal has more nuanced views. I'm taken by this comment, for example—a tack I've rarely encountered:

**Researchers** generally view the “Big Deals” as a positive development; they get access to 4 times as many journals. Few are aware of the increased cost, which [in most cases is confidential](#). Even if they are, it does not come out of their budget. Even fewer are aware that the additional journals obtained for the extra cost add, on average, little value. These journals have been created by the publishers to inflate the size of their Big Deal. More journals in a “Big Deal” increases the value librarians perceive because they believe that the number of journals is a measure of value. It also provides the publishers additional editorial board slots with which to bribe researchers. To oversimplify, the same amount of research is being spread over more articles in more journals, a point that Andrew seems to miss.

I'm pointing to the portion starting at the fourth sentence, “Even fewer...”—and I must admit to wondering whether there really *should* be three million or five million or eight million scholarly articles each year, and the extent to which salami-slicing (dividing a research project into Least Publishable Units) is reaching the point where many of those slices are transparent.

But Rosenthal also seems not to value librarian roles much:

**Libraries** are on the horns of a dilemma. The “Big Deals” are an easy way to satisfy the demands of their researchers for access to the literature. **But the “Big Deals” eliminate almost all functions of the library, except negotiating the “Big Deals” with the publishers.** Any individual library is a small customer for a big publisher, and the “Big Deal” removes their ability to walk away from the table, thus they have little if any leverage. “Big Deal” negotiation is much more effective at a national level, as in [the UK](#). Andrew demonstrates that the result of the switch to “Big Deals” has been to increase the proportion of the library budget going to the big publishers, and reduce the proportion going to traditional library services. Universal Open Access would remove much of the funds passing through libraries' budgets and their last major function, so it might be even worse for libraries than the “Big Deal”. [Emphasis added.]

Indeed, Rosenthal later says explicitly that he “agree[s] with Andrew's bleak view of the future for libraries.”

There's more here, and I find it more than a little depressing.

### *Another day, another bad deal*

Let's close this group of older items with one from a first-rate librarian, Jenica P. Rogers, who posted this [on October 30, 2013](#) at *Attempting Elegance*. Rogers is well-known for being an early refusenik for a Big Deal,

canceling a package with the full and informed backing of her faculty (she's library director at SUNY-Potsdam—or, rather, was for a decade, [stepping down in July 2019](#) to return to a different set of responsibilities). This time around, it was a Sage package.

Since Rogers writes more eloquently than I do, I'm mostly pointing and saying "Read this. It's very good." Oh, and read the comments as well; they enhance the already-good post.

In this case, the heart of the problem was that she no longer had faith in Sage's pricing model. She describes what happened over a brief period, culminating in this:

And so we were left, after 16 emails in just one of the threads of emails on this, with no idea how pricing was actually being calculated, but a strong feeling that it goes something like this: SAGE looks at our spend from last year, decides what they think we should spend this year, and then bills us for that, but is willing to justify it however will make us happy through some combination of negotiated price increases, hold-ings values for a time period defined by them, top-up fees, upgrade fees, and inflationary upticks. Very few of those phrases have actual definable meanings. Every email we got seemed to offer us a new set of prices, broken down in new ways, with a slightly different bottom line. Each exchange produced more questions, and few answers. (And, perhaps, the whole thing can be explained by saying that the vendor has a perfectly explicable pricing policy but we just didn't get it... but if two experienced collection development and administration librarians "can't get it", isn't that a problem in and of itself?) So, as I explained to our faculty, as a steward of this institution's funds, as a steward of our students' tuition dollars, and as a steward of resources dedicated to providing good, appropriate access to information for our teaching and learning community, this is not how I choose to do business.

That's followed by some reasons that librarians are at least partly to blame for this state of affairs, and says clearly that she can't and won't do this anymore. But, again, she says it better: go read it.

## Other Cancellations

"Other" both because you've just read about one cancellation and because the last and longest section is about a Really Big Cancellation. All of these are within the last two or three years.

### *Big Deal Cancellation Tracking*

This one's [an ongoing project](#) by SPARC that's been going since at least 2017. Here's the overview:

Large publishers have marketed bundles of journals at a discount off of aggregated list price since the late 1990's. The value proposition for

publishers is a guaranteed revenue stream at a high overall dollar value. The perceived benefit for the institutions has been access to a large volume of journal titles, at a lower per-title price than ala carte purchasing would afford. Over time, however, the actual value of these “big deals” has grown less clear. Publishers have often raised the price of the packages by 5-15%, far outpacing library budgets. This has been justified, in part, by the addition of a growing number of specialized journal titles, launched in quick succession. Libraries have found a growing chunk of their budgets allocated to servicing these big deals, as well as their ability to curate resources and build collections most appropriate for their communities severely hampered.

What was once a no-fuss way to get a significant collection of journals at a discount off of list price has devolved into a restrictive agreement that limits financial and strategic flexibility. The “big deal” has often been compared to a cable or satellite TV package, an apt analogy insofar as the customer cannot choose to pass on content that is of no interest, with initial price breaks quickly giving way to locked-in increases. Much like the millions of consumers who have chosen to “cut the cord”, a growing number of libraries are electing to critically appraise these big deals by assessing their collections, the value for money they are receiving from these packages, and how they might more strategically spend their finite collections resources.

That’s followed by a list (“by no means comprehensive”) of recent negotiations and cancellations, showing the institution or consortium, date (year only), region, publisher(s), strategic considerations, outcome, and estimated annual savings. At this writing, the first (most recent?) item is the 2019 Electronic Information Service National Programme (EIS) decision not to renew EISZ Consortium subscriptions to some Elsevier services and goes back to the 2008 decision by Lafayette College to drop Elsevier’s ScienceDirect and pay per view instead. There’s also a short list of cases where Big Deals have been canceled but later replaced by new packages, and a large handful of links to articles, blog posts and other resources.

An impressive and useful resource. Note that another tab on this site opens the Big Deal Tracker, described as follows:

This database puts libraries on a more level playing field with vendors by detailing what thousands of peer institutions have paid for journal subscription packages. Institutions can leverage this pricing data, as well as the other resources on this site, to make clearer assessments about the suitability of these Big Deals and to strengthen their negotiating power.

The database is extensive, with 6,594 rows as this is written. It has a range of filters and sliders to limit the set of viewed deals.

## 'Big Deal' Cancellations Gain Momentum

This article by Lindsey McKenzie appeared [May 8, 2018](#) in *Inside Higher Ed*, but I'm only covering part of it, as it's heavy on pontifications from "chefs" at a source I've given up on.

I will quote one particular section, however:

In 2015, the Université de Montréal combined [usage and citations data](#) with the results of an extensive survey of faculty and students to determine that 5,893 titles were essential to research needs at the university -- accounting for 12 percent of the institution's total subscriptions, and around a third of all titles included in big deals.

A similar analysis has since been performed by 28 university libraries in Canada, with some "truly considering unbundling or exiting consortium negotiations to get better deals," said Stéphanie Gagnon, director of collections at Université de Montréal.

Gagnon and her colleague Richard Dumont, university librarian at Montréal, said that unbundling big deals was a "last resort" strategy for the institution. The institution will first offer what it considers to be a "fair price" based on the needs of the community and the publishers' pricing, said Dumont.

This approach "seems reasonable," said Dumont, since four major publishers have accepted the institution's offers -- Wiley, SAGE, Elsevier and Cambridge University Press. Currently, the institution has two big deals unbundled: [Springer Nature](#) (2,116 titles canceled) and [Taylor & Francis](#) (2,231 titles canceled).

The Taylor & Francis big deal cost Montréal around half a million U.S. dollars per year for over 2,400 titles. Per title, the average cost was around \$200. But Montréal calculated that only 253 titles were being used regularly, meaning the "real" cost was closer to \$2,000 per title, said Gagnon. By unbundling this deal and the Springer Nature deal, and by renegotiating all big-deal subscriptions, the institution saves over \$770,000 annually, said Gagnon.

Gagnon said she did not think teaching or research has been hindered by the cancellations, since the big deals that were unbundled did not contribute greatly to the needs of the community. Researchers can still access paywalled content they don't have immediate access to through the interlibrary loan system. "Content is still available, with some hours' delay," said Gagnon.

The penultimate paragraph is perhaps the most pertinent, especially the second and third sentences.

You might also read the comments, especially Bob Holley's comment ("rholley13").

## *U of S cutting subscriptions to almost 4,000 academic journals*

This news item, by Alex MacPherson on [August 8, 2019](#) in the *Regina Leader-Post* (or the *Saskatoon StarPhoenix?*), discusses a University of Saskatchewan decision to cancel two Big Deals totaling more than 3,800 and costing \$1.4 million. It's not a bad piece, with this second paragraph saying a lot:

The cost-cutting measure is expected to cleave \$1.4 million from the University Library's \$14-million collections budget, almost three-quarters of which is currently allocated to journal subscriptions.

A disgruntled associate professor comments negatively, as does a PhD student. (Note that the canceled bundles represent fewer than one-tenth of the university's journals.)

## *University Library's non-renewal of 'big deals'*

Here's the [July 12, 2019](#) press release that presumably forms the basis of the later story just discussed. The two Big Deals are Taylor & Francis and Wiley-Blackwell.

A key portion, following links to full lists of the journals involved:

### **Green Titles**

104 journal titles have been confirmed for re-subscription based on high usage/low cost (<\$5 per article download)

### **Red Titles**

1,865 journal titles have been confirmed to expire based on low usage/high cost (>\$75 per article download)

### **Yellow Titles**

1,886 journal titles fall between the green and red titles (>\$5 and <\$75 per article download)

There's more to the statement, which seems clear and open.

And here's the [September 30, 2019 followup](#), showing the journals to be renewed and the criteria involved.

## **Arguments and Developments**

Other items relating to Big Deals but not directly to the University of California situation.

## *The Impact of Big Deals on the Research Ecosystem*

This essay by Kevin Smith appeared [June 16, 2018](#) at *In the Open*. It's excellent, so much so that I'm inclined to quote most of it (yes, it's CC BY).

The simple fact is that publisher bundling "deals" are larded with what, from the point of view of usage, is simply junk – obscure titles of little value that can only be sold by tying them to more desirable resources. If I want "Cell Biology" for my researchers, I also must buy "Dancing

Times,” even if no one on my campus uses the latter.\* At my institution, to give just one example, over 30% of the titles in our journal package from Wiley are “zero-use,” but it is still less expensive to buy the package than to subscribe, at list price, only to the titles that would get substantial use. This tying of titles, and enforcing the bulk purchase by charging grossly-inflated “list prices” for title-by-title purchases, is highly coercive, as Frazier points out, but it also creates some perverse incentives for the publishers themselves, which led me to think about the potential consequences of big deals for things like peer review.

