

Editorial

## Is this journal worth US\$1118? ☆

'With continuing revenue growth momentum in our markets and in our business and ongoing cost efficiency, as well as growing returns from investment, we are again targeting to deliver next year organic revenue growth of at least 5% and double digit growth in adjusted earnings per share at constant currencies.' This projection for 2005 comes from Sir Crispin Davis, Chief Executive Officer of Reed Elsevier.<sup>1</sup> While it may sound as if Sir Davis is making toasters or televisions, he is, in fact, in the academic industry. Elsevier describes itself as a 'world-leading publisher of scientific, technical and medical information products and services'. It publishes more than 2000 journals, including this one, and sells an array of electronic academic products, such as ScienceDirect and Lexis/Nexis. In 2004, Elsevier was one of the largest internet players in the UK, generating £1.2bn internet revenue—a quarter of its revenue. Its interim results for 2005 point to adjusted profits before tax of £395m (up from £387m in 2004).

While Elsevier leads the pack, it is but one of a number of global corporations who have realized the potential wealth that can be derived from academia. For example, the Informa group, which includes Taylor and Francis, saw a 37% increase in adjusted operating profits between 2003 and 2004 (from £79m to £108m). A 2002 Morgan Stanley report, entitled 'Knowledge is Power' dubbed 'scientific publishing the fastest growing media sub-sector of the past 15 years'.<sup>2</sup>

One can see the attraction. As academics, we fall over ourselves to produce free product. We willingly serve on editorial boards and as journal reviewers, where we engage in unpaid quality control. The same publicly funded institutions that both support us, and compel us to produce, then buys back the product as journal subscriptions.

Until recently, the relationship seemed to work for both parties. Publishers derived modest profits, while academics could advance their careers by publishing in peer-reviewed journals. However, the intensified pressure to publish within academia combined with the globalization and intensification of the publishing industry with predictable results. Journal prices have soared, particularly in the STM (science, technology and medicine) field. The Association for Research Libraries in the United States revealed increases of 273% in serial expenditures between 1986 and 2004 (the number of serials purchased increasing by only 42%, while monograph purchasing declined 9%).<sup>3</sup> Librarians began complaining of 'sticker shock': for example, in 2004, the companion journals *Nuclear Physics A&B* (Elsevier) cost USD \$23,820, the same as a 2004 Toyota Camry sedan. While Geography journal subscriptions have not been so stratospheric, prices can still be arresting. My department's 2004–2005 subscription to the *International Journal of Remote Sensing* (Taylor and Francis), at an annual rate of CDN \$6,606, was \$200 higher than the basic social assistance payment to a single person in British Columbia.<sup>4</sup>

The furore over price inflation, and marketing schemes such as the 'big deal' has led to a number of initiatives, ranging from collective purchase schemes on the part of libraries (as occurs in Canada), national debates over the desirability of the creation of accessible archives of publications produced through publicly funded research, and attempts to circumvent corporate publishing entirely, through open access publishing (in geography see, for example, *Acme*).

Geographers have reflected generally on the nature of journal publishing (Johnston, 2005) or attempted to unpack citation patterns in the discipline (Whitehand, 1985; Wrigley, 2002). Others have expressed caution at the perils of citation counts, and urged us to better understand their limitations (Yeung, 2002). Yet, to my knowledge, no one in

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<sup>1</sup> [http://miranda.hemscott.com/servlet/HsPublic?context=ir.access&ir\\_option=RNS\\_NEWS&item=30672508992999&ir\\_client\\_id=525](http://miranda.hemscott.com/servlet/HsPublic?context=ir.access&ir_option=RNS_NEWS&item=30672508992999&ir_client_id=525).

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.openrfi.com/UKSG/si\\_pd.cfm?a=1&pid=10&articleid=469](http://www.openrfi.com/UKSG/si_pd.cfm?a=1&pid=10&articleid=469).

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.arl.org/stats/arlstat/index.html> Canadian ARL institutions saw a 320% increase in serial expenditures in the same period.

<sup>4</sup> National Council of Welfare (2005) *Welfare Incomes 2004*. Ottawa (<http://www.ncwcnbes.net/htmldocument/reportWelfareIncomes2004/WI2004EngREVISED.pdf>) accessed January 15 2006.

geography has sought to assess the degree to which price is correlated with quality. Given the wide disparity in prices, this seems to be a useful exercise.

I take my lead from a survey of economics journals in 2001, in which Bergstrom (2001) concluded that price difference did not reflect a difference in quality, as measured by citations. Indeed, he notes, the six most-cited economics journals listed in the Social Science Citation Index were all nonprofit journals, with an average library subscription price of \$180/year. Further, 'pricing studies by librarians show that the pattern found in economics is common to many disciplines. The commercial journals are far more expensive than the journals published by the commercial societies, but the most cited and influential journals are almost universally those published at low cost by professional societies' (pp. 4–5).

