

To post or not to post? A question for the Bee



Daniel J.B. Mitchell is professor emeritus at the Anderson School and School of Public Affairs at UCLA.

Recently, two Nobel prizes were awarded to faculty members at University of California campuses. So I went to a database of all California state workers maintained on the website of the Sacramento Bee and looked up what each had earned in 2008. In one case, I entered only the family name of the Nobelist in the search option and specified the relevant campus. As it turned out, that Nobelist — who is retired — earned about \$84,000, apparently on recall. But I also came across an elevator mechanic employed at the same campus who had the same family name and who earned about \$25,000. There was also a same-name senior custodian who earned about \$33,000.

When I looked up the other Nobelist, I put in both first name and last name, but I did not specify the UC campus. In that case, the Nobelist — who is an active employee, not a retiree — earned about \$242,000. But it turned out there was another UC employee at a different campus with the same first and last names. That employee — a student affairs officer — earned about \$43,000.

In principle, information on individual UC salaries was always available. But without the Internet, it would have been difficult to obtain. Actually, that is not quite so; without the Internet *and* the decision of the Sacramento Bee to post the information on its website, it would have been difficult to obtain. In short, it wasn't just technology; a journalistic decision to post the information was critical.

Of course, the Bee has a constitutional right to post this information. But before we give the Bee a John Peter Zenger award (Google that name if it is not familiar), perhaps we should examine the decision. Newspapers do not publish everything they have a right to publish. For example, some newspapers do not publish the names of rape victims because

of privacy concerns. They don't publish the names of news sources that request anonymity.

Here is an interesting question: The Bee clearly has access to its own personnel records. It could publish the names and salaries of all of its own employees. But it chooses not to do so. Why not?

Perhaps the Bee doesn't publish its own payroll records because its editors think such records wouldn't be newsworthy. But that can't be the answer. Surely at least some readers of the *Bee* might be curious about the earnings of their favorite columnists. Indeed, they might be more curious about their favorite columnists than about an elevator mechanic employed by UC.

Perhaps the Bee's editors feel that because UC employees are paid by state taxpayers, they are different from the *Bee*'s private-sector employees. Taxpayers, so the argument might go, have a right to know since they pay for the university. However, most of the UC budget is not paid for by state taxpayers. Many UC employees are not supported by California tax dollars. Moreover, subscribers to the *Bee*, advertisers in the *Bee*, and shareholders of the *Bee*'s parent corporation all pay for the salaries of *Bee* employees. Yet the *Bee* doesn't make available a database of its own employees' salaries open only to subscribers, advertisers, or shareholders — although it could.

In fact, it is obvious why the Sacramento *Bee* does not make available a database of its own employees' salaries even though the information might well be of interest. The *Bee* doesn't do so for the same reason that other employers — if they have a choice — don't do so. Such information violates employee privacy. It could assist competing employers in raiding key staff. And it and might assist in identity theft.

If there is a public interest in access to UC payroll records at the individual level despite such evident concerns, isn't that interest confined to top executives? Couldn't public curiosity about what UC pays be satisfied with general statistical distributions, but without individual names? I'm just asking.