

**Mark G. Bilby. The UC Just Walked Away from Elsevier. The CSU Should Do the Same [20190306]**

On February 28, 2019, the world's most prestigious research university system discontinued negotiations on a big deal with the world's largest scientific publisher.

The largest four-year public university system in the United States should do the same.

It's time for the CSU to stand in solidarity with the UC.

The last big deal that the University of California (UC) had with Elsevier amounted to \$10 million annually. That contract expired at the end of 2018.

Since then, negotiations became fraught. In past years, such discussions between universities and publishers turned on matters of cost and value. This time around, the contention centered on open access.

The UC was only willing to make another big deal with Elsevier if the journal articles authored by UC faculty were made openly accessible to the world without any cost to the readers. Elsevier would not budge or compromise, so the UC walked away.

UC faculty are authors on about 10% of all articles in Elsevier journals. To make all such articles open access would entail a major change in Elsevier's business model and cut deeply into their global revenues. Elsevier is not going to change or compromise without a fight.

The UC ask was not a small one, but it was a just and reasonable one.

Open access journal publishing is not the same as journals being free to produce or publishers not making a decent profit. It simply means that costs of production, especially in a digital space, should be reasonable, transparent, and covered up front through memberships or set fees, rather than being passed along to the individual reader and/or a reader's library or university through subscriptions.

It means that universities should not pay twice for academic journal content: first, to produce the research and do almost all the work of writing, reviewing, and editing that content; then, second, for university faculty and students to have access to that content.

It means that taxpayers should not pay for academic journal content that they cannot even access.

It means that college students should not pay for academic journal content that they cannot access as soon as they graduate, if at all.

It means that governmental and non-governmental grant funders should not pay for academic journal research that cannot be legally shared to further science and the common good.

It means that, as the infrastructure and mechanisms for copying, disseminating, and hosting academic journal content approach zero sum marginal cost, the economics of academic publishing need to change.

The California State University (CSU) system is paying \$4 million annually for our big deal with Elsevier. Our current three-year contract expires at the end of 2019, and the next round of negotiations is

approaching. Negotiations are centrally coordinated, and all campuses participate in an opt-in cost-sharing arrangement.

If the UC has ample reason to walk away from Elsevier, the CSU has all of them and more.

*Academic Impact.* UC faculty have higher expectations of academic research and publication for tenure and promotion, and thus greater need for access to scholarly literature, than do CSU faculty. If UC faculty can do without Elsevier journal subscriptions, CSU faculty can as well.

*Economic and Labor Justice.* Elsevier's profit margin is an absurd 40%. By comparison, Amazon's profit margin is just under 4%. Walmart's is under 3%. Elsevier is making such huge margins not just by inflating journal prices, but primarily by relying on a business model that is essentially a form of massive labor exploitation. Universities do almost all the work and pay almost all the subscription costs, while publishers add marginal value but make all of the profits. In the meantime, faculty give away our author rights to publishers and can't even share our articles or sometimes even access them.

*Gender Justice.* With a 40% gender pay gap, Elsevier is by far the most noxious in the academic publishing industry. Their male executives are raking in massive salaries, while their female employees are disparagingly underpaid.

*Taxpayer Justice.* California taxpayers and students are paying the bill for scholarly journal literature and yet typically cannot even access that literature to read. Hundreds of millions of US taxpayer and student dollars, and tens of millions of California taxpayer and student dollars are going into the coffers of a Dutch company when they could be invested to support US and California economies.

The CSU has walked away from a big deal with a big journal publisher before, namely with Wiley on December 19, 2014. CSU campuses, faculty and libraries adjusted, and the excellence of our research and teaching continued undiminished.

Walking away from the Wiley big deal was a big deal, since it was the second largest single library content vendor deal in the CSU. At \$4 million annually, the big deal with Elsevier was and still is the largest by far.

Given the cost-sharing arrangement, just a few CSU campuses opting out of the Elsevier big deal would generate significant pressure on the whole system to cancel.

Most of the UC campuses have signed on to OA2020, a pledge to cancel journal subscriptions and reallocate funds to support open access publishing initiatives in the UC and beyond. Presumably, a large portion of the funds saved from the \$10 million big deal cancellation by the UC will go toward this end.

If the CSU did the same, we could free up a significant chunk of funds to expand our support for various open access initiatives, such as the development of our centralized repository (CSU ScholarWorks), publishing open access journals, producing open educational resources, curating open access datasets, all with the help of a new crop of savvy librarians, digital humanists, software developers and publishing experts who can transform our universities into major centers not merely of the *consumption* but also the *production* of academic knowledge.

It's time for the CSU to stand in solidarity with the UC to coordinate our negotiations for the sake of collective bargaining, to refuse any big deal that doesn't guarantee our faculty keeping copyright of their

journal articles and those articles being made open access, and to reallocate savings from journal subscriptions to local open access publishing.

CSU faculty, alumni, students, donors, and all California taxpayers are encouraged to contact your local campus Library and/or sign the “CSU Should Cancel Elsevier” petition on [change.org](http://change.org).

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Mark G. Bilby, PhD, MSLIS, is Senior Assistant Librarian of Scholarly Communications at California State University, Fullerton.