Citation counts, of course, are rather a blunt instrument when measuring the quality of a journal. For example, some geography journal editors will purposely publish an article which they feel should be in the public domain, even though they knew it would not be highly cited.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, in considering the cost of a journal, one needs to also consider the nature of the contractual arrangement between the publisher and the editorial board. So, for example, Blackwell publishes in collaboration with professional societies (such as the AAG, CAG and IBG). A significant amount of the journal royalties are returned to these associations. Editors in other geography journals have also managed to extract considerable resources from their publishers: *Antipode*, for example, has negotiated with Blackwell to establish a book series, sponsor lectures, and fund graduate scholarships using a portion of its royalties.<sup>6</sup>

This caution to one side, I conducted a few simple analyses for Geography journals in order to assess the relation between price and standing. The journals I chose were obtained from the ISI Web of Knowledge 2004 Journal Citations Report for Geography.<sup>7</sup> Price<sup>8</sup> variations are wide amongst the sample: compare *Economic Geography* at \$90 with \$1713 for the *International Journal of Geographic Information Science*, for example. Prices over the past decade have also increased, though unevenly. Subscription prices between 1994/1995 and 2002/2003 at Simon Fraser University Library, for example, increased by 173% for *Transactions*, 250% for *Geoforum*, and nearly 460% for *Antipode*.<sup>9</sup>

Table 1  
Price/ISI Journal Impact Factor

Journal title	Publisher	Cost	Impact factor
J. Econ. Geogr.	Oxford UP	\$468.00	3.139
Prog. Hum. Geog.	Hodder Arnold	\$624.00	2.943
T. I. Brit. Geogr.	Blackwell	\$499.00	2.388
Econ. Geogr.	Clark University	\$90.00	2.325
Ann Assoc. Am. Geogr.	Blackwell	\$698.00	2.115
Antipode	Blackwell	\$717.00	1.922
Reg. Stud.	Taylor and Francis	\$1312.00	1.652
Environ. Plann. A	Pion	\$1297.00	1.622
Environ. Plann. D	Pion	\$479.00	1.591
Geoforum	Elsevier	\$1118.00	1.56
Area	Blackwell	\$242.00	1.475
Polit Geogr.	Elsevier	\$1099.00	1.316
Int. J. Geogr. Inf. Sci.	Taylor and Francis	\$1733.00	1.234
Landscape Urban Plan	Elsevier	\$1619.00	1.204
Singapore J. Trop Geo.	Blackwell	\$197.00	1.029
Aust. Geogr.	Blackwell	\$345.00	0.947
Geogr. Anal.	Blackwell	\$213.00	0.902
Geogr. J.	Blackwell	\$223.00	0.857
Appl. Geogr.	Elsevier	\$646.00	0.853
Eurasian. Geogr. Econ.	Bellwether	\$499.00	0.78
Urban Geogr.	Bellwether	\$530.00	0.667
J. Hist. Geogr.	Elsevier	\$388.00	0.661
Tijdschr. Econ. Soc., Ge.	Blackwell	\$343.00	0.518
Cult. Geogr.	Hodder Arnold	\$538.00	0.5
Pap. Reg. Sci.	Blackwell	\$397.00	0.481
Can. Geogr.-Geogr. Can.	Blackwell	\$253.00	0.429
J. Geogr. Higher Educ.	Taylor and Francis	\$1115.00	0.413
Cartogr. J.	Maney	\$266.00	0.295

As a first cut, I compared price with the ISI Web of Knowledge 'journal impact factor'.<sup>10</sup> ISI defines the JIF as 'the average number of times articles from the journal published in the past two years have been cited in the JCR year. The JIF is calculated by dividing the number of citations in the JCR year by the total number of articles published in the two previous years. An impact factor of 1.0 means that, on average, the articles published one or two years ago have been cited one time. An impact factor of 2.5 means that, on average, the articles published one or two year ago have been cited two and a half times. Citing articles may be from the same journal; most citing articles are from different journals'. The results for the geography sample are shown in Table 1.

If any pattern can be discerned, when price is plotted against JIF, it is a bifurcated one (Fig. 1). An increase in price may correlate loosely with increase in JIF, but the curve is a flat one: that is, a significant increase in price is linked to a less marked increase in impact. A cluster of expensive journals also appear on the plot, whose price is not strongly correlated to impact factor.

<sup>10</sup> [http://jcr01.isiknowledge.com.proxy.lib.sfu.ca/JCR/help/h\\_impact.htm#impact\\_factor](http://jcr01.isiknowledge.com.proxy.lib.sfu.ca/JCR/help/h_impact.htm#impact_factor). As an aside, it is worth noting that ISI (the Institute for Scientific Information) is owned by Thomson, a global corporation with 2005 revenues of US\$8.7 billion ([http://www.thomson.com/corp/about/ab\\_home.jsp](http://www.thomson.com/corp/about/ab_home.jsp)).