Publishers make more money using these big deals, of course. They justify the price tag of a package by highlighting how many titles we are getting. They claim that the annual price increases, which far outstrip any growth in our collection budgets, are justified because of the growth in the number of papers published. These sales techniques give the publishers a strong motive to encourage the proliferation of titles in order to increase the perceived value of their products and continue to raise prices for each package. In short, there is an incentive to publish more journals, even if they do not meet basic academic standards of quality or appeal only to a tiny niche of research that is unneeded on many campuses.

It is ironic that we hear a lot about the incentive to publish without attention to quality in the open access world, where the [unfortunate phrase “predatory publishing”](#) has become almost a cliché, but we often fail to notice the commercial incentives that encourage similar practices in the subscription market, thanks to these “big deals. More is better, regardless of quality, and it justifies ever increasing prices.

...

Prestigious publishers keep their impact factors high by rejecting lots of articles. In the era of the digital big deal, those articles still get published, however, they just slide down to lower-ranked journals, and the standard of review decreases. Big deals do not just harm the sustainability of the library subscription market, although they certainly do that; they also undermine the very activity they were born to support. The scholarly publishing industry, which after initially trying to ignore the digital environment has now turned to ruthless exploitation of it, has become actively detrimental to the scholarly enterprise itself.

I omitted the first paragraph and the penultimate one, which discusses the probable negative effect of Big Deals on peer review quality.

Nothing to add, and as usual Smith writes better than I would.

*Is It Such a Big Deal? On the Cost of Journal Use in the Digital Era*

This peer-reviewed article by Fei Shu and five others appears in [Volume 79, No. 6 \(2018\)](#) of *College & Research Libraries*, a no-fee gold OA journal. I'll just quote the abstract and the conclusions.

Commercial scholarly publishers promote and sell bundles of journals—known as big deals—that provide access to entire collections rather than individual journals. Following this new model, size of serial collections in academic libraries increased almost fivefold from 1986 to 2011. Using data on library subscriptions and references made for a sample of North American universities, this study provides evidence that, while big deal bundles do decrease the mean price per subscribed journal, academic libraries receive less value for their investment. We find that university researchers cite only a fraction of journals purchased by their libraries, that this fraction is decreasing, and that the cost per cited journal has increased. These findings reveal how academic publishers use product differentiation and price strategies to increase sales and profits in the digital era, often at the expense of university and scientific stakeholders.

### Conclusion

This study shows that the current serials crisis can be attributed to the combination of multiple factors related to the supplier (publishers), the consumer (academic libraries), and the product (journals). With the development of digital technology, electronic journal and online access replaced the print copy and became the dominant format of publishing and accessing academic journals, thus eliminating costs of printing, handling, and shipping. These changes sharply reduced marginal production costs relative to increased sales for producers. Seizing this opportunity, large commercial publishers increased their journal portfolio through mergers, acquisitions, and creating new journals. This allowed them to increase the sales volume of secondary journals through the big deal, making academic publishing one of the most profitable industries in the world. Large publishers have effectively exploited the power of oligopolies. The big deal is often appealing to universities because bundles allow libraries to increase the size of their collection while decreasing the average price per journal. However, as the current study demonstrates, the number of journals cited by the scholars who use these collections did not increase in a similar manner and in actuality, leading the average cost of *cited* journals to increase. In the end, the big deals are leading many academic libraries into financial difficulties and creating frictions with other library services and stakeholders in universities as library budgets continually expand to keep pace.

As scientific publishing has become one of the most profitable industries in the world, it is perhaps time for libraries, researchers, instructors, students, and university administrators to take a step back and question the current model in which access comes to a price set by corporations and completely disconnected from production costs. Indeed, this study shows that, in the current system, larger serials collections mostly lead to larger expenditures for libraries and bigger profits for publishers, but not to more use. Yes, bigger is better... mostly for publishers.

Worth reading in full.

## *Germany Strikes Deal With Springer Nature*

This report by David Matthews appeared [August 29, 2019](#) in *Inside Higher Ed*. I'm generally not dealing with so-called "transformative" Big Deals, since they're sufficiently complicated and dubious in terms of long-range gains to throw me for a loss. But I will make a small exception, at least for some pithy portions of this piece. For example, the first two paragraphs:

Research-intensive German universities could see their publication costs rise by up to 50 percent under a new deal with Springer Nature, while smaller, more teaching-focused institutions and public science libraries will see their outlay slashed.

After three years of negotiations, on Aug. 22 the publisher and a consortium of German institutions announced a new agreement that will largely shift the costs of publishing from those who read research papers to those who produce them.

And this:

Under the agreement, German universities will pay 2,750 euros (\$3,050) per article to publish in hybrid journals, which include a mixture of open access and closed, subscription-only articles. For fully open-access journals, the price depends on the title.

This figure of €2,750 was calculated to make sure that the overall agreement was "budget neutral," said Meijer, so that German universities would end up paying roughly the same amount to Springer Nature as they did before -- although they would get far more for their money, he argued.

"The most realistic, pragmatic way to be able to make a transformation from a subscription system to an open-access system is saying: let's do it budget neutral," he said.

Oh, and to be sure, this: *Nature* and Nature-branded journals aren't part of the deal.

Is this progress toward a sustainable open-access future? Or is it, as the first of two comments says, a "long con" to assure continued high profits and make it even more difficult to negotiate with publishers?

## Fiat Lux

And now to the rest—or whatever's left of 40 items initially tagged, many of which almost certainly restate portions of a still-evolving situation. I was going to call this section "UC and Elsevier," and all but one of the items concern that situation and date from December 2018 through September 2019, but there is one earlier item. **Full disclosure:** I'm a graduate of the original UC campus, UC Berkeley (as one vendor of campus-branded stuff learned when I was a student there in the 1960s, there is no such thing as "University of California at Berkeley"), and regard UC as the nation's, and probably the world's, greatest university system. I'm biased.

I've tried to eliminate items that seem to be mostly redundant.

*UC Libraries Discontinue Taylor & Francis Systemwide Journals License*  
You might think of this [July 3, 2013](#) post by CDL (California Digital Library) on the CDL website as an early warning: UC was paying attention to Big Deals in various ways.

Following a rigorous value assessment, the Libraries on the ten UC campuses and the California Digital Library (CDL) have discontinued their systemwide Taylor & Francis journals license in favor of local campus subscriptions effective January 1, 2013. Three important systemwide principles were the basis for the decision: achieving sustainable pricing, better aligning cost to value, and maintaining the highest quality journal content possible across a broad range of disciplines. Clear UC-focused value metrics by subject category combined with a structured, holistic review process encompassing all systemwide journal packages were used to inform this decision, which will save the Libraries nearly 45% over previously projected costs.

After notes on the holistic review process of the UC Libraries, there's this:

- The Taylor & Francis journal package was ranked as providing the least value of our major journal packages. Seventy-one percent of the Taylor & Francis journals were determined to provide lower value to UC's faculty and researchers compared to titles in the same discipline from other publishers as measured by article usage, UC citation rates, and independent quality indicators such as journal impact factor, as well as cost.
- Based on this analysis, a change in the valuation of the Taylor & Francis package was warranted. The UC Libraries sought to re-negotiate the overall cost of this package to better align its cost with the value obtained. After extensive negotiations, Taylor & Francis was unwilling to compromise on a reasonable reduction to the UC Libraries journals license. As a consequence, the Libraries regretfully decided to discontinue a shared systemwide license to Taylor & Francis journals.
- Beginning with 2013, Taylor & Francis journals will now be selectively licensed at each UC campus based on local campus collection goals and priorities. Two thirds of our previous Taylor & Francis holdings will continue to be available at UC in some form. Converting our Taylor & Francis license to local campus subscriptions and eliminating many lower-value titles will save the Libraries nearly 45% over our previously projected costs, with significantly higher savings at some campuses.

The rest of the post discusses continuing access to T&F journals and future assessment. The T&F cancellation wasn't about OA—but it was still a bellwether. There was a new, less expensive, deal in 2016.

## *Heavyweight Showdown Over Research Access*

We'll start the main discussion with this Lindsay McKenzie piece [on December 13, 2018](#) at *Inside Higher Ed*. The tease:

University of California System is playing hardball with Elsevier in negotiations that could transform the way it pays to read and publish research. But does the UC system have the clout to pull it off?

It's a good (and long) report, noting faculty involvement in and general support for UC's stance, the sheer size of UC, and aspects of what's being proposed. A few excerpts (but you should read the article):

Currently, final versions of research papers are often made available to the public some time after they have been published.... The UC system wants journals to make this research immediately available to all.

To facilitate this, the UC system is pursuing a new kind of arrangement with Elsevier and several other publishers... Rather than paying separately to access subscription journals and make articles immediately available in OA, the UC system wants to roll both costs into one annual fee, which could potentially be higher than what the UC system currently pays for subscriptions only.

This arrangement, called a "read-and-publish" deal, would mean that the public would have immediate, free access to final versions of UC research papers, with no additional article-processing fees to the UC system.

...

Gemma Hersh, vice president for global policy for Elsevier, said in an interview Wednesday that the company is one of the leading open-access publishers and continues to be receptive to working with universities to explore different open-access options.

"There's a lot of experimentation in the market, and we've been engaged in pilots for a number of years," said Hersh. "We're always open to testing and trialing something new, and we have a very broad menu of options."

However, the publisher does not want to shift from individual article-processing fees to a fixed annual rate for the immediate open-access publication of an unknown number of articles. "Our principle is that we would like to be paid for the articles that we publish," said Hersh.

Hersh said the popularity of open-access publishing is growing, but she noted that the subscription model is also growing and remains popular.

A letter from Philippe Terheggen, managing director of scientific, technical and medical journals at the company, to Elsevier journal editors who work within the UC system, sheds some light on the publisher's concerns about the UC system's proposal.

"We understand what [the California Digital Library] wants to accomplish and are working hard to construct an agreement that enables CDL

to retain access to the highest quality subscribed content at a fair price and promotes OA in a realistic context,” wrote Terheggen.

He continued, “CDL wants to pay towards its authors publishing OA for the world to read freely but only pay a nominal amount to access the world’s subscribed content. This model could work if this were an all-OA world. But the reality is that the world’s subscribed content comprises 85 percent of scholarly output and continues to grow. Therefore, while [CDL] wants to fund OA, which we fully support, it still needs to pay to access subscribed content.”

The comments are a mixed lot, with one pseudonymous source claiming that it costs \$2,000 per article to publish a nonprofit OA journal—a figure that’s *much* higher than any other actual-cost calculations I’ve seen and seems to rely on paid staff to do everything, essentially writing off many if not most university-published efforts.

