
INTERVIEWS

■ DAVID C. PROSSER IM INTERVIEW

von Kerstin Stieg

Seit Jahren verschärft sich in Bibliotheken weltweit die Budgetlage. Bibliotheksbudgets schrumpfen oder bleiben bestenfalls stabil, während sich die laufenden Kosten ständig erhöhen. Bis vor wenigen Jahren waren Preisssteigerungen von bis zu 10% und mehr seitens wissenschaftlicher Verlage an der Tagesordnung, aber auch in zunehmend schwierigeren Zeiten für Bibliotheken liegen Preissteigerungen vor allem bei großen kommerziellen Verlagen noch immer weit über der Inflationsrate. Dies führt zu massiven Problemen in Bibliotheken. Jemand, der diese Problematik auch aktiv in der Öffentlichkeit anspricht und Lösungen sucht ist David C. Prosser, Executive Director von Research Libraries UK (eine Vereinigung von 30 Universitäts- und Forschungsbibliotheken in UK und Irland). Im folgenden Interview mit den VÖB-Mitteilungen spricht David C. Prosser über die finanziellen Nöte der Bibliotheken, die Problematik der sogenannten Big Deals (Lizenzverträge, bei denen Einrichtungen für einen Aufpreis auf die eigenen Abonnements elektronischen Zugriff auf das gesamte Portfolio eines Verlages oder sehr große Teile davonhaben), Open Access und vieles mehr.

RLUK announced last year to walk away from its big deals with Wiley and Elsevier unless major savings are achieved. What is the background of this strategic move and why Elsevier and Wiley? What do you consider ‘major savings’?

The UK has not escaped the world-wide economic turmoil of the past few years. We have seen a significant tightening of government spending, with funding for universities especially hit. Research funding is being cut and the whole financing of student education is shifting – with less direct government funding and greater student fees. This means that there is massive financial uncertainty within British universities.

This uncertainty has been felt in university libraries. Many of the RLUK members have seen flat budgets over the past few years, or even budget decreases. Staff positions have been lost, services cut, and spending on acquisitions reduced.

For all of our members looking at their budgets one fact is perfectly clear. An extremely large proportion of their budgets is spent on a small number of journal “big deals”. For some of our members, individual big deals from single publishers can exceed £1 million per year. And these deals cost an increasing amount each year – for the six years between 2004 and 2010 the prices for the largest big deals rose at twice the rate of inflation. Our members realized that paying ever-increasing proportions of their budgets for just a few big deals meant that they did not have any flexibility in reacting to our financial problems.

By coincidence, the two largest of the multi-year big deals – those from Elsevier and Wiley – were due to lapse at the end of 2011. The size of these deals can be seen in the fact that between them they represent about half of a typical RLUK members’ annual acquisitions budget. We therefore felt that if we could influence the terms and conditions of any new deals with these publishers we could potentially have a significant effect on the total library spend.

How have publishers in general and Elsevier and Wiley in particular reacted to this announcement?

Publishers have reacted much in the way that might be expected. They have stressed that their products are high-quality and offer great value-for-money. Our problem is that we don’t have the money!

Many librarians consider you to be brave standing up corporations which at least in part have a reputation of ripping off publicly financed institutions like universities. Have you received support from the library community and/or organizations such as ICOLC?

We have received a great deal of informal support from both within the UK and internationally. There is sometimes a feeling of powerlessness amongst the library community and so any sign of ‘resistance’ to excessive price increases is seen as a good thing. We, in turn, were inspired by those institutions that have previously entered into strong negotiations with suppliers and won important concessions.

What is RLUK’s plan B if you don’t reach an agreement with the two publishers and eventually end up without more than 4.000 journals in the STM sector. How would you provide the academia with the scientific literature needed?

Any move away from big deals would cause some inconvenience and lack of access, but we looked at ways in which we could minimize this. Firstly, many of our members have purchased online back-files and agreements mean that some archival material would still be available. This is especially important in the months immediately following the end of a contract as most of the requests for papers will be for material that is still available. For current material, each institution would look at its own usage patterns and take out individual subscriptions to the most heavily used titles. The well-known 80/20 rule applies here as in many other areas – roughly 80% of an institution's usage is to 20% of the journals in a publisher's package of titles.

For material that was not subscribed to institutions would rely on inter-library loan. This would be either through the British Library or through other RLUK members. One thing that a national organization such as RLUK can do is liaise with individual members to ensure that there are no significant gaps and that every journal is taken by at least one library.

We were initially concerned that the level of current usage would result in unacceptable numbers of inter-library loans if access was lost. But we have been encouraged by data from those libraries that have walked away from big deals showing that the conversion rate of downloads to loans is only 1-2%. So we are less worried about large numbers of downloads swamping the inter-library loan system. (Although we have already done some work to improve our systems for inter-library loan.)

Springer's CEO Derk Hank said in an interview that the big deal has been the best invention since sliced bread and argues that the big deal has solved the serials crisis. Indeed, most publishers and many librarians state that the big deal has come to stay. Why are you no longer happy with big deals?

There are many, many advantages to the big deals – which is why they have lasted as long as they have. But they are becoming so big and taking such a large proportion of the budget that we are concerned that they could become 'too big to fail'. They result in libraries paying for content that does not have much usage. And as the prices rise faster than budgets they take money that could be spent on journals from smaller, society publishers or on books. In fact, over the past 10 years our members are spending an ever decreasing proportion of their budgets on books. We need to move to a more flexible arrangement: certainly discounts for buying 'in bulk', but also greater possibilities to match the content of the big deals with the actual needs of researchers and students within our institutions.

