Public statement from Nature Publishing Group regarding subscription renewals at California Digital Library (CDL)

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CDL's letters to the UC Divisional Chairs and Members of the UC Faculty, dated June 4th, 2010, has today been brought to our attention, and to the attention of scientists and librarians around the world. This has been a shock to us at NPG, in terms of the sensationalist use of data out of context, misrepresentation of NPG pricing policies, and the fact that we were under the impression we were in an ongoing confidential discussion. It is with great regret we therefore have to publicly address, in detail, all the allegations contained in the letter. It is our hope in doing so that we can move back to discussions in good faith, and correct the already negative effects of this letter on scientific communication. We have had no information from CDL that they were under the impression that discussions had broken down. Negotiations began back in 2009, our last face-to-face meeting was May 14th, and the current agreement runs until the end of December 2010.

The implication that NPG is increasing its list prices by massive amounts is entirely untrue. We have been publishing our academic site licence pricing for several years on our librarian gateway. Dollar list price increases have been reasonable (averaging roughly 7 % over 4 years), and publicly available throughout. A 7% cap on annual list price increases is currently in place.

The complication with CDL is that they have been on a very large, unsustainable discount for many years, to the point where other subscribers, both in the US and around the world, are subsidising them. The origins of this discount can be found in the lack of clear definitions around consortia and 'single institute, multisite' subscribers, as well as previous accommodations of CDL's budget limitations.

If we regard CDL as a consortium of multiple libraries (not least suggested by CDL's membership of International Coalition of Library Consortia (ICOLC), and the libraries' ARL listings), the CDL discount on list price is 88%. By their own figures, CDL receives average discounts of 55% from publishers. After several attempts, we are now trying to bring them close to a 50% discount (although this leaves CDL on better terms than many other consortia). We do recognise the situation can be viewed from different perspectives, and we remained committed to ongoing discussions.

NPG stands by its position that CDL is paying an unfair rate. Again, by CDL's own figures, the average cost of an NPG journal was $4,465, well under the price of many major STM titles. NPG titles reflect the most highly used, and most high impact journals in science. NPG adds huge amounts of value to the very best quality original research, and this situation was simply not sustainable. It is our belief NPG titles represent excellent value for money, whether measured by cost per download, or perhaps more accurately, cost per local citation.

Our own projections show CDL will be paying roughly $0.56 per download under the new prices. This represents incredible value for money across any publisher's range of titles. We now call on CDL to reveal how much it spends with all the major publishers, and how this translates into cost per use, and/or other indicators of value. If NPG represents poor value for money, we will work with CDL to readjust their pricing. If, as we expect, NPG represents good value for money compared with other publishers, even at the new proposed pricing, we want to work with CDL to have this reflected in our agreement. We sincerely hope that no boycotts will occur, not least because it is detrimental to the advance of science, but we will not be bullied into continuing CDL's subsidy by our other customers.

We are confident that the appointment of Professor Keith Yamamoto and other scientific faculty to lead the proposed boycott, will mean they will be in a position to assess value with a rigorous and transparent methodology. We specifically recognise the value faculty add to the publishing process, not only through authorship and peer review, but as the user group we aim to service efficiently and effectively. NPG journals are, and always have been run by scientists, for scientists. Nevertheless, while recognising this value as critical to our existence, we are utterly confused by the claims that UC authors have contributed $19 million in revenue to NPG over the past six years. We look forward to learning more about those calculations.

Many of our other customers, editors, authors and peer-reviewers have been alarmed by claims from CDL. We would like to confirm our ongoing commitment to cap site licence list price increases for 2011. We would also like to assure customers that CDL is the only consortium with a legacy pricing issue which requires an adjustment of this size, to bring pricing into line with other customers, and ensure fairness across our customer base, in the US, in the west, and around the world.

We must also take this opportunity to address CDL's calls for increased compliance with funder mandates, more self-archiving, and authors retaining copyright. These are positions that NPG has actively supported and encouraged since 2005. However, we believe our colleagues at PLOS would agree that publishing high quality manuscripts, in journals with a high rejection rate, is an expensive business, and requires either high subscription fees, or high article processing charges, to be profitable.

To conclude, we are disappointed that CDL has resorted to using misinformation in inappropriate contexts to create publicity with the threat of a boycott, as part of a negotiating tactic, when NPG's intention has always been to reach a fair agreement. As of today, individual scientists, both within and outside of California are already suffering as a result of CDL's unwarranted actions. NPG will continue to do all it can to bring the world's best science to scientists around the world, hopefully working in cooperation with a more realistic CDL.

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