Perhaps before continuing, for the benefit of those not familiar with California’s higher education system (and since one person quoted in this article likened UC to a small country), it’s worth noting California’s tripartite public higher education system. UC is the top of the heap, with about 250,000 students on ten campuses; originally, it was the only PhD-granting institution. California State University has about twice as many campuses (23) and students (484,000). Finally, the California Community Colleges system includes 114 campuses and 2.4 million students, and *primarily* offers two-year degrees and courses leading to transfers to the other two systems. UC is the primary research system; eight UC campuses are R1 institutions, and one is R2.

### *California Dreamin’*

The first of several items I tagged on [March 1, 2019](#) is *not* an official statement and not even from the University of California: it’s by Lindsay Cronk (University of Rochester River Campus Libraries) on her blog. As an outside party, she does a good job of summarizing the situation. Unfortunately, I can’t find a Creative Commons license, or I’d be tempted to quote the whole thing. A few portions:

Yesterday, the University of California publicly walked away from negotiations with Elsevier to take control of their research and the narrative. You can read the release from the [Office of the President](#) and the statement from the [Faculty Senate](#) online. While there are many takeaways from this move- and I’ll be watching the scholarly resources marketplace reaction- what strikes me most is the clear and significant coordination of this effort, which is inspiring.

Let’s be honest- I love a splashy and strategic play- and we don’t get tons of those in libraries. We should see more. It’s a significant victory for the Open Movement, no matter the long-term outcome...

**Coordinate Communication.**

This maybe isn't a sexy point- but it should be. Da-a-a-amn, am I impressed with how clearly prepared the whole UC System was to put this out. The President's message dropped right after the Faculty Senate and [Libraries memo](#) dropped. What a signal of support and groundswell commitment. The link that ends the President's statement takes you right to the Office of Scholarly Communications website. Most of the big system libraries also had their statements ready to go, and everyone's messaging aligned around the future of OA but also around their support of the decision to stop negotiations.

It's not a small compliment to make that this whole team of professionals had their act totally together. It's like watching a good heist movie, really.

And all of the statements from stakeholders spoke in direct support of library leadership of the negotiations and access to research. That's the future of collections right there- not an invisible process that facilitates access without contextualizing the costs. It's all about how we demonstrate the value of our work by making it visible, which requires this kind of integrated communication and outreach to be successful.

#### **Believe the Pitch.**

And I mean the pitch around open knowledge but also the pitch that we're qualified and ready to make the call as to when to walk away. Many libraries are forever on hold with open work, or negotiating harder, waiting for the right time or the right faculty partners to show up. As scholarly communications agents, librarians in every area of library service should be pitching ourselves and our work to spark the conversations necessary to get this level of buy-in.

There's a little more, and it's nicely done.

#### *Why UC split with publishing giant Elsevier*

This piece by Gretchen Kell appeared [on February 28, 2019](#) at *Berkeley News*, an official UC Berkeley site. It's also not an Official Pronouncement; rather, it's a Q&A with Jeffrey MacKie-Mason, University Librarian at Berkeley and co-chair of the negotiating team. Excerpts:

##### **Why did UC decide to end negotiations today?**

Elsevier made a new, quite complex, but novel proposal to us at the end of January. On Monday, our negotiating team gave them a written response outlining our appreciation for Elsevier's effort, but saying that conditions had to be met for us to sign a contract, and that we thought we were pretty far apart. We knew if they couldn't accommodate us, there was not much point in continuing to negotiate at this time.

Elsevier wanted to keep meeting with us, and we have a meeting scheduled for tomorrow (Friday), but yesterday they approached our faculty directly — faculty who are editors of Elsevier journals, who they have

working relationships with — and also the media, and presented a rosy view of the offer they'd made to us. Their characterization of the offer left things out, and they didn't mention what we'd proposed as conditions. They went public with it. So, we announced the end.

We knew all along it was going to be difficult for Elsevier to change its ways to our satisfaction. We had hoped they'd see the light, that the publishing industry is changing, and that they could help lead the way.

I think that second paragraph is key: Elsevier made an end-run around the negotiating team, presumably hoping to cause faculty pressure to accept the deal.

### **What did each side want the most, and why?**

From the very beginning, we had two goals: a reduction in costs — we pay about \$11 million a year to Elsevier in subscription fees, which is 25 percent of UC system-wide journal costs — and default open access publication for UC authors: that is, that Elsevier would publish an author's work open access unless the author didn't want to. This is consistent with the UC faculty senate's goal of all work being published open access.

We also wanted a contract that integrated a paid subscription with open access publishing fees. It would have been a transformative agreement, one that would shift payments for reading journal articles into payments for publishing them, and publishing them open access.

Elsevier eventually offered to do something like what we wanted, for open access, but they wanted to charge us a lot more. Our current calculations are that they would have increased the amount of our payments by 80 percent — an additional \$30 million over a three-year contract.

Open access would eventually mean fewer subscriptions for Elsevier. But we don't think they would lose, in the long run, by charging for publishing rather than by charging for reading. The transition the industry is making to open access is a feasible path forward, so that more universities don't cancel their licenses for the same reasons we did.

If the whole world switches to open access, which we think it will at some point since the scholarly community wants this, it would be a world without subscriptions. But it would be a world where people would still want and need to publish their work in peer-reviewed journals, and there's always a cost for that.

And, of course, here is where I believe there are problems: namely, assuring that Elsevier maintains revenue and profits is *not* transformative by my lights and almost certainly not sustainable. Also note the price: Elsevier wanted 80% *more* revenue from UC over three years!

I'll stop quoting. The remainder notes that UC is trying to transform the publishing industry (but, in my opinion, too cautiously); that this is

the first Big Deal cancellation where OA is the critical issue; and that previous agreements means that UC scholars retain perpetual access to 95% of Elsevier articles published prior to 2019.

OK, I will quote one more paragraph by MacKie-Mason:

The decision today does not affect publishing. This is all about reading. Authors can still submit their work to Elsevier; Elsevier isn't going to deny a submission, because it wants our articles. But despite the good journals it publishes, Elsevier is not a good actor in the scholarly communications field.

### *California Tells Elsevier to Take a Hike*

This commentary by Derek Lowe appeared [March 1, 2019](#) on *In the Pipeline*, Lowe's blog at *Science Translational Medicine*. It's only four paragraphs long, but there were 60 comments. The final paragraph notes that UC generates 10% of US scholarship. I'll quote the third paragraph, which begins with a flat-out lie:

Open-access, of course, can only work if the authors pay costs up front, rather than having the subscribers pay to read the papers when they're published. (And its that author-pays model that's left the door open to a lot of shady operators at the low end of the business). The UC folks have apparently been trying to negotiate a deal on what those OA fees would be as part of a subscription agreement, and have been unable to come to terms. So they've walked away. *Science* says that negotiations were underway for eight months, which should have given everyone plenty of time to get their proposals on the table and play all the chicken anyone could want.

I could be charitable and call that first sentence ignorant, but with the “of course” and the gratuitous slap at OA in general, I'm inclined to believe that Lowe should know better.

As to those comments... Some are good, some are crappy, almost nobody recognizes no-fee OA as even *existing*, and there's this from “Emjeff”:

Leave it to the People's Republic of California to 1) demand open access for all their papers and 2) balk at actually paying for it. This really is a case of academia, once again, not understanding basic economics.

We'll see who blinks first...

Can't quote that gem without adding the response from “a”:

Leave it to an inane commenter not to read the article and project their own prejudice on how the negotiations took place.

### *University of California system libraries break off negotiations with Elsevier, will no longer order their journals*

This brief item by Cory Doctorow appeared [March 1, 2019](#) at *boingboing*—and, much as I like Doctorow, he gets it a bit wrong. Key paragraphs:

The University of California system is one of Elsevier's biggest customers, and after eight months of unsuccessful negotiations over its subscription deals with the publisher, it has walked away and announced an indefinite boycott of the publisher, making it the largest Elsevier customer to do so.

The sticking point was the university's insistence on a single price that covered both subscription fees for closed-access journals, and the fees that university personnel are expected to pay when they submit their work for publication in open access journals -- while Elsevier insisted on its right to "double-dip" from the system: charging it for submissions of papers and then again for access to its journals.

The boycott will cost Elsevier \$11m/year and about 10,000 papers that UC researchers will publish elsewhere.

Well...while UC may be encouraging an Elsevier boycott, it hasn't mandated that; it's *highly* likely that UC will order *some* Elsevier journals if no deal is consummated; the description of "double dipping" is questionable at best; and, as far as I can tell, the "10,000 papers" figure comes out of thin air. (I'd expect the number to be significantly higher.)

### *UC Drops Elsevier*

I'll note this news article by Lindsay McKenzie [on March 1, 2019](#) at *Inside Higher Ed*, but not in great detail. It covers the ground well enough, with some useful details and quotes. It does appear that McKenzie has Rick Anderson on speed dial, since once again he's quoted over multiple paragraphs—but we do learn that he's "an unpaid member of Elsevier's North American Library Advisory Board."

Comments are from some of the usual suspects, including "graddirector"'s claims that it *costs* \$2,000 per article to publish OA (and this statement: "open access fees range from 2000-8000 per published paper"—I am not aware of *any* OA journal charging more than \$5,300, but perhaps there's a "hybrid" journal with such an outrageous fee).

### *Comments for Times Higher Education: University of California break with Elsevier tipped to boost 'global revolt'*

This odd item by Jon Tennant appeared [March 1, 2019](#) at *Green Tee and Velociraptors*. Tennant was quoted in a *Times Higher Education* article (I don't link to paywalled resources) and printed the full interview from which the quote was taken.

I'm quoting one interesting paragraph:

I strongly doubt that anyone at Elsevier, including their new CEO, is against OA on a personal or principled level. It is virtually impossible to make an argument against the ethical or practical value of OA. The problem that Elsevier, and its staff, have is that they are constrained by

the business they operate in. They simply can't support policies and practices that will disrupt their revenue or growth. So things like Plan S and OA in general, which can be seen to disrupt their 'business as usual' have to be fought against. This is why Elsevier remain one of the smallest OA publishers (6-10% tops annually is OA) and the largest barrier-based publisher. It's just business. I think that internally many of their staff actually struggle with this tension, and want to do things better, but they simply cannot.

I think much of that is right and pertinent, although saying "Elsevier remains one of the smallest OA publishers" is nonsense: Elsevier is the third largest gold OA publisher by article count, after Holtzbrinck (Springer-Nature and Frontiers) and MDPI and well ahead of Hindawi.

