

Your university is definitely paying too much for journals

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Citation

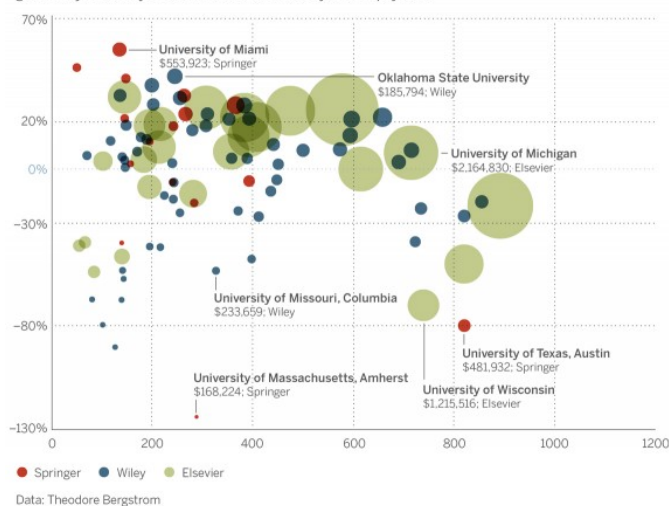
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Keywords

Science Politics, Costs, Journals, Pricing, Publishers

Journal prices: good deal or not?

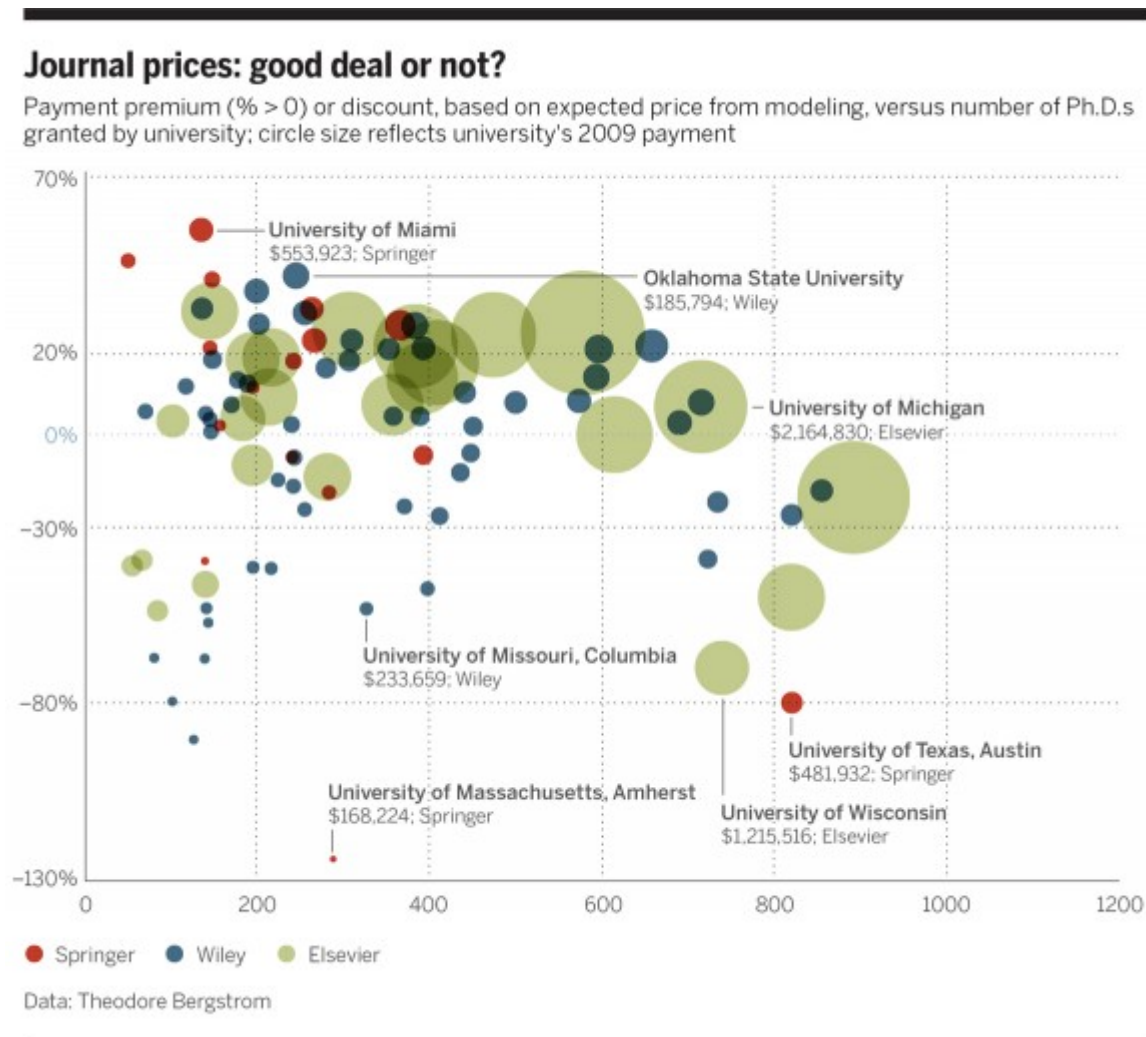
Payment premium (% > 0) or discount, based on expected price from modeling, versus number of Ph.D.s granted by university; circle size reflects university's 2009 payment