<sup>5</sup> Nigel Thrift: personal communication.

<sup>6</sup> Noel Castree: personal communication.

<sup>7</sup> This does not include the more science oriented geography journals, such as the *Journal of Biogeography*, or *Water Resources Research*, which tend to be considerably more expensive.

<sup>8</sup> Posted institutional rates for North America, in US Dollars, as of February 2006. If a 'bundled' subscription is available (print + online), I chose the basic rate. Real prices may vary, depending on library purchase agreements.

<sup>9</sup> This may not be an entirely accurate reflection of the posted price, given currency fluctuations, and site licence purchase arrangements.

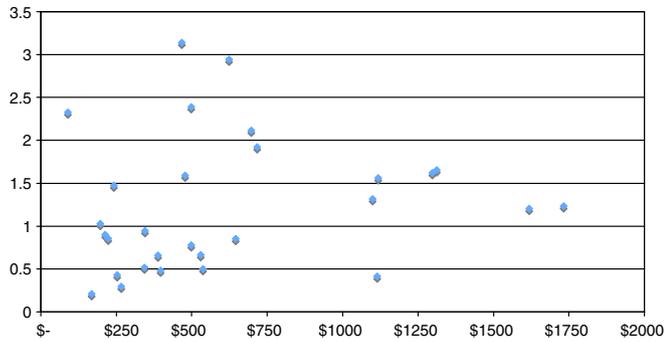


Fig. 1. Price/impact factor.

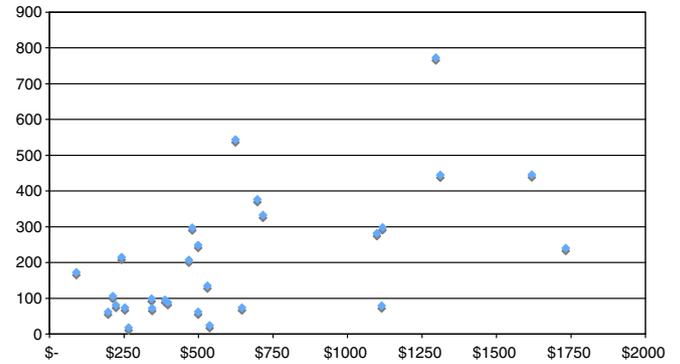


Fig. 2. Price/citations 2000–2004.

Table 2  
Total citations 2000–2004

Journal title	Publisher	Cost	Cites 2000/2004
Environ. Plann. A	Pion	\$1297.00	773
Prog. Hum. Geogr.	Hodder Arnold	\$624.00	544
Landscape Urban Plan	Elsevier	\$1619.00	446
Reg. Stud.	Taylor and Francis	\$1312.00	445
Ann Assoc. Am. Geogr.	Blackwell	\$698.00	377
Antipode	Blackwell	\$717.00	333
Geoforum	Elsevier	\$1118.00	298
Environ. Plann. D	Pion	\$479.00	297
Polit Geogr.	Elsevier	\$1099.00	282
T. I. Brit. Geogr.	Blackwell	\$499.00	249
Int. J. Geogr. Inf. Sci.	Taylor and Francis	\$1733.00	240
Area	Blackwell	\$242.00	215
J. Econ. Geogr.	Oxford UP	\$468.00	207
Econ. Geogr.	Clark University	\$90.00	173
Urban Geogr.	Bellwether	\$530.00	135
Geogr. Anal.	Blackwell	\$213.00	106
Tijdschr. Econ. Soc. Ge.	Blackwell	\$343.00	99
J. Hist. Geogr.	Elsevier	\$388.00	96
Pap. Reg. Sci.	Blackwell	\$397.00	89
Geogr. J.	Blackwell	\$223.00	81
J. Geogr. Higher. Educ.	Taylor and Francis	\$1115.00	79
Can. Geogr.-Geogr. Can.	Blackwell	\$253.00	74
Appl. Geogr.	Elsevier	\$646.00	74
Aust. Geogr.	Blackwell	\$345.00	72
Singapore. J. Trop. Geo.	Blackwell	\$197.00	62
Eurasian. Geogr. Econ.	Bellwether	\$499.00	62
Cult. Geogr.	Hodder Arnold	\$538.00	24
Cartogr. J.	Maney	\$266.00	18

The JIF is far from perfect as an index of a journal’s worth or standing. For example, the two-year window offers only a limited snapshot of citation activity, and tends to favour journals that publish fewer articles (Yeung, 2002). An alternative measure might be simply to count the number of citations over a longer time period. I thus simply added all citations to a given journal over the period 2000–2004 (in other words, the number of times volumes published in this period were cited in 2004). The results are shown in Table 2.<sup>11</sup> Some shuffling occurs in ranking.