*The costs of academic publishing are absurd. The University of California is fighting back.*

Mostly a brief note on this Brian Resnick piece, [posted March 1, 2019](#) at Vox. It's a little garbled at points, but that's not atypical of articles in this area. For example, the first paragraph:

The University of California, the largest public academic system in the US, is [ending its subscription](#) to Elsevier, the world's biggest and most influential publisher of academic research.

If you've read this section up to now, you know that UC isn't *California's* largest public academic system, although it might be the largest set of research universities in one system. Both California State University and SUNY (State University of New York) are larger in terms of campuses and students (as is the California Community Colleges system, which probably is the largest public academic system. (The Wikipedia article on SUNY claims it's "the largest comprehensive system of [universities](#), [colleges](#), and [community colleges](#) in the United States"—and that's probably true, because California's is not a single system. Aren't definitions wonderful?)

And this:

Academics often have to pay publishers like Elsevier (which [owns](#) 2,500 journals) to print their work, and then have to pay extra to make it open access, meaning anyone in the world can read the papers for free. These fees can [top thousands of dollars](#) per journal article.

At the same time, academic institutions have to pay journal subscription costs. This setup — where academic institutions pay for both publishing and subscription — has helped make academic publishing [an absurdly profitable business](#).

That just seems garbled. Except for page/color print charges (and I believe Elsevier, at least, has eliminated most of those), it's just wrong at least for any given article.

## *Enough is Enough: UC Leadership and the Transformation of Scholarly Publishing*

This commentary by Jeff Kosokoff and Curtis Brundy (Duke and Iowa State respectively) appeared [March 1, 2019](#) at *Scholarly Communications @ Duke*. It's very good, and worth reading on its own, I'll quote the first two of four paragraphs:

With the [University of California's \(UC\) announcement that they have broken off talks with mega-profitable commercial publisher Elsevier](#), we have moved closer to a tipping point in the ongoing struggle to correct asymmetries in the scholarly information ecosystem. Elsevier, along with the rest of the Big Five (Wiley, SpringerNature, Taylor & Francis, and Sage), has been put on notice: things as they are cannot stand. UC's leadership in advancing open access is longstanding, and we applaud their continued efforts to seek new models that would transform scholarly publishing.

This is a great day to be a librarian, and a great day for scholars and scholarship. A day when the needle visibly moved in the right direction. Like the UC, we must openly and strongly engage publishers if we want to find mutually agreeable and sustainable long-term solutions to the current crisis. While profit-driven publishers whose business models depend on artificial scarcity to control scholarly content may object, the privatization of the common goods represented by research outputs no longer serves the best interest of academia or society at-large. To be clear, we are not rooting for large commercial publishers to go out of business. The Big Five provide substantial value through their publishing services and journals. However, journal subscription pricing has increased beyond what even the most well-resourced institutions can afford. As a result, an increasing number of preeminent institutions in North America have been quietly cutting their subscription inventories. See [SPARC's Tracking page](#) for an incomplete but helpful list of institutions and packages they have cut. We are not aware of any academic institution that does not have renegotiation of big deals in its plans.

### **Fiat Lux, March 2<sup>nd</sup>-31<sup>st</sup>**

Just to keep this from being too long...

#### *Kudos to UC for Breaking up with Elsevier*

We move past March 1 with this Marcus Banks piece from [March 2, 2019](#) at *Medium*. Banks used to work at the UCSF library, and suggested that the library cut off journal access for just one day as a learning experience.

Nobody liked my idea. It was far too radical. Even if it had made its way out of the committee where I had proposed it would surely have died when it reached the library director. I didn't actually think the proposal would

fly— librarians live to provide content to patrons, and here I was asking us not to do that. But it was borne out of frustration that we played an essential role in providing scholarly materials online, and yet had absolutely no power to dictate the terms of the exchange. Researchers wanted things, publishers provided them, and librarians wrote the checks.

That's the start of a brief and interesting opinion piece. Worth reading.

### *The Real Cost of Knowledge*

It's worth noting this article by Sarah Zhang, which appeared March 4, 2019 at *The Atlantic*—but although it covers the ground, there are problems. The tease:

The University of California has broken with one of the world's largest academic publishers. Is this the end of a very profitable business model?

The problems? For example:

Elsevier still made [\\$1.17 billion in publishing in 2017](#), which is precisely the problem, according to its critics.

Maybe it's just me, but I read that as Elsevier having \$1.17 billion in publishing revenue. In fact, that's *profit* from the journal publishing division.

*Open access* means a journal article is free to read, but researchers pay the journal a fee to cover the cost of publishing.

Need I say...wrong, wrong, wrong.

The piece also seems to suggest that European countries and UC that have canceled Big Deals are not subscribing to Elsevier journals at all: I suspect that's not the case.

### *Following UC's break with Elsevier, messages of support from around the world pour in*

This item, which appeared [March 4, 2019](#) on *Berkeley Library News*, isn't exactly an article—it's a collection of signed messages, some from within UC and some not. A few examples:

"With much admiration to UC for taking this brave stance. I hope and trust that other major and perhaps better-heeled research libraries — looking at you, Harvard and Yale — will follow in your footsteps. I cannot tell you how much this news lifted my spirits today. Bravo, and thank you!"— *David C. Murray, the humanities librarian at the College of New Jersey*

"I hope that you will be able to convey my gratitude to President Napolitano and the UC faculty leadership and negotiating teams related to the Elsevier contract and open access publishing.

The important, and I would say courageous, actions taken by the UC will have a ripple effect across the planet and improve research and

communication of research findings for the rest of time.”— *Joseph E. Kerschner, dean of the School of Medicine at Medical College of Wisconsin*

“The united front, from the president’s office to line faculty and librarians, is what makes this outcome so impressive. One can only imagine the blood, sweat, and tears all of you have devoted to these negotiations over the past months. ... When UC joint governance works this well, it is truly something to be celebrated! I’m proud to be part of this community.”— *Christine Borgman, a professor of information studies at UCLA*

“I was dancing around my office yesterday I was so excited about the news and wanted to reach out. Please pass on the word that everyone I know at Gates is very happy and supportive of this move to ensure open access to publicly funded research.”— *Ashley Farley, the open access associate officer at the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation*

And, last but not least:

“Fiat lux.”— *Charles Bazerman, a professor of education at UC Santa Barbara*

### *Big Win For Open Access, As University Of California Cancels All Elsevier Subscriptions, Worth \$11 Million A Year*

The article itself, by Glyn Moody on [March 4, 2019](#) at *techdirt*, is a fairly good summary, but I might have skipped it but for the comments...which are, well, the kind of comments you might expect at *techdirt*.

To wit, the first 15 of 29 comments are about “\$11 million dollars,” how that *should* be said (it’s now corrected in the headline and story), whether “hot water heater” is redundant and the meaning of \$ in, what, UNIX?

### *University of California’s break with the biggest academic publisher could shake up scholarly publishing for good*

This fairly lengthy piece by MacKenzie Smith (University Librarian at UC Davis, and not part of the negotiating team) appeared [March 7, 2019](#) at *The Conversation*. It’s quite good, and well worth reading, even though Smith makes the common error of...well, here’s the paragraph:

Fortunately, the academy has another option for a publishing business model that can better achieve the promise of the internet: open access. In that model, authors, or their funders or institutions, pay the publisher a fee to cover the cost of publishing each article. In exchange, the articles are made freely available for everyone to read online, anywhere, anytime. Article quality is preserved by the same unpaid peer-review system. Libraries at research institutions could shift their payments from licenses and subscriptions to publication fees for their affiliated authors. The cost is theoretically the same, but everyone can read everything for free.

Sigh. Even with that issue, it’s a worthwhile piece that I don’t believe works as well in bits and pieces, so I’ll just say “well worth reading.”

## *Open statement: Why UC cut ties with Elsevier*

This statement, appearing on the Berkeley Library site on March 25, 2019 (but revised April 25) and signed by the members of UC's negotiating team, is a clear statement that deserves to appear in full.

The University of California has [taken a firm stand](#) on both open access to publicly funded research and fiscal responsibility by deciding not to renew its journal subscriptions with Elsevier, the world's largest scientific publisher. Here's why:

### Elsevier's proposal

Under Elsevier's proposed terms, **the publisher would capture significant new revenue on top of the university's current multimillion-dollar subscription while significantly diminishing UC's rights to Elsevier content.** Elsevier's latest proposal, dated January 31, 2019, did consider some of UC's conditions, including providing UC authors with open access publishing options across much of the publisher's portfolio of journals. However, there were several conditions that UC was unwilling to accept:

- **Higher costs:** Elsevier's proposal would impose much higher costs on the university as a whole. UC has consistently requested a contract that would result in open access for 100 percent of UC-authored research articles. As presented, Elsevier's proposal assumed a much smaller number of open access articles, yet would still increase UC's costs. When we calculated what it would cost to achieve 100 percent open access under the terms that Elsevier proposed, UC's total payments would increase by about 80 percent, or an additional \$30 million over three years. UC's goal is [cost-neutrality in the transition to open access](#).
- **Reduced rights:** The proposal would have required UC to forgo perpetual access to a significant number of Elsevier journals. UC expects that perpetual access to journal content will be part of an integrated open access agreement.
- **Limitations on UC's financial support for authors:** The proposal did not enable UC to provide full financial support to authors who lack access to grant funds. UC is committed to supporting all UC authors who wish to publish open access.
- **Excluded journals:** Elsevier's terms would have precluded open access publishing in some high-profile Elsevier journals, such as those from Cell Press and The Lancet, and some society journals. UC is committed to making all the work of all of its authors freely available.

### The UC proposal

UC had two goals for our Elsevier agreement at the start of negotiations:

- An integrated agreement that covered access to Elsevier journals as well as default open access publishing for all UC corresponding-authored articles in Elsevier journals.

- An overall cost reduction commensurate with the value that we believe Elsevier journals offer.

As negotiations proceeded, the terms that UC proposed to Elsevier provided for full open access publishing for UC-authored articles, with no increase in the total UC payments to Elsevier. This proposal was similar to several agreements in Europe, but the payment structure was different to reflect the decentralized nature of research funding in the U.S. Under UC's proposal, payments to Elsevier would be shared by central university and individual researcher funds. The model has been endorsed as a pilot by the faculty senate's University Committee on Library and Scholarly Communication (UCOLASC), the UC Libraries, and UC's Systemwide Library and Scholarly Information Advisory Committee (SLASIAC), and we believe it can be replicated at other U.S. institutions.