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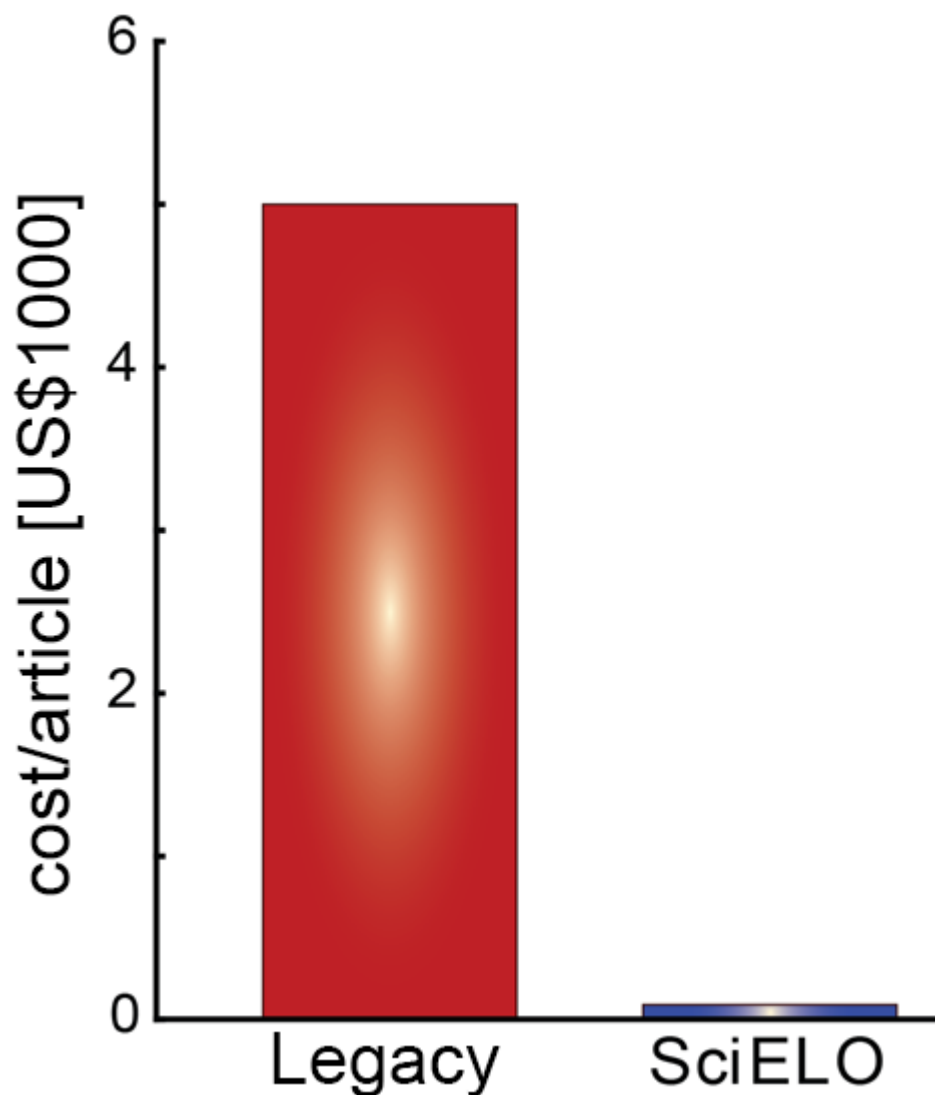
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There is an interesting study out in the journal PNAS: “[Evaluating big deal journal bundles](#)”. The study details the disparity in negotiation skills between different US institutions when haggling with publishers about subscription pricing. For *Science Magazine*, John Bohannon of “[journal sting](#)” fame, wrote a [news article](#) about the study, which did not really help him gain any respect back from all that he lost with his ill-fated sting-piece. While the study itself focused on journal pricing among US-based institutions, Bohannon’s news article, where one would expect a little broader perspective than in the commonly more myopic original papers, fails to mention that even the ‘best’ big deals are grossly overcharging the taxpayer. Here is the figure of the article, apparently provided by the PNAS authors:



This graph shows that some universities pay more for subscriptions than others. I’m not sure what exactly -130% is supposed to mean. I take it that UMass didn’t receive money from Springer, but still paid \$168,224. So I take this graph to mean that there are differences of up to 200% between what libraries are paying publishers, i.e. one university may pay up to 200% on top of what another library is paying for the same content, e.g. when one pays one million, another has to pay three. I’m not entirely sure that this is the correct reading of the Y-axis, but it’s the best I can do for now.

Being charged 200% more than other libraries for the same service may hurt, but consider what we would be paying if we wouldn't use publishers, but instead published all our papers in a system like [SciELO](#):



Comparison between legacy subscription publishers and SciELO in US\$ prices per article published.

According to a [Nature article citing Outsell](#), we currently pay US\$5,000 per article to prevent public access to it, while the overall cost of a publicly accessible article in SciELO is only [US\\$90](#). Try to explain that to a taxpayer on the street: you pay \$5,000 for each article you're not allowed to read, instead of just \$90 for each article you could read. In the light of such numbers, it is a sign of a truly warped perspective when people can still discuss a few percentage points more or less for what they pay to block public access to research. Because this is what libraries do by paying subscription fees: they pay to block public access to research.

Be that as it may, if I were to calculate any percentages from these differences, I could say that subscriptions are in excess of 5000% more expensive than SciELO or that SciELO would only cost institutions 1.8% of what they are currently paying for the same service, or that we are overpaying legacy publishers by 98.2%. So either way you see it, we could pay less than 2% of

the current cost or are currently paying more than 5000% too much – compared to these figures, the 200% seems like a totally negligible number to me. In the words of *Science Magazine*: no matter what your university paid for subscriptions, they definitely got a horrible deal – even if it was the best deal in the country.

Nevertheless, given the effective distraction machine that *Science Magazine* is turning into, I expect people will discuss the irrelevant 200% much more extensively, than the crucial 1.8% or 5000%.

What we should instead discuss is the following:

Why are we paying to block public access to research, when we could save billions by allowing access?