<sup>11</sup> *Cultural Geographies* was removed from the sample, given its relatively short existence. The *Journal of Economic Geography*, which I retained, has only been published since 2001.

Ranked by JIF, the top five are the *Journal of Economic Geography*, *Progress in Human Geography*, *Transactions IBG*, *Economic Geography*, and the *Annals*, with an average price of \$475. Measured according to total citations, the top five are: *Environment and Planning A*, *Progress in Human Geography*, *Landscape and Urban Planning*, *Regional Studies*, and the *Annals* (average price \$1110). While the price of the top five increases when measured by total citations, a broadly similar relationship reoccurs when plotted against price (Fig. 2).

In both cases, these broad measures suggest that there is no direct or straightforward relationship between price and citation scores. A more fine-grained assessment of the value of a journal is provided by the relative price index, a measure developed by US economists Preston McAfee and Ted Bergstrom ([www.journalprices.com](http://www.journalprices.com)). The RPI is the geometric mean of price/article and price/citation, divided by the median RPI of non-profit journals in the same subject category.<sup>12</sup> McAfee and Bergstrom’s rule of thumb is that a journal with an RPI of less than 1.25 is ‘good value’, while one greater than 2.5 would be classified as ‘bad value’. The results of my analysis are shown in Table 3. With a few exceptions, geography journals appear to score quite well on this index.

There is a considerable spread in the price of geography journals, yet expensive geography journals are not necessarily the most-cited. Some expensive journals, such as *Regional Studies* and *Environment and Planning A* publish highly-cited research. Yet so do cheaper journals, such as *Area*, *Progress in Human Geography* and *Economic Geography*. All rely upon the remarkable commons that is the academy. As academics, mostly in publicly funded institutions, we feed, sustain and depend upon a publishing industry that is increasingly driven by, and generative of profit. This should cause us to ask hard questions about both the implications and outcome of such a Faustian pact.

<sup>12</sup> I used the average number of citations over the 2000–2004 period for the price/citation calculation. I categorized the following as ‘non-profit’ journals: *Area*, *Geographical Journal*, *Tijdschrift*, *Canadian Geographer*, *Geographic Analysis*, *Papers Regional Science*, *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography*, *Annals AAG*, *Australian Geographer* *Economic Geography* and *Transactions IBG*.

Table 3  
Relative price index for geography journals

Journal title	Publisher	Cost	RPI
Econ. Geogr.	Clark University	\$90.00	0.30
Area	Blackwell	\$242.00	0.53
Prog. Hum. Geogr.	Hodder Arnold	\$624.00	0.77
Geogr. Anal.	Blackwell	\$213.00	0.88
Environ. Plann. A	Pion	\$1297.00	0.91
Ann Assoc. Am. Geogr.	Blackwell	\$698.00	0.93
Geogr. J.	Blackwell	\$223.00	0.94
Antipode	Blackwell	\$717.00	0.96
Environ. Plann. D	Pion	\$479.00	0.99
Tijdschr. Econ. Soc., Ge.	Blackwell	\$343.00	1.00
Can. Geogr-Geogr. Can.	Blackwell	\$253.00	1.05
T. I. Brit. Geogr.	Blackwell	\$499.00	1.11
Singapore J. Trop Geo.	Blackwell	\$197.00	1.13
J Econ. Geogr.	Oxford UP	\$468.00	1.16
Pap. Reg. Sci.	Blackwell	\$397.00	1.36
J. Hist. Geogr.	Elsevier	\$388.00	1.44
Reg. Stud.	Taylor and Francis	\$1312.00	1.49
Landscape Urban Plan	Elsevier	\$1619.00	1.56
Geoforum	Elsevier	\$1118.00	1.58
Urban Geogr.	Bellwether	\$530.00	1.81
Aust. Geogr.	Blackwell	\$345.00	1.83
Polit Geogr.	Elsevier	\$1099.00	1.92
Eurasian Geogr. Econ.	Bellwether	\$499.00	1.99
Cartogr. J.	Maney	\$266.00	3.11
Appl. Geogr.	Elsevier	\$646.00	3.38
Int. J. Geogr. Inf. Sci.	Taylor and Francis	\$1733.00	3.42
J. Geogr. Higher Educ.	Taylor and Francis	\$1115.00	4.33

journals publish highly-cited research for a lot less. This might be worth bearing in mind when we (especially those of us with tenure!) consider where to submit articles, serve on editorial boards, and review articles.

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Is this journal worth \$1118? This, of course, depends on how we define worth. What is noteworthy is that many