In our November 18, 2018 proposal to Elsevier:

- Open access would be the default publication option for all UC corresponding authors who publish in Elsevier journals. (Authors would have the choice to opt out.)
- The total payment to Elsevier would be 10 percent less than the current total UC payment.
- The total payment would consist of a reading fee and APC payments for each UC corresponding-authored article published. The reading fee would be about 10 percent of the total payment.
- Depending on the number of UC articles published in a given year, the total payment could vary upward or downward by 2 percent, allowing for incremental adjustments in response to actual UC publishing behavior while offering stability and risk protection for both UC and Elsevier.
- The APCs charged by Elsevier would be reduced to accommodate the total payment ceiling.
- The Libraries would pay \$1,000 of the reduced APC (or less when the discounted journal APC is smaller) for each UC article. Authors would then either pay the balance using their research funds, or, if they did not have sufficient available research funds, the Libraries would pay the APC in full.

Our proposal preceded Elsevier's January 31, 2019 proposal. In response to their proposal, we informed Elsevier on February 25 that we would be willing to revise our proposal to be cost-neutral (combining both subscription and open access APC payments). Based on Elsevier's external communications on February 26, we believed that Elsevier was not going to meet our goal for cost-neutrality, so we ended negotiations.

UC's proposal grew out of the long history of support for open access that originated with the Academic Senate, including the [Systemwide Open Access Policy](#) and the [Principles to Transform Scholarly Communication](#).

And support for UC's position continues, including through a recent [statement delivered to the UC Regents](#), and a statement of support [from the Senate's Academic Council](#) (executive committee). UC's goal has been to transition the university's expenditures from subscriptions to open access publishing in a way that would make open access available, by default, to all UC authors in a cost-effective way.

### What's next

UC is prepared to return to the negotiating table at a future point if and when we perceive an opportunity for substantive progress. In the meantime, we look forward to further engagement with our UC community of authors and editors about the future shape of research dissemination at UC and elsewhere.

We welcome your additional comments and questions about this issue (including inquiries about [alternative access to Elsevier articles](#)). Please also feel free to contact your campus library with any questions you may have.

No additional comments.

### *The Beginning of the End for the 'Big Deal'?*

This article, by (guess who?) Lindsay McKenzie on [March 27, 2019](#) at *Inside Higher Ed*, discusses ramifications of UC's stance elsewhere. The tease:

Inspired by University of California's decision to drop its "big deal" with Elsevier, university librarians are laying the foundation to follow suit.

Excerpt:

The UC system's cancellation has given many librarians hope that they, too, can push for change. If one of the largest university systems in the country can do it, why can't they?

The [University of Virginia](#), the [University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill](#), the [University of Minnesota](#), [Duke University](#) and [Iowa State University](#) are among the institutions whose librarians have recently published statements in support of the UC system's decision.

The statements praise the UC system for fighting for a financially sustainable scholarly publishing model and gaining the support of faculty members in the process, but they also serve a strategic purpose -- priming academics for tougher negotiating tactics and the possibility of more big deal cancellations to come.

"A lot of people are feeling inspired by what the UC system did," said Elaine Westbrooks, vice provost of university libraries at UNC Chapel Hill. "They did what many of us thought was unthinkable."

There's lots more, and it's quite good. Well worth reading. The comments are also worth reading.

## Fiat Lux, July-September 2019

I'm sure there were lots of articles in April, May and June 2019, but I didn't tag them—and July was when Elsevier actually cut off access to new articles.

### *The war to free science*

This *long* piece by Brian Resnick and Julia Bellus was updated [July 10, 2019](#) at *Vox*, and it covers a huge amount of ground, more than I'd choose to comment on. It takes the UC action as a starting point and goes from there. I find it unfortunate that the authors seem to equate scholarly research with “science”—but that's secondary. One good excerpt:

Imagine your tax dollars have gone to build a new road in your neighborhood.

Now imagine that the company overseeing the road work charged its workers a fee rather than paying them a salary.

The overseers in charge of making sure the road was up to standard also weren't paid. And if you, the taxpayer, want to access the road today, you need to buy a seven-figure annual subscription or pay high fees for one-off trips.

We're not talking about roads — this is the state of scientific research, and how it's distributed today through academic publishing.

Indeed, the industry built to publish and disseminate scientific articles — companies such as Elsevier and Springer Nature — has managed to become incredibly profitable by getting a lot of taxpayer-funded, highly skilled labor for free and affixing a premium price tag to its goods.

Not a bad analogy. A good discussion.

### *UC Library's hasty implementation of a complex plan means academic researchers lose*

While CalMatters, where this appeared on [July 17, 2019](#), might be considered a neutral site (it's tricky), this “guest commentary” is anything but: it's by Daniel Marti, “head of global public policy at RELX, the parent to Elsevier.” It appears without any countering commentary or comments; it's essentially an Elsevier editorial.

As you might expect, Elsevier comes off as an oh-so-reasonable “partner” trying to help UC avoid a “complex and risky restructuring of the research model.” There's this claim:

Elsevier agreed to keep subscription costs flat, accounting for inflation, and to fully fund a five-fold increase in open access publishing. This offer would have enabled the UC Library to achieve cost containment goals and materially increase open access publishing at a scale not yet realized by the university.

Most importantly, our offer would have ensured that the research community would continue to be served in an uninterrupted manner. Instead, the library refused to compromise, and researchers are losing out.

There is, of course, more.

### *Fact check: What you may have heard about the dispute between UC and Elsevier*

Rather than quote other items replete with Elsevier statements—such as this undated set of [“UC Elsevier Questions Answered”](#) on Elsevier’s site—I think it makes sense to quote this statement from the UC Negotiating Team, posted [August 2, 2019](#) at UC’s Office of Scholarly Communication. It’s replete with footnotes and links—32 footnotes in all. I won’t quote the footnotes, but the statement does such a good job (OK, I’m biased) that I’ll quote the whole thing:

Whether you have received an email directly from Elsevier, or have been reading the news coverage since early July, you may have seen some of Elsevier’s claims regarding the journal contract dispute between the publisher and UC. Here’s a fact check from UC’s negotiating team.

#### Regarding the negotiations:

- Elsevier claims that it “proposed a series of arrangements that would...achieve the objectives of the Academic Senate.”<sup>1</sup>

Not so, according to the leadership of the Academic Senate itself. Elsevier’s final proposal only included open access publishing of 30 percent of UC’s research. The Academic Senate’s library committee [publicly called for open access publishing of all UC research](#) on April 25, 2018.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the entire [Senate leadership publicly stated](#), “[We] hereby [signal our] collective and resolute commitment to support UC’s negotiating position with Elsevier.”<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the Academic Senate Chair publicly stated at a [meeting of UC’s Board of Regents](#) on March 13, 2019, that “Elsevier remains far apart from us both in their commitment to open access, and in their financial offer.”<sup>4</sup> These positions were reaffirmed by the Academic Senate during the July 17, 2019, Regents meeting both in [Academic Senate Chair Robert May’s opening remarks](#) and his [contributions to discussions in the Academic and Student Affairs Committee](#).<sup>5 6</sup> “The Academic Senate has been very firm and strong and unwavering in support of the university’s position,” May said.

- Elsevier also asserts that it “proposed a series of arrangements that would contain costs.”<sup>7</sup>

Elsevier’s proposal would only have contained costs under the narrowest of interpretations, in which two-thirds of UC-authored articles would remain behind Elsevier’s paywall. To meet UC’s goal of making

all UC research freely accessible, the final proposal from Elsevier would have cost UC 80 percent more than its most recent agreement.<sup>8</sup>

- A point Elsevier has made repeatedly is that they offered UC “a five-fold increase in open access publishing.”<sup>9 10 11</sup>

Elsevier’s offer to increase open access publishing “five-fold” would have resulted in *only 30 percent of UC’s research*, all of which is supported by public funding, being freely available to the public. Under the past Elsevier contract, which required UC authors to pay an additional charge for open access (after the libraries already paid Elsevier for subscriptions), only 6 percent of UC authors made that second payment — making the majority of UC research published in Elsevier journals inaccessible to the public who helped fund it.

- The publisher states that it has “opened over 1,900 of its subscription journals to open access submissions.”<sup>12</sup>

Elsevier has not “opened” its subscription journals. Rather, it is asking authors, after the libraries have already paid Elsevier for subscriptions, to pay a second charge (generally thousands of dollars) if authors want their individual articles to be available open access. Under this model, Elsevier gets paid twice for publishing such articles.

- Elsevier incorrectly characterizes “the California Digital Library,” or simply “the library,” as the sole decision maker for UC in these negotiations.<sup>13</sup>

In fact, the negotiating team consisted of members of the UC (faculty) Academic Senate, the UC (campus) Libraries, and the California Digital Library (a unit within the UC Office of the President which, among many other activities, represents and serves as the fiduciary agent for the full University of California library system in contract negotiations with publishers). Indeed, three of the six negotiators were tenured faculty members. UC’s negotiating goals were extensively vetted with faculty and other key leadership groups across the university throughout the course of our negotiations; the decision not to accept Elsevier’s last offer was supported by the Academic Senate, the UC Libraries and the Office of the President.

Regarding cancellation of UC’s access:

- In the media and in emails sent directly to UC faculty and administrators, Elsevier has claimed UC “requested cancellation” of campus access to Elsevier journals.<sup>14 15</sup>

UC did not request that Elsevier cut off journal access. Rather, UC declined to continue negotiations when Elsevier was unwilling to accept the university’s proposal for a comprehensive agreement that met UC’s two key goals: cost neutrality and full open access for UC research. Alt-

though UC had no expectation that access would be extended indefinitely without a contract in place, Elsevier ultimately determined the timing for this change in access.

- Elsevier has described the current status as “cancellation of campus access to over 2,500 scientific journals” published by the company.<sup>16</sup>

While UC’s access to 2019 articles in Elsevier journals has been discontinued, this statement requires some context. UC did not lose access to all articles from the 2,500 scientific journals represented in Elsevier’s portfolio. Among the approximately 2,000 Elsevier journals that UC previously licensed from Elsevier, UC retains perpetual access rights to most Elsevier articles published before 2019 (95 percent measured by UC usage). Elsevier cancelled direct access only to new publications since January 1, 2019, and the small amount of historical content not covered by perpetual rights.

- Elsevier also cites a statistic that members of the UC community “download over 11 million articles a year” from their journals.<sup>17</sup>

Since UC retains direct access to most previously licensed Elsevier articles (only 2019 articles and certain older content were discontinued), citing the total number of downloads is misleading. Most of the downloads can continue since UC has perpetual access to the back-issues of a significant number of Elsevier journals. Further, the measure Elsevier uses is based on a formula that double-counts many uses of the content published in its journals. For example, when a reader goes to the article web page, and then also downloads a PDF copy, Elsevier counts that as two downloads, when in reality it is only one use.<sup>18</sup> A more accurate estimate is that approximately 500,000 article downloads (an average of 50,000 per campus) will be affected in 2019 — a far cry from Elsevier’s 11 million.<sup>19</sup> These numbers are not tiny, but they are manageable with alternative, legal means of access.

