CORE
Metadata, citation and similar papers at core.ac.uk
Provided by Purdue E-Pubs

Against the Grain

Volume 29 | Issue 1 Article 10

February 2017

The Big Deal at Michigan State University

Steve Sowards
Michigan State University Libraries, sowards@mail.lib.msu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/atg

Part of the Library and Information Science Commons

Recommended Citation
Sowards, Steve (2017) "The Big Deal at Michigan State University," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 29: Iss. 1, Article 10.
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.7709

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

The Big Deal at Michigan State University

by **Steven W. Sowards** (Associate Director for Collections, Michigan State University Libraries, 366 W. Circle Drive, East Lansing, MI 48824-1048; Phone: 517-884-6391) <sowards@mail.lib.msu.edu>

The so-called Big Deal has been a feature of scholarly publishing and academic librarianship for twenty years. **Ken Frazier** wrote a concise definition in 2001: "In the Big Deal, libraries agree to buy electronic access to all of a commercial publisher's journals for a price based on current payments to that publisher, plus some increment. Under the terms of the contract, annual price increases are capped for a number of years." **Frazier** also pointed out the trade-offs: in return for specific savings, libraries gave up some control over selecting and de-selecting journals, took on work previously done by agents, and by implication committed to pay for serials at the expense of monographs if pressed.

Librarian response to the Big Deal always has been ambivalent. The Great Recession of 2008-09 reduced budgets and increased pressure to cancel subscriptions: some libraries dropped Big Deals. **Michigan State University**, however, continues to participate in multiple Big Deals, and has expanded use of similar arrangements. Why have Big Deals continued to be useful and acceptable at **MSU**, when they are impractical and unacceptable for numerous other libraries? The answer boils down to two factors:

- First, the relevance of journal content to campus needs; and
- Second, stable budgeting that lets us plan for efficiencies in cost and content.

What Big Deals are in place at MSU?

By 2000, **MSU** had deals with both **Blackwell** and **Wiley**, and added a **Springer** plan around 2005. We have less extensive agreements with publishers such as **Emerald** and the **Royal Society of Chemistry**, and a few similar "database model" agreements to buy content as a single block, rather than a basket of separate titles.

Elsevier is often a poster child and lightning rod for Big Deal conversations. In 2002, **MSU** moved from print to online-only for **Elsevier** journals. We added the "Freedom Collection" in 2007, more or less doubling the number of their journals on hand, through a multi-year commitment with a cap on annual price increases. This step addressed specific faculty requests, at a lower cost than adding traditional subscriptions. For several years, we had asked new faculty to list journals of importance for their success: in the majority of cases, they cited **Elsevier** titles. Since that Big Deal, new hires rarely identify journals that we lack.

Our most recent Big Deal decision added humanities, social science and science titles from **Taylor & Francis**. Once again, the decision reflected specific campus needs. In recent years, we noticed two trends. First, Inter Library Loan borrowing requests went up for **T&F** content. In particular, faculty and graduate students often wanted all of the articles in a thematic issue. Filling those requests went beyond our interpretation of the CONTU "rule of five," leading to an increase in copyright permission costs. Second, faculty asked for subscriptions to new **T&F** journals in emerging fields of study. When compared to the combined cost of new subscriptions and ILL fees, the cost of the Big Deal in fact meant a small net savings.

Our early Big Deals covered journals, but **MSU** later made similar deals for publishers' front lists in eBook format. The CIC arranged a **Springer** plan in 2009, later extended to **Wiley** and **Elsevier**. The same principles are at work: discounting, multi-year agreements, e-only formats. However, **MSU** cancelled some smaller eBook deals when high prices failed to match low demand.

Why do these plans work for MSU?

The first factor is the wide range of disciplines on campus. **Michigan State University** is the state's land grant university, offering more than 200 programs of study ranging from agribusiness management to Chinese to chemical physics to human geography, in 17 degree-granting colleges serving medicine and nursing, engineering, law, education, music, communication, the social and natural sciences, arts and letters, and business. **MSU** is a doctoral university in **Carnegie's** "highest research activity" category, with over 50,000 students, including 11,400 students in graduate and professional programs. In other words, the library serves an extensive community of active researchers representing nearly all branches of academic knowledge. Founded as an "ag school," **MSU** remains active across the life sciences and in other science disciplines served by **Elsevier**, **Springer** and **Wiley**. Very few subject areas are unrepresented on campus: therefore the great majority of journals in Big Deal bundles have an audience.

