

University of California librarians urge boycott of Nature journals

June 11 2010, By Matt Krupnick

University of California librarians are urging professors not to submit research to Nature or 66 related journals to protest a 400 percent increase in the publisher's prices.

A new contract with Nature Publishing Group would raise the university's subscription costs by more than \$1 million, library and faculty leaders wrote in a letter to professors throughout the 10-campus system this week. With recent [budget cuts](#), UC libraries simply can't handle the higher price, which would take effect in 2011, the letter said.

Boycotting the Nature group would be a huge step for a university that, according to UC estimates, has provided 5,300 articles to the 67 journals in the past six years. Nearly 640 of those articles went to Nature itself, one of the world's premier scientific journals.

"We understand that it's an important journal," said Laine Farley, executive director of UC's California [Digital Library](#), which manages most systemwide journal subscriptions. "But we can't simply wipe out our savings on one publisher."

In a written response to the university, London-based Nature Publishing Group criticized UC's "sensationalist use of data out of context" and said the negotiations were supposed to be confidential. The pricing dispute is rooted in confusion over whether UC is one institution or many, Nature's response said.

UC has "been on a very large, unsustainable discount for many years, to the point where other subscribers ... are subsidizing them," the publisher said. Nature "stands by its position that (UC) is paying an unfair rate."

This week's volleys represented an escalation of a long-simmering battle between universities and journal publishers, who have been criticized for charging thousands of dollars for annual subscription to some publications. Many titles have been consolidated under a handful of major publishers, including Nature, making it more difficult for universities to negotiate lower prices.

Several UC professors have fought back against publishers, refusing to contribute work to highly priced journals. But a widespread boycott of one of the most prestigious journals would present a dilemma for faculty members under pressure to publish research in order to gain promotions.

The publish-or-perish structure is fundamentally unfair to professors, said Michael Eisen, a UC Berkeley biology professor who refuses to publish his research group's work in Nature's journals.

"The university is forced to give away information for free and then to buy it back at a huge markup," he said. "The whole thing is just completely screwed up. The only alternative the university has is to strike back at what Nature really values."

A boycott of the Nature group would not hurt UC professors' careers, said Lawrence Pitts, the university's provost.

"The reality is that there is a number of quality publications," said Pitts, UC's chief academic officer. "Nature Publishing Group isn't the only game in town."

Some journals, recognizing that universities are struggling to afford

them, have cut prices in recent years. Others have invented ways to give away their articles for free.

The Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, for example, makes its contributions available for free six months after publication, said its editor in chief, UC Berkeley biologist Randy Schekman.

"Nature's just being tone-deaf," said Schekman, who is considering writing an article for Nature. "They have to know that California is in a perilous financial state. They can't win this one."

BY THE NUMBERS

- Amount spent by UC for online journals: \$24.3 million
- Number of Nature Publishing Group journals in UC libraries: 67
- Current average UC cost for Nature Publishing Group journals: \$4,465
- 2011 cost per journal as proposed by Nature Publishing Group: \$17,479

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