Regarding UC’s proposal:

- Elsevier asserts that UC’s proposed model is, “in their own words ... complex and risky,” using as evidence a mischaracterized quote from the UC Davis university librarian. A representative of the company wrote: “The plan is so intricate that one senior UC librarian called it ‘akin to modernizing the FAA’s air traffic control system – a million planes are in the air at any moment and changing anything can have serious consequences elsewhere.’”<sup>20</sup>

We have not characterized our offer as “complex and risky.” The quote Elsevier references describes the complexity of transforming the entire scholarly publishing industry, not UC’s proposal to Elsevier. [Read the passage in context here.](#)<sup>21</sup>

To the contrary, the contract framework we proposed is straightforward,<sup>22</sup> and similar to numerous agreements signed by various publishers (including Elsevier) with European university consortia. This is also the framework underpinning an [agreement that UC reached with Cambridge University Press](#).

- Elsevier describes UC's proposal as a "restructuring of the research model at UC" that "shifts costs to the UC researcher community under a default 'author-pays' model."<sup>23</sup>

We did not propose a restructuring of the UC research model. Our proposal would continue to provide researchers with full reading access to Elsevier journals, and would allow researchers to publish in whichever journals they choose. Moreover, UC authors would be able to choose to publish their articles behind a subscription paywall or publish their work as open access. If authors choose open access, our framework asks *those who have sufficient research funding* to contribute to *part* of the cost of publishing (with the library paying the rest); many of these authors already pay open access publishing charges, so this does not change the research model. In addition, our framework provides for a discounted price, a partial library subsidy for all authors, and full library subsidy for those authors — including students — who wish to publish open access but do not have sufficient research funding available. Thus, the only change those authors would see is a positive one: the opportunity to publish open access without the need to fully self-fund the open access publishing fee.

Most, if not all, research funders allow, and in some cases actively promote, the use of research funds to support open access publication costs as a matter of policy, and by our published calculations, the total burden on research funds, accounting for the library share of payments, would be less than one percent of research funding.<sup>24</sup>

- The publisher further claims that "a UC Library-commissioned study similarly found the plan 'extremely complex, with significant risk on many sides.'"<sup>25</sup>

The [study](#) referenced was not UC Library "commissioned." Rather, it was a collaborative research project initiated by two of UC's libraries, conducted in partnership with other leading North American research institutions and funded by the non-profit Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. Five of the eight principal authors were from outside UC.<sup>26</sup> As to the quote itself, it referred not to UC's proposal to Elsevier, but to the challenges of transforming the entire worldwide scholarly publishing industry. UC's proposal to Elsevier is a thoughtful attempt to address those challenges.

- Elsevier confusingly states that the university's "proposed plan would require UC researchers to pay to publish their own output."<sup>27</sup>

UC's proposal would actually reduce the burden on UC authors who wish to publish their work open access, by *fully subsidizing* authors without access to grant funds and asking those with sufficient grant funding to contribute toward only *a portion* of the open access fees.

- The publisher claims that “when surveyed,” researchers had “extremely negative” reactions to the scenarios laid out in the 2016 research study referenced above.<sup>28</sup>

We are unaware of any survey that addresses the scenarios explored in the 2016 research study. We invite Elsevier to produce the survey that specifically addresses these scenarios, including the questions the survey asked, its sponsor and authors.

**Other unsubstantiated claims:**

- Elsevier alleges that “one senior library official has repeatedly pointed to illegal sources of articles, including a Russia-based piracy site.”<sup>29</sup>

We are unaware of any library employee who has been directing users to illegal sources of articles. On the contrary, [UC explicitly published a statement on its website](#), in response to *questions asked by users*, that states: “The UC Libraries do not endorse the use of Sci-Hub for article access.”<sup>30</sup> As the UC Berkeley university librarian said in a published [interview](#), “we are unequivocal: it is our understanding (though we are not attorneys!) that Sci-Hub is in violation of U.S. copyright law. We will not advise nor help anyone to use it.”<sup>31</sup>

- Elsevier claims that after Germany canceled its contract with the publisher, “83% of those surveyed complained of a ‘significant decline’ in their research productivity and that most wanted the contract renewed.”<sup>32</sup>

We are unaware of any such survey. When we inquired of German colleagues, they were also unaware of any published survey results correlating to these numbers. We invite Elsevier to produce the survey, the questions asked, and its sponsor and authors.

No additional comment required.

*UC faculty to Elsevier: Restart negotiations, or else*

That sensational headline must be from some linkbait website, right? Wrong: it heads this story by Robert Sanders, posted [August 7, 2019](#) at *Berkeley News*, an official UC Berkeley site.

It's fairly long and worth reading in the original, but I'll just quote a couple of relevant early paragraphs—and, to be sure, it's *not* “UC faculty to CDL: give in to Elsevier”—not at all.

A group of prominent University of California faculty say they will step away from the editorial boards of scientific journals published by Elsevier until the publishing giant agrees to restart negotiations, which stalled in February and left the 10-campus system without subscriptions to some of the world's top scholarly journals.

A [letter](#) circulating since July 12 throughout the UC system and already signed by 30 faculty from four UC campuses warns Elsevier that the signatories will suspend their services on editorial boards of the 28 Cell Press journals, which are among the premier journals in the field of biology and Elsevier's flagship publications. About one-third of all UC Berkeley scientists who serve on editorial boards for Cell Press have signed the letter...

The new petition...is from UC professors only, and it would sever ties to editorial boards by some powerhouse scientists, including UC Berkeley's Jennifer Doudna, co-inventor of the CRISPR-Cas9 technology to manipulate genes; UCSF's Elizabeth Blackburn, co-recipient of the 2009 Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine; and UCLA's Stephen Smale, vice dean for research of the David Geffen School of Medicine. A survey of the editorial boards of all Elsevier journals turned up more than 1,000 UC faculty members, more than 110 of whom provide their services to Cell Press journals.

Again, there's a lot more to the story as written.

### *Elsevier Tries To Lie About University Of California's Contract Negotiation; UC Shows Its Receipts*

I'm only including this, by Mike Masnick on [August 9, 2019](#) at *techdirt*, for the headline, since the content appeared earlier ("Fact check..."). The comments are...interesting.

*UC Berkeley's fall semester is here. Catch up on the latest Elsevier news.* This rather good summary of the summer appeared [August 23, 2019](#) at *Berkeley Library News*. It's a good enough summary (and includes enough new material to be worth reprinting in full:

Now that you're back, there's something we need to talk about: Elsevier. And a *lot* has happened while you were gone.

Let's catch you up to speed, whether you want the latest, need a refresher, or missed the news altogether.

#### **What's the latest?**

Recently, more than 30 high-profile University of California faculty, including gene-editing pioneer Jennifer Doudna, announced in a letter they are [suspending their editorial duties to Elsevier journals](#) until a new contract is signed. In addition, at least two petitions online — on [Change.org](#) and [MoveOn.org](#) — have garnered more than a thousand

signatures from around the world in support of UC's efforts to transform the scholarly publishing industry. [An earlier petition protesting Elsevier's business practices](#) has collected more than 17,000 signatures. (All of these are faculty-led efforts.)

In July, [UC's Academic Council released a statement](#) affirming support of UC's negotiating position with Elsevier and urging people across UC to forgo entering subscriptions with the publisher while talks are stalled. With this act of solidarity, the letter states, "UC can help change the system of scholarly communication for the betterment of all."

### **Back up. How did we get here?**

In July 2018, UC began negotiating its subscription contract with Elsevier, the world's largest scientific publisher.

UC's goal? To constrain the ever-increasing journal prices and to provide default open access publishing of UC research. Meaning: Unless an author requests otherwise, the results of taxpayer-funded UC research would be made free and accessible to everyone.

Those talks were extended after the contract lapsed at the end of 2018. In February of this year, UC made waves by ending its subscription agreement with Elsevier, with the publisher unwilling to meet UC on its cost-cutting and open access goals.

Without a contract, Elsevier shut off UC's direct access to new articles (that is, those published in 2019 and the backfiles of some journals) this summer.

### **How does the shutoff affect me?**

Elsevier may have suspended direct access to some of its articles, but the Library is helping connect patrons with the materials they need, using everything from Google Scholar to interlibrary borrowing. (Note: It could take anywhere from a couple of hours to a few days to secure materials requested through interlibrary borrowing.) [Check out our video to learn how to access Elsevier articles, and read answers to more of your pressing questions.](#)

Still have questions? Email [scholarly-resources@lists.berkeley.edu](mailto:scholarly-resources@lists.berkeley.edu).

### **What's next?**

UC has inked an [open access deal with Cambridge University Press](#) and is looking to enter more transformative agreements that would make the results of taxpayer-funded UC research freely available to everyone. ([Authors, learn more here.](#))

In the meantime, UC is hoping to re-enter talks if Elsevier is willing to help UC achieve its goals.

Want to know more? [Stay up to date on UC-Elsevier news here.](#)

*Statement: ARL Supports University of California Libraries' Commitment to Barrier-Free Access to Information*

We'll close this open-ended story with the following statement, approved by the Association of Research Libraries' Board of Directors on September 27, 2019 and posted [September 30, 2019](#) on ARL's site.

The Libraries of the University of California (UC) are seeking transformative agreements with publishers such that access to the research of UC faculty is open to all, not limited to those who can afford it. In February 2019, the UC Libraries withdrew from negotiations with the publisher Elsevier due to lack of progress, and in July, Elsevier cut off access to current content for all UC campuses.

The Association of Research Libraries (ARL) expresses strong support for the UC Libraries in their efforts to initiate change and expand access to research. While ARL member library approaches to transformative change may vary, we applaud UC's commitment to the values and vision they have articulated even at the expense of disruption. In particular, we commend the strong coalition of faculty, librarians, and administrators across the UC system, that together developed the principles and together managed the negotiations.

Libraries and publishers play vital roles in the scholarly communications ecosystem, and they are as interwoven as they are essential to produce and disseminate vetted, peer-reviewed research that advances humanity and improves quality of life. Scholars now and in the future count on this ecosystem to be robust and sustainable.

In this age of innovative digital technologies, the Association of Research Libraries advocates for libraries to explore and invest in new approaches to scholarly communications with all our partners—teaching and research faculty, administrators, and publishers—to improve the research communications ecosystem. As well as leveraging new open infrastructures, libraries are working to change existing publishing models to improve access to information.

