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BIG DEAL - GOOD DEAL?
OR IS THERE A BETTER DEAL?

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Abstract.

The purchase "en bloc" by library consortia of all journals published by one publisher - the so-called "Big Deal" - is bad for small publishers and for large libraries even if - in the short-term - good for large publishers and for small libraries. The publishing and library communities need to find alternative purchasing models which provide better deals for those disadvantaged by the prevalence of the "Big Deal" while retaining the benefit of scale in negotiation and supply.

Why "Big Deals"?

The commercial publishers large enough to offer a "Big Deal" are doing no more than their shareholders would expect. Increasing market share and maximising profits are legitimate commercial objectives. It is also easy to understand why library consortia have been attracted by the offers of large packages of journals. Most consortia are run on the proverbial shoe-string, and time available for negotiation is limited. What can be better for a group of libraries serving tens of thousands of users than one negotiation which gives access to thousands of journals? How tempting to avoid hundreds of separate negotiations which may provide access to fewer titles than one "Big Deal"! Library consortia provide a valuable service to their members, and that service appears even more valuable if limited staff time is used to provide access to a big pile of content. Library performance indicators are geared to numbers and no more so than in consortia. It is to consortia managers that the purchase of all journals from large publishers has had the greatest appeal. This is not mere cynicism, for behind the emphasis upon numbers is the reality that tens of thousands of users do require access to thousands of titles. The thirst for academic information can only be satisfied by unrestrained access to published work.

The problem is that the cost of slaking this thirst through the "Big Deal" is high both for the publishing and the library communities. To take an analogy with an industry which satisfies another thirst, the supermarkets are able to supply our need for liquid refreshment of all kinds, forcing the small supplier - whether it is your friendly milkman or your neighbourhood off-licence - out of business. It is easy to see the same trend in publishing, as the big companies swallow the small academic-friendly publications. A spiral of disadvantage has been created as the smaller publishers lose out to big companies on consortial deals and become more vulnerable to acquisition. This trend cannot be good for the future of publishing. Libraries also suffer from over-emphasis upon deals concluded with the larger publishing houses as they find that an ever-increasing proportion of their expenditure is on journals acquired from a small number of publishers, thus reducing the money available to buy journals from a wider set of publishers. The richness of library holdings depends upon the acquisition of a wide variety of titles. Consortial deals are threatening to remove much of that richness, leading to "identikit" holdings as libraries offer the same titles to their users.

Added value?

The justification usually put forward for the purchase of large packages of journals is that they add value by increasing the quantity of content available above the rate of increase in price. This argument depends upon a certain definition of added value and upon the perspective from certain types of libraries. Even on a quantitative view of value, a "Big Deal" may be of poor value to a large library with subscriptions to the most important journals before the "Big Deal" came along. Those librarians who support the purchase of large packages of journals do so on the basis of use of titles to which they could not otherwise afford to subscribe. If value is measured by numbers of titles consulted, the importance of this additional resource in that type of situation cannot be denied but not all libraries benefit in that way. The large publishers who benefit from increased market share also use the "numbers game" to justify their view of added value, telling librarians how cheap their product is when price is divided by number of titles accessible. Unfortunately those librarians who are sceptical about this definition of added value have no hard evidence on which to base their view that academic value cannot be measured in numbers.

A true estimate of academic value has to be based upon quality of research and teaching but no measures are available to enable the academic community to judge quality of research and teaching in relation to content available. To take a radical example, if all libraries in the UK were to cancel all journals published by a major publisher, would the Research Assessment or Teaching Quality results be affected one iota? Maybe neither the publishing nor the library communities would be happy with the answer to that question, if only we knew the answer, but it is the kind of question we should be asking if we really wish to base purchasing upon added value. Ultimately it is only the user of the content who can judge the value of the additional titles accessible through a "Big Deal". The publishing and library communities are co-operating well in devising reliable measures of the use of electronic content, and this quantitative information will be valuable to us all. However, there is also a need for qualitative information to place alongside the quantitative. Could we add a short electronic questionnaire - simple "yes" or "no" answers about value - for a user to complete after the user has consulted a particular article? The response rate may not be high, but any such qualitative information would be better than the none we have now.