MSU librarians assess use of our databases. Taking one major package as an example, downloading conformed to the 80/20 rule. The most-frequently used one-fifth of journals accounted for 78.9% of downloads. Journals at the low end of that quintile saw 103 articles each downloaded during the year; the most highly-used journal had more than 2,000 downloads.

A long tail comes into play for journals with less use. Readers downloaded at least 30 articles from 41.1% of journals. 69.5% of journals in the package were used at least once during 2015. About 30% of titles, then, were unused in 2015. However, usage varies from year to year. During the preceding five years (2009-2014), about one third of 2015's unused titles had seen some use.

However, 2015 usage was strongly concentrated in just half of the titles in the package: 98.3% of downloads. Was it economical to enter a Big Deal for the other 1.7% of article needs? Based on the yearly top-up fee and the download count, cost-per-use to deliver those articles was about $25 per transaction. This is not a bargain, but it is comparable to the cost of an ILL request in terms of sunk costs, permission fees, and delivery.

The Big Deal brings some other efficiencies. While average annual increases in journal prices are no longer in double digits, figures around 7% per year are often mentioned. Over a period of years, the difference widens between prices that increase at 7% and prices that increase at, say, 5% due to a negotiated cap. For a hypothetical journal Big Deal that began with an annual price tag of $1,000,000, after ten years the difference between the two figures is more than $330,000. This figure far offsets a typical top-up fee, proportional to price.

None of these savings matter if content goes unused. At **MSU**, however, enough content is used across the extensive curriculum to warrant the payment.

The second factor behind the viability of Big Deals at **MSU** is the budget situation.

The **MSU** Libraries collection amounts to some six million print and digital volumes. The annual materials budget for FY16 is approximately $17 million. We enjoy group deals and discounts through consortial partnerships with the Committee on Institutional Cooperation (the CIC, often better known as the academic arm of the Big Ten conference) and the Midwest Collaborative for Library Services (MCLS).

The **MSU** Libraries benefit from budget support that is not only generous, but regular and predictable. For at least the last 20 years, the office of the provost has increased the materials budget by at least 5%, with occasional higher figures in pursuit of specific program goals. Central university administration understands the value of projecting future budgets several years ahead: that projection allows the library to agree to 3-year or even 5-year deals. The length of those agreements secures favorable price caps, which in turn stretch our budget dollars even farther. When funds are limited, libraries can use aggressive planning to achieve spending cuts; at **MSU** strong funding also calls for (and rewards) aggressive planning that can lead to favorable and efficient spending commitments.

Can we view Big Deals in a wider context?

Having adopted Big Deals — which were tightly connected to a shift from print to digital journals — the **MSU** Libraries also have seen a variety of results downstream:

- Faculty requests for complete online backfiles for the same journals covered in Big Deals.

continued on page 27

The Big Deal at Michigan State University
from page 26

- Familiarity with bundled content concepts that can extend beyond journals to cover eBooks, streaming video, and streaming music.
- Unlimited simultaneous user access which serves our large campus population.
- Remote access which serves our distance education programs.
- Opportunities for cost-per-use analysis through COUNTER statistics.
- Reduced demand for stack shelf space, opening up room for new library services.

As a research library, **MSU** prefers to collect with an eye to long-term ownership. The mix of "owned" and "rented" content in the Big Deal varies from that ideal: should we break some of these deals, we could lose access to content that came in via the top-up fee. However, limits on resources (not only acquisitions dollars but also building space and staff time) increasingly push us toward strategies that help us meet as many needs as we can, with the resources we have. We no longer expect that we can guess all of the resources that library users will want (so that we can buy those materials in advance), and we no longer expect that when we do pay for materials in advance, that library users will use every resource.