ARL appreciates the UC system's leadership in the broader library community as we individually and collectively create new models to achieve enduring and barrier-free access to information.

And that's it for this section, this roundup and, probably, for discussions of Big Deals in *Cites & Insights*.

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## The Back

In science, absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. In real life, sometimes it is. Given the expressed interest in retaining some version of

*Cites & Insights* after 2019—which is to say, *none whatsoever*—I can say with some confidence that this is the final collection of snarky items and audio-price commentaries under THE BACK label. It's been fun.

We'll get to audio prices—a far less elaborate version than in previous years—but first, we'll clear up three remaining years of items and a few items from *Stereophile*. Mostly chronological as usual.

### *Two judges smack down notorious patent holder “Shipping and Transit” in one week*

I'm not being snarky about the item itself—by Joe Mullen [on July 13, 2017](#) at *ars technica*—but about the situation. To wit, that a company called “Shipping and Transit LLC,” which claims to have patented the tracking of vehicles and the packages they deliver, has received patent-license payments from more than 800 companies (that includes an earlier company, ArrivalStar).

The specific story is that, once again, when a company (LensDiscounters) receiving a demand for licensing fees filed a response to Shipping and Transit's suit and S&T dropped its lawsuit, a judge awarded attorneys' fees to LensDiscounters.

The story is rich in links if you want to explore. Also an interesting comment stream.

### *What's worse? Doctors who believe homeopathy or just use it for placebo effect*

Here's an interesting one, again from *ars technica* but by Beth Mole on [November 16, 2017](#).

It's hard to predict which would be more disconcerting: finding out that your doctor believes in notions that defy basic science—like, the pseudoscientific [doctrine of homeopathy](#)—or that they'll prescribe you something they know doesn't work in hopes you'll be tricked into *believing* you're better—achieving nothing more than a placebo effect.

It might be a toss-up of which is worse. And if you get a homeopathic prescription in Switzerland, it's also a toss-up of which kind of doctor you're dealing with.

In [a large survey of physicians around Zurich](#), only 50 percent of the doctors who prescribed homeopathic treatments did so firmly believing that they were treating their patients' ailments. About 21 percent of doctors who prescribed homeopathic treatments did so explicitly to achieve placebo effect. And the rest provided incomplete responses or reported ambiguous intentions behind their dubious prescriptions.

There is, of course, quite a bit more in this well-reported story (and more than 300 comments!).

## *Digital Goods Valued Less Than Their Physical Counterparts*

This one's from Alain Samson, posted [November 14, 2017](#) at *Psychology Today*.

Remember when photos had to be developed, books were exclusively printed on paper, and getting ready for a home movie night involved a trip to your local Blockbuster? If you're my age, you would. But the warm fuzzy feelings evoked by old school physical media may easily be outweighed by an appreciation of the convenience that digital technologies have brought to your life...

New research by Ozgun Atasoy and Carey Morewedge in the *Journal of Consumer Research* (mainly distributed digitally these days) suggests that people financially value physical goods more than their digital equivalents and shows some of the psychological factors behind this link...

In one study reported in the article, tourists who were asked to pay whatever they wanted for a souvenir photograph on average paid three times as much for a physical copy of the photo (\$3) than a digital copy (\$1). In another study, participants were willing to pay significantly more for the physical format of a book (\$9.59 on average) than the digital format (\$6.94), and more for a movie on DVD (\$8.98) than the same movie on iTunes (\$5.07).

The piece goes on to suggest reasons, including "psychological ownership." Those may be valid, but, at least for books, movies and the like, *actual* ownership could certainly be a factor: you *own* a physical copy. You can be sure it won't just disappear; you can lend it to others; you can give it away or sell it. If the publisher fails, you'll still own it. Oh, and it's nobody else's business when you're viewing/reading/listening to it.

*Perhaps the point of vinyl is not the music but those poignant pops, crackles and hisses*

By Tracey Thorn on [December 2, 2017](#) at *NewStatesmanAmerica*.

I had to listen to the test pressing of my finished album the other day. This is when you check what the vinyl version will sound like, so you sit very quietly in front of your speakers and, ignoring the songs completely, take note of the overall sound quality and strain your ears to listen out for any excessive surface noise, any unwanted pops or crackles. And, this being vinyl, there *are* occasional pops and crackles. But are they unwanted? Ah, that's the question.

Vinyl has had a revival, you will have read. And part of me can't help feeling that it's really the pops and crackles that have made a comeback, securing their place in people's hearts as some kind of badge of authenticity. The clunk of the needle dropping. The faint hiss before the first song begins. Sounds that, if you're the right age, whirl you back in time to those first records you owned.

Those are the lead paragraphs. Later, Thorn—a musician, half of Everything but the Girl—offers her own comment about sound quality:

The other reason I'm sometimes sceptical about its revival is that I remember when vinyl and cassettes were the only options. We'd listen to a recording we'd just finished – which had sounded so rich and sparkly in the studio – squashed on to a piece of plastic, with a sinking feeling of disappointment. In 1988, our album *Idlewild* was the first we re-released on CD and the experience was a revelation. We were thrilled at how close it sounded to what we'd actually recorded.

Thorn doesn't think vinyl sounds better or that his opinion matters.

People like vinyl in an irrational way, the way they like lots of things. There is meaning in placing the record carefully on the turntable, lowering the needle. It's reverential, ritualistic. And maybe we *like* the snaps, crackles and pops, the surface noise, that faint mysterious hiss that seems to come from somewhere else entirely, perhaps the place where the music lives.

At least for some, pops and crackles aren't the point—they can be avoided. The background noise of vinyl is a different thing. It is, to be sure, true that many early CDs were badly mastered, but these days, I tend to believe that when audiophiles insist vinyl is superior to CD or digital in general, euphonic distortion *may* be at play. But my belief doesn't matter.

### *Don't Buy Anyone an Echo*

This article, by Adam Clark Estes on [December 5, 2017](#) at *Gizmodo*, isn't just about Echos—it's about Google Home, Apple HomePod, HarmanKardon Invoke and, to a lesser extent, any Internet of Things device. The opening:

Three years ago, we [said](#) the Echo was “the most innovative device Amazon's made in years.” That's still true. But you shouldn't buy one. You shouldn't buy one for your family. You definitely should not buy one for your friends. In fact, ignore any praise we've ever heaped onto smart speakers and voice-controlled assistants. They're bad!

After noting some prices and savings, we get:

Let me make this point dreadfully clear, though: Your family members do not need an Amazon Echo or a Google Home or an Apple HomePod or whatever [that one smart speaker](#) that uses Cortana is called. And you don't either. You only want one because every single gadget-slinger on the planet is marketing them to you as an all-new, life-changing device that could turn your kitchen into a futuristic voice-controlled paradise. You probably think that having an always-on microphone in your home is fine, and furthermore, tech companies only record and store snippets of your most intimate conversations. No big deal, you tell yourself.

Actually, it is a big deal. The newfound privacy conundrum presented by installing a device that can literally listen to everything you're saying represents a chilling new development in the age of internet-connected things. By buying a smart speaker, you're effectively paying money to let a huge tech company surveil you. And I don't mean to sound overly cynical about this, either. Amazon, Google, Apple, and others say that their devices aren't spying on unsuspecting families. The only problem is that these gadgets are both hackable and prone to bugs.

There's more, and it was well-informed commentary even before it became clear just *how much* people have been listening in. I like this:

You don't need an artificially intelligent robot to tell you about the weather every day. Just look outside or watch the local news or even look at your phone. You already do one or all of these things, so just keep it up. Same goes for turning on the lights. Use the switch. It works really well! A light switch also doesn't keep track of everything you're doing and send the data to Amazon or Google or Apple. What happens between you and the switch stays with you and the switch.

*The written word is losing its power and will continue to*

This oddity comes from Mike Shatzkin, posted on [February 21, 2018](#) at *The Shatzkin Files*. The lede:

If there were a futures market in literacy, it would be dropping. It is a sad fact that the value of written words, in relation to spoken words and still and moving pictures, is sinking like a stone. Changes like this happen for structural reasons.

This may be a good place to quote the sidebar about Shatzkin:

Mike Shatzkin is the Founder & CEO of The Idea Logical Company and a widely-acknowledged thought leader about digital change in the book publishing industry.

He's a Thought Leader! And he's a *wonderful* writer—just ask him:

Being among the lucky group that has word-centric skills, this is, as a recent [article making this same point in the New York Times](#) just said, the “writing on the wall” that clearly states that the advantages they have delivered me for a lifetime are expiring. I had the massive good fortune of having parents who responded to my childhood curiosity by getting me taught to touch-type when I was 8. With that capability and typewriters — by the time I was about 10 or 11 even *electric* typewriters — at my disposal, I had [Malcolm Gladwell's “ten thousand hours”](#) of writing far younger than the average kid. When I was ten years old I was delivering fresh copy on Little League games to my local newspaper on deadline.

Being able to craft good prose quickly has been my personal competitive advantage for my whole life. Meanwhile, I'm not so facile with images. Writing a better sentence is something I've been practicing for more than 60 years. Framing a better image is something most people can do much better than I can.

Since I would never claim “word-centric skills,” I don't know what to say about this. He assured us in 2009 that ebooks would disrupt the print book industry (remember print books? remember when they were completely overshadowed by books? oh, you don't remember that?) And now he's convinced that literacy is *passé* because “pictures and sound are so much easier for most people these days.”

Right.

*Researchers replicated a classic paper on unsuccessful treatment of writer's block. Then they tried to write it up.*

It's rare for an interview about a published paper to be longer than the article itself, but that's the case with this unsigned piece on [October 3, 2018](#) at *Retraction Watch*.

The piece here includes links to the seminal 1974 study by Dennis Upper, to three replication efforts, and to the landmark multidisciplinary effort discussed here. Far be it from me to say more—except to note that two of the replication efforts are in paywalled journals charging \$36 to read the article!

*Why vinyl records survive in the digital age*

This second take on vinyl's qualities is by Steven Brykman on [March 3, 2019](#) at *ars technica*—and the tease is significant:

Don't underestimate ritual and tactility.

The first three paragraphs:

Ask a record-collecting audiophile why vinyl is back and you may hear a common refrain: “Of course vinyl's back! It's a more accurate reproduction of the original! It just sounds better than digital!”

To this I reply, “Does it really, though? Or is it just EQ'd better? And since when did we start caring so much about the perfect fidelity of our recordings? I grew up—as did many of you—listening to cassette tapes on a boom box. They sounded horrible, and we loved them.”