Libraries, however, say they are no longer able to sustain price increases like in past, not even price rises in line with the inflation rate as budgets are plummeting or remain stable at best. Publishers say that the unit cost of access to research articles has dropped considerably thanks to the big deal and that certain price increases are justified due to the ongoing expansion of research output. Has the scholarly publication system simply become too expensive to support? Is it in danger of falling apart, especially since this is not a cyclical but a structural problem?

There is a structural problems with the way in which we fund scholarly communication. The big deals masked this problem for a decade by giving researchers access to a wider range of material for a relatively small increase in price, but it did not solve the problem. And interestingly the issue of unit cost is one that is changing – in 2010 for the first time the unit cost per download for one of the biggest deals went up slightly in the UK. The ever-downward trend is running out of steam.

The fundamental problem is that library budgets do not scale with the international increase in research output. We need a new system that does scale and ties communication costs in to increasing research spending.

How do you evaluate the quality of a big deal or any subscription-based deal?

There are two parts (at least) to any evaluation of big deals. The first is a quantitative evaluation – what is the cost per download? Which titles are being used locally? Which titles are not being used? This type of analysis can give an initial idea of which titles would need to be subscribed to if an institution were to move away from a big deal. RLUK has produced a tool that helps our members to answer some of these quantitative questions by combining pricing information with usage statistics. We hope to release a ‘user-friendly’ version of the tool internationally in the next few months.

However, there is an important qualitative part to the analysis. Download statistics do not tell you how important a journal is to the academic community. A journal may have a relatively low download rate, but be hugely valued by the community. At this point good relations between the library and academics becomes vital. The library should determine whether there are high-download titles that the community would not mind losing and low-download titles that should be retained as far as possible. This process has the added advantage of allowing the library to explain to researchers why the questions are being asked and describe what the problems are. Most researchers are sympathetic to the library – provided

they know what is happening and their voice has been listened to in any decision-making process.

What is your opinion on patron-driven acquisition models? Could that be a cost-effective and user-friendly alternative to the traditional licensing models?

Patron-driven acquisition models are interesting, but I don't think I have seen many where the pricing has been set at the right level. For example, in e-book packages the amount of usage in an institution can trigger purchases where the cumulative cost quickly reach the cost of a subscription to the entire package. The problem is that pricing that defends publisher income can mean that the institution essentially end up paying the same amount.

I also worry about any model in which the library is 'penalized' for promoting access to resources. This is also the case in some journal models I have seen where downloads are one factor that determines the price. The more the library promotes a resource to users, the more it is used, the more expensive it is! This does not appear to be a sustainable model.

What do you think about the Open Access movement? Niche market or potential successor of the traditional subscription model?

In the long term open access will succeed. It best fits with the desires of researchers and research funders – for the widest dissemination of research – and it best fits with the new technology where disseminations costs fall to almost zero. Over the past ten years the subscription model has been artificially sustained by two drivers – the success of the big deals and the use of journal publications in funding and promotion decisions. The big deals have a lot of benefits, but one side-effect is that they distort the market and allow weak, underperforming journals to survive as part of the deals. If these journals stood alone, competing for subscription revenues they would fold, so hastening the move to open access. As budgetary pressures force libraries to look carefully at the number of big deals they can afford we will see a reduction in the weakest subscription journals and a growth open access journals.

At the same time, the funders of research will increasingly insist on open access routes as they ask researchers to show the 'impact' of their work. And this is not just 'impact' in terms of citations, but range of dissemination, engagement with a wider community, etc. So over time the pressure from funders and the pressure on the finances of subscription models will overcome the inertia in the system and allow open access to thrive.

In the medium-term we will see a mix of green open access (author self-archive) and gold, open access journals. The pace of change will be different in different subject areas – biomedical sciences are well in advance of chemistry, for example – but the pressures described above will act on all subject areas eventually. (With a possible exception for small, cheap arts and humanities journals – perhaps that is the one area where subscriptions will endure.)

10 years from now on: How does the scholarly publication system look like? Where do you see libraries, publishers and agencies?

Over the next ten years the proportion of scholarly materials – journal articles, monographs, textbooks, etc. – in open access will increase. In some subject areas it will be the primary means of communication. As the market moves from subscriptions to open access libraries will see their role shift. They will no longer just be purchasing bodies, buying content for local consumption, but they will take on the role of helping their own academics to disseminate their research and data. Data itself will become much more important and more widely shared than ever before.

The publishers who will best succeed in this new environment are those who move from the model of content-owners, who mediate access to a select few, to a new model of service-providers. So the providers of peer-review services to authors, of specialized finding services to readers, of archiving services to libraries, etc. will stand most chance of success. They will realize that new models reward those who disseminate knowledge widely, not those who erect artificial barriers to knowledge. Basically, those who accept that open access will become the dominant mode of scholarly communication.

Thank you very much for the interview!

Mag.^a Kerstin Stieg
Zentrale Koordinationsstelle der
Kooperation E-Medien Österreich
Website: <http://www.konsortien.at>
E-Mail: kerstin.stieg@obvsg.at