The Big Deal model with its mix of long-term ownership and conditional rented access complements other library strategies that move away from traditional expectations about what we own and how we own it:

- Consortial sharing is a step toward cooperative collection building, in which ILL fills a substantial role. **MSU** has ILL lending agreements across the CIC and also in our state through the MeLCat system. As a rule of thumb, academic libraries have seen that perhaps half of monograph selections go unread (just as we now see that some portion of Big Deal content goes unread). When in doubt, it now makes sense to wait before we buy some titles, since we can borrow many books from other libraries … and in return, we lend widely.
- For eBooks, ILL is difficult or impossible, but eBook packages can offer a lot of titles at reasonable cost. **MSU** has both frontlist Big Deal agreements with major publishers, and also aggregated rental packages from **ebrary** and **EBSCO**. Once again, we understand that some content will go unread, and that we will not own some content forever.
- **MSU** also rents aggregations of periodical articles, such as **EBSCO** Business Source and **ProQuest** Academic Complete. While some content goes unread and content is not owned, pricing and convenience justify offering these tools.
- Finally, **MSU** has a few PDA/DDA plans (mainly for films at this time): some lead to ownership, some to rental access, and all begin with lists of titles in excess of what will be used or paid for.

While these concepts and approaches are not quite the same as Big Deals for journals, all of these models break out of the traditional model of title-by-title selection by library staff, in pursuit of other efficiencies that can reconcile user access with budget realities.

Conclusion

If **MSU** had limited academic programs, gaps in the science curriculum, a reduced emphasis on current research findings, or an uneven materials budget for the library, the Big Deal model would be far less congenial. Rising journal costs, particularly in the sciences, challenge the library budget and force us to prioritize our selections. Given conditions on our campus, however, Big Deals have been part of an array of strategies to stretch available budget dollars.

Further Reading

Theodore C. Bergstrom, **Paul N. Courant**, **R. Preston McAfee**, and **Michael A. Williams**. "Evaluating Big Deal Journal Bundles," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* (2014).

Stephen Bosch and **Kittie Henderson**. "Whole Lotta Shakin' Goin' On: Periodicals Price Survey 2015." *Library Journal* 140/7 (2015): 30+.

Walt Crawford. "Big-Deal Serial Purchasing: Tracking the Damage," *Library Technology Reports* 50/4 (2014).

Kenneth Frazier. "The Librarians' Dilemma: Contemplating the Costs of the 'Big Deal,'" *D-Lib Magazine* 7/3 (2001).

Karla L. Strieb and **Julia C. Blixrud**. "Unwrapping the Bundle: An Examination of Research Libraries and the 'Big Deal,'" *portal: Libraries and the Academy* 14/4 (2014): 587-615.

***Steven W. Sowards** is the Associate Director for Collections in the **Michigan State University Libraries**.* *Thanks go to **Diane Warner** and **Hui Hua Chua** for assistance in preparation of this article.*

"Managing The Big Deal"

by **Monica Moore** (Electronic Resources Librarian, Assistant Librarian, Interlibrary Loan and Acquisitions Services, 417 Hesburgh Library, Notre Dame, IN 46556; Phone: 574-631-2987) <mmoore18@nd.edu>

A recent query for "big deal" in a library science indexing database provided 109 hits, dating back to 1987. Not all of these articles related to what we as librarians think of when we hear that phrase. In fact, it's striking that not very long ago, those two words put together did not mean something controversial and they were not always capitalized. When did the Big Deal become a big deal?

Coined in the early 2000s, it was originally used to describe an emerging acquisition model in which publishers offered aggregated collections of online journals for one price, through a multiyear contract with a fixed price increase. The impact of acquiring journal content in this fashion has been studied and reported on at conferences ever since, and continues to be discussed in this issue of ***ATG***. The actual implementation of a Big Deal acquisition and the ongoing management of it often seems to be forgotten in these discussions.

Any time libraries buy or lease something in bulk, it requires translation into the infrastructure that we use to manage our library collection. This includes our integrated library system (ILS) and our discovery systems, and any type of knowledge base that includes the holdings information for the journals in a deal. There is a significant amount of staff time and resources involved with these efforts, not only for the initial acquisition, but for the ongoing management of this bundled content. Does this management represent a hidden cost that isn't taken into consideration when we talk about costs of the Big Deal? What happens to the Big Deal once the ink on the license agreement is dry?

The Secret Life of The Big Deal

All libraries have some system for managing their print and their electronic resources, either through an ILS or some type of electronic resource management system (ERMS) or even a highly sophisticated, homegrown set of spreadsheets. All of these systems try to implement in some way the functional requirements of acquiring and managing electronic resources, initially defined and laid out by the Electronic Resources Management

continued on page 28