How long will the "Big Deal" be around?

There are many signs that the days of the "Big Deal" are numbered. The euphoria with which this purchasing model was welcomed as "win-win" has evaporated to a considerable extent. Even those large publishers who benefit most from this model are said to be considering placing a greater emphasis upon alternative models. Their commercial antennae are picking up the signal that this type of deal cannot be extended more widely. Those publishers who offer their entire package of journals have usually been prepared to make alternative offers even if the perception has been that the "Big Deal" is the only one on offer, and librarians are beginning to look for those alternative purchasing models more frequently. Coping with budgets declining in real terms, even large consortia are feeling the financial strain of existing commitments and are reluctant to enter into more large commitments. Another factor leading to a reduced emphasis upon the "Big Deal" is that the sale and purchase of journal titles is making the purchase of a large package of journals more complicated. The situation may be straightforward if only a handful of titles change hands, but if one publisher purchases a large bloc of titles from another publisher, will the new bloc be included with the existing deal? Neither publisher nor consortium may wish an offer to be enlarged this way, or if they do, the pricing may be a major issue complicating the existing relationship. It may be that the "Big Deal" will survive these pressures and continue in deals between certain publishers and certain consortia, but it is clear that this purchasing model will not be the universal model it was once expected to become.

What are the alternatives to the "Big Deal"?

There are other purchasing models which could give both publishers and library users the advantages of the "Big Deal" without the disadvantages. Purchasing a large bloc of content is economical for both publishers and librarians in time taken to negotiate a deal, so the aim should be to retain that advantage of scale. The way in which that advantage is exercised at present is through negotiation between one consortium and one publisher for subscription to a bloc of journal titles. The same advantage of scale could be achieved through negotiation between several consortia and one publisher, or between one consortium and several publishers, or between any combination of consortia and publishers for a mix of subscriptions and document delivery rather than subscriptions alone.

Most publishers have been reluctant to negotiate with several consortia collectively, arguing that the terms of a deal with one consortium may not be relevant to the situation in another consortium. Certainly the size of consortia and of the individual institutions belonging to consortia does vary widely from country to country. However, there is scope for combining the negotiation process between consortia within the same country or between consortia in countries with similar educational structures. This is the rationale behind the eIFL consortium set up by the Open Society Institute, as the countries in that consortium are all countries in economic and social transition facing similar problems. In Western Europe also several countries have universities which come from the same educational tradition and - if their political authorities were willing - could combine their negotiating procedures. This could benefit smaller publishers if they were willing to negotiate a consortial deal which would be offered in several countries. Likewise negotiation with consortia would be greatly assisted if publishers could find a way - anti-trust legislation permitting - to combine some of their holdings in a single offer, either on the BioOne basis of journals published by a group of related societies or by placing certain of their titles in a subject package of titles from several publishers. This could be described as a "Big Deal" but this kind of offer would be more user-friendly than the type of deal which includes all the content from only one publisher.

One of the major disadvantages of the "Big Deal", i.e. the purchase of content that is not required by users, could be overcome if deals were to be offered which combined some subscriptions with some electronic document delivery. The subscription model is very suitable for core journals which libraries can predict will receive heavy use, but money is currently being wasted on titles included in large packages which may receive no use or only occasional use. That type of title can be supplied more efficiently through document delivery, and publishers are missing an opportunity to offer efficient electronic document delivery at reasonable prices. Publishers' current document delivery services cannot meet that need, being too expensive on a large scale and placing too many barriers in the way of easy use. Negotiating that type of deal will be a challenge, as libraries will need predictable expenditure levels in a situation of unpredictable use, and the procedures for users will have to be barrier-free. If we are to find alternatives to the "Big Deal" which provide smaller publishers with a better future and users with better value, we may have to face up to that challenge. Much in the world of scholarly publication is changing, and open access economic models may well satisfy the world-wide thirst for academic information in the future, but while journals are still purchased by library consortia we need a better way to purchase than the "Big Deal".