I think the real reason for vinyl's return goes much deeper than questions of sound quality. As media analyst Marshall McLuhan famously wrote, “The medium is the message.” In other words, “the form of a medium embeds itself in any message it would transmit or convey, creating a symbiotic relationship by which the medium influences how the message is perceived.” Nowhere does this hold truer than in the world of recorded sound.

There's more here, and it's well written. I'll quote "The ritual" section:

The cumbersome process of putting on a record is akin to a ritual, an experience that mirrors the care that artists took in creating the work. First you have to find the record—a treasure hunt which might take five or 10 minutes depending on the size and organization of your collection. When you find the record, you pull it out. You remove the album from its cover. (Or, if you're a real stickler, you remove the album from the cover, still inside the inner sleeve. Because at some point you rotated the inner sleeve 90 degrees to prevent the album from accidentally slipping out. So you pull out the album in its sleeve.) Then you place the record gently on the turntable spindle: the hole so accurately punched that you need to push the album firmly down to get it to sit right.

The album and the turntable needle are both objects that demand your respect. The record must be freed of dust, so you get out your Discwasher D4+ System. You remove the wood-handled brush from the cardboard box. You remove the small red bottle of Hi-Technology Record Cleaning Fluid, along with the tiny red-handled needle brush, both of which are cleverly nestled inside the wooden handle. You gently sweep the needle with the brush, which produces a satisfying whooshing from the speakers.

Then you apply 3-6 drops of D4 fluid to the cloth-covered face of the wood-handled brush and rub it in with the base of the bottle. Then you place the wood-handled brush on the record, careful to orient the nap in the right direction. Then you lick a finger of the other hand, place it in the center of the record, and gently rotate the platter beneath the brush. When these tasks are complete, then—and only then—do you set the platter in motion and lower the needle—slowly, ever so slowly—onto the spinning vinyl disk.

Back in my LP days, I was a stickler—can't imagine otherwise, since to do otherwise was to *invite* damaging dust—but, as with others who really cared, I replaced most inner sleeves with plastic-lined-paper sleeves purchased separately. The second and third paragraph sort of describe what I'd do back then (but I'd set the disk on the turntable to rotate it), but omit the crucial steps of using a deionizing gun to get rid of static electricity. Of course, these days *serious* vinyl users use record-cleaning machines that can cost upwards of \$1,000 or more.

A good read; I don't disagree with much here. (I also don't play LPs...) More than 500 comments, some good, some stupid, some both.

*The PACS-L LISTSERV List Was Established 30 Years Ago Tomorrow*  
Given that this is the final *The Back* in what's either the penultimate or antepenultimate *Cites & Insights*, it feels right to reprint in full Charles W. Bailey, Jr.'s [June 28, 2019](#) post in *DigitalKoans*:

Imagine the Internet without the Web. Imagine that there is no Google or similar search engine. Imagine that the cutting edge Internet applications are e-mail, LISTSERV, FTP, and Telnet. Imagine that the “Internet” is made up of a number of different noncommercial networks, and that the connections between them are not always transparent. Imagine that Microsoft only shipped one million copies of the second version of Windows last year, and you are using MS-DOS without a graphical interface. Imagine that no established publisher has even experimented with an e-journal.

That was the situation on June 29, 1989 when I launched PACS-L, a LISTSERV mailing list. PACS-L was one of the first library-oriented mailing lists, and it was unusual in that it had a broad subject focus (public-access computer systems in libraries). Although PACS-L's greatest contribution may have been in raising librarians' awareness of the importance and potential of the then fledgling Internet, it was also the platform on which my soon-to-follow open access journal, [The Public-Access Computer Systems Review](#), was based.

In [Remembering PACS-L](#), Roy Tennant said:

For quite a while this list was where everything new in librarianship was happening. Despite its name, topics well beyond public access computer systems were discussed and debated. It was, in a nutshell, an essential place to hear and be heard. Its like was never to be again, as since then online communication channels have burgeoned and diversified. But for a little while, at least, there was a single place to be. And it was PACS-L.

In its heyday, it became one of the largest LISTSERV lists as Walt Crawford recounts in [Talking about Public Access—PACS-L's First Decade](#)“:

PACS-L kept growing, reaching 4,000 subscribers in June 1992; 5,000 subscribers that December; 6,000 by April 1993; and 7,000 that October. The 8,000 mark was reached by March 1994, 9,000 by February 1995, and 10,000 by February 1996. The list itself never reached 11,000 subscribers, and by 1996 many other specialized library lists had joined the fairly general PACS-L.

PACS-L was a collaborative effort that involved a number of staff from the University of Houston Libraries, including these list moderators:

- Nicole Abbott
- Amelia Abreu
- Charles W. Bailey, Jr.
- Marianne Stowell Bracke
- Nancy Buchanan
- Diane Gwamanda
- Jill M. Hackenberg

- Jack Hall
- Gretchen McCord Hoffmann
- Sara Holland
- Rafal Kasprowski
- Anne Mitchell
- Joan O'Connor
- J. Michael Thompson
- Linda Thompson
- Dana C. Rooks

PACS-L ceased operation at the end of 2013.

You can find out more about the list at [“PACS-L \(The Public-Access Computer Systems Forum\).”](#)

### *Who Watches the Watchers?*

The “As We See It” essay in the [May 2019](#) *Stereophile*, by John Atkinson, is about objective testing and blind comparisons. It notes an exchange between Walter Mossberg (then at the *Wall Street Journal*) and Michael Fremer in which Mossberg is apparently saying that, if you think MP3s don’t provide full musical fidelity, you’re a snob.

I’ve had exchanges with people who assure me that *nobody* can tell the difference between a high-bitrate MP3 (320K is the maximum) and CD-quality sound. Because blind testing shows they can’t.

My basic response is that my wife can *always* tell the difference, especially on properly-recorded piano or orchestral music—that *when she doesn’t know which is which*, she regularly finds 320K MP3 tiring and annoying and the same music in lossless-FLAC form fully enjoyable. I can also assert that I can frequently tell the difference, and that listener fatigue used to set in on 320K MP3 (I’d ripped our CDs that way because I didn’t think there was a difference—but I kept the CDs!).

After noting his own sad experience in believing a blind test’s “no difference” results, Atkinson says:

All I could conclude was that the blind-test protocol itself had become what scientists call an “interfering variable”—that the conditions of the test were too far removed from how we listen to music through our systems to give meaningful results. I have participated in a large number of blind tests since 1978, and have found that, even when a real difference exists, it is very difficult to produce anything but statistically null results—what are called “false negatives.” In the end, I decided that if so-called “objective” testing lets you down, it’s best to follow J. Gordon Holt’s strategy and judge equipment by how it sounds playing real music in real time.

This has pitfalls of its own. When such tests are poorly performed, they can produce “false positives”—*ie*, the listener concludes that there is a difference when none exists...

Typical blind tests tend to mask subtle differences: I have no doubt of that. It's true for taste tests, not just audio.

That second paragraph includes a lot more about the dangers of false positives. I believe many audio writers (and others!) exaggerate the differences they hear and that some prejudice devices based on the manufacturer or the circuitry. That's a different set of issues.

Meantime, I think Atkinson's on the money. If *you* can't tell a difference, that's great: you can probably save a lot of money. For many of us, we might be able to tell a difference (e.g., between a \$1,000 speaker system and a \$100,000 speaker system) but may not consider it worth the extra money. Then there's the issue of euphonic distortion, but I've touched on that earlier.

## Audiophile Price Check: The Final Round

I devoted a dozen pages of the [October 2018 Cites & Insight](#) to an ~~exhausting~~ exhaustive discussion of audiophile system prices as expressed in the October 2018 *Stereophile* list of 500+ Recommended Components. For the first time, I showed median as well as high and low prices by grade (A vs. B-K) and category.

I'm not doing that again. This time, I'll note those cases where there's a new highest or lowest price in a category—but I'm also simplifying categories and ignoring digital sources, cables and headphones.

Basically, as in 2018's discussion, there are two stages: the LP stage (turntable, tonearm, cartridge, phono preamp) and the output stage (either preamp and amplifier or integrated amp, and speakers).

### *Class A Vinyl Stage: Low Price*

As far as I can tell, the best deal now is the same as last year: PTP AudioSolid12 turntable (\$3,452); Audio-Creative Groovemaster II tonearm (\$1,348), EMT TSD 15 cartridge (\$1,950) and Nagra BPS phono preamp (\$2,459), for a total of \$9,208 without cable.

### *Class A Vinyl Stage: High Price*

Since the over-\$100K turntable from 2018 has been superseded, the new options are: Acoustic Signature Ascona Mk.2 turntable (\$36,997); Swedish Analog Technologies CF1-09 tonearm (\$53,600); DS Audio Master 1 cartridge (\$20,000); and CH Precision P1 (\$89,000 fully loaded)—for a combined price of \$199,597 without cable—about \$13,000 more than last year.

### *Class B-K Vinyl Stage: Low Price*

Here, the choice is obvious: the Sony PS-HX500 USB turntable with tone-arm, cartridge, phono stage and digital USB output, \$499.99--\$26 lower than last year because no turntable-to-preamp cable is required.

### *Class B-K Vinyl Stage: High Price*

TechDAS Air Force V turntable (\$19,500!); Sorane ZA-12 tonearm (\$2,500, and flagged as a bargain even though it's the most expensive tonearm below Class A); Triangle Art Apollo MC cartridge (\$8,000, same as last year); and Haniwa HEQ A03-C1 (\$12,000), for a total of \$42,000 without cable, or about \$8,000 more than in 2018.

### *Class A Output Stage: Low Price (full-range)*

Rogue Audio RH-5 preamp (\$2,495, same as last year); Schiit Aegir power amp (\$799, or about \$2,200 less than the 2018 solid-state choice); GoldenEar Technology Triton Reference speakers (\$8,998, up \$500 from 2018), for a total of \$12,292 without cables, or about \$2,150 less than in 2018.

### *Class A Output Stage: High Price (full-range)*

Boulder 2210 preamp (\$59,000, same as last year); Moon by Simaudio 888 Monoblock \$118,888—about \$58,000 less than the 2018 choice); Tidal Audio Akira (\$215,000, up \$5,000 from the 2018 choice); for a total without cables of a low, low \$392,999, significantly lower than in 2018.

### *Class B-K Output Stage: Low Price*

AudioEngine A2+ powered speakers (\$249/pair).

### *Class B-K Output Stage: High Price*

AudiaFlight FLS1 preamp (\$6,995); Cary Audio CAD-805RS monoblock power amp (\$15,995); Wilson Yvette speakers (\$25,500). Combined price without cables \$48,490.

And that's it. Once you add cables, digital sources and processors, and accessories, the high price could easily approach a cool million.

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## Masthead

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