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Canceling the Big Deal: Three R1 Libraries Compare Data, Communication, and Strategies

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Canceling the Big Deal: Three R1 Libraries Compare Data, Communication, and Strategies

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Abstract

Canceling the Big Deal is becoming more common, but there are still many unanswered questions about the impact of this change and the fundamental shift in the library collections model that it represents. Institutions like Southern Illinois University Carbondale and the University of Oregon were some of the first institutions to have written about their own experience with canceling the Big Deal several years ago, but are those experiences the norm in terms of changes in budgets, collection development, and interlibrary loan activity? Within the context of the University of California system's move to cancel a system-wide contract with Elsevier, how are libraries managing the communication about Big Deals both internally with library personnel as well as externally with campus stakeholders? Three R1 libraries (University of Maryland, University of Oklahoma, and Kansas State University) will compare their data, discuss both internal and external communication strategies, and examine the impact these decisions have had on their collections in terms of interlibrary loan and collection development strategies. The results of a brief survey measuring the status of the audience members with respect to Big Deals, communication efforts with campus stakeholders, and impacts on collections will also be discussed.

Putting the Big Deal in Context

The concept of breaking the Big Deal is not new (Nabe & Fowler, 2012; Pedersen, Arcand, & Forbis, 2014), with some libraries even following up years later to reevaluate the results of breaking up journal packages (Nabe & Fowler, 2015). However, most libraries that have written about this experience have focused on measuring the impact in terms of ILL use and reductions in journal subscription costs. With the recent decision by the University of California System to cancel its group contract with Elsevier, we believe it might prove useful for libraries to examine canceling the Big Deal within the full context of a more rapidly changing landscape, discussing more openly the reasons for canceling, the relative success of both internal and external communication strategies, as well as any changes in collection development strategies this experience has produced. We also created a brief survey for our session attendees to find out how many had already canceled a Big Deal, how many were thinking about doing it, and if so, what reasons they had for doing so.

For the authors of this piece, the last few years are the first time our libraries have had to undertake breaking up large publisher packages on a wide scale. We define "Big Deal" as a contract governing the sale of bundled academic journals (and sometimes databases) between a large commercial publisher and a library (or consortia of libraries), with provisions that cap inflation rates over multiple years in return for contractually obligated renewal commitments and limitations on canceling journal subscriptions. To give some context for the decisions made, in 2017 the Kansas State University Libraries, the University of Oklahoma Libraries, and the University of Maryland Libraries spent collectively $11,722,392 on Big Deal journal packages. This amount represented 40% of the combined libraries' annual budgets. The most striking part of the amount spent and its proportion of the three libraries' annual budgets is that this represents content from only eight large publishers: Sage, Wiley, Elsevier, Springer/Nature, Cambridge, DeGruyter, Taylor and Francis, and Oxford.

Kansas State University Libraries (KSUL)

Kansas State University Libraries (KSUL) has annual expenditures around $14 million, $5.8 of which is earmarked for collections. We hold or subscribe to roughly 3.65 million print and e-books, over 12 thousand journals, and over 260 databases.

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KSUL has experienced several years of shrinking budget allocations. Between fiscal years 2014 and 2019 the KSUL total budget allocation reduction totaled $1.6 million. Since 2014, we have canceled nearly 3,300 resources including journals, databases, and other materials, some of which were packaged in Big Deals. These cancellations totaled more than $1.25 million.

In the spring of 2019, KSU Libraries approached our largest cancellation to date with greater transparency and better communication. We formed a Collection Communications team comprised of deans, department heads, and our public relations officer. Together, this group developed a multifaceted publicity campaign aimed at helping our campus understand the root of the problem: the serials crisis and the unsustainable way we produce scholarship in the academy.

We engaged with our campus around these issues in several ways:

- Open forum addressing the campus community about the upcoming cancellation project and the serials crisis
- Published articles in our campus newsletter
- Attended multiple leadership meetings
- Published webpages describing the problem
- Distributed a potential cancellation survey including a list of titles compiled in a publicly searchable Microsoft Power BI database

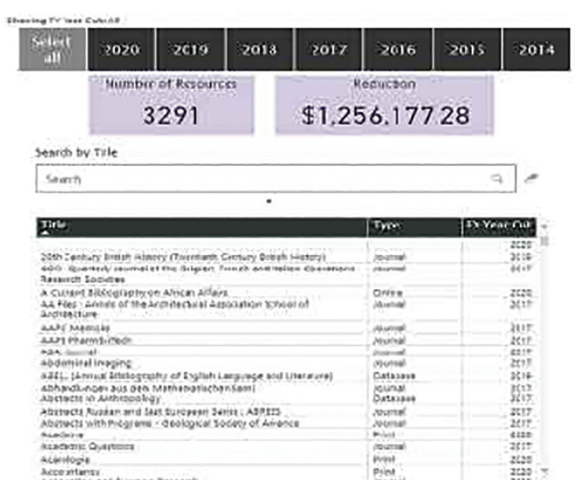

Figure 1. Cancellation database.

Our liaison librarians also made concerted efforts to meet with their faculty and departments. Over 400 faculty responded to our survey from over 50 departments and offices. Respondents provided over 2,200 comments.

As a result of years of cancellations, we are hesitant to enter into any multiyear deals, especially those without financial hardship clauses. We no longer sign nondisclosure agreements so that we can flexibly communicate our true expenses with our campus stakeholders at a granular level. We also heavily emphasize data analysis and data-informed decision-making, including attempting to forecast continuations inflation and spend over multiple years.

The most surprising internal impact we have seen after vastly reducing our Big Deals is our relatively steady interlibrary loan usage and cost. Statistics indicate the total number of journal articles we receive from other libraries was stable from 2016 through 2018, and that our cost per article has actually gone down during that interval from $1.84 per article to $1.20 per article. These figures do not include our memberships to RapidILL/Reprints Desk, which skews the true cost, but all else being equal, we have not experienced the large influx of article requests anticipated after a period of major cancellations.

KSU has experienced many negative impacts as a result of our Big Deal and other resource cancellations. Most obvious is reduced access to thousands of materials. We have canceled so many resources for so many years that we have no recourse now but to cancel materials deemed “critical” by some researchers. We also struggle with the ability to support new programs in this environment, especially those that require high-cost or specialized resources. Service reduction is also a negative impact. Our public services staff are now spending significantly more of their time related to collection management conversations than ever before, meaning they either add to their existing workloads or reduce their teaching, reference support, and other campus engagement activities. Finally, our materials cancellations have weighed heavily on the morale of our library staff and our campus.

However, there is some positive impact we can point to throughout these last few years of cancellations, namely the increased engagement and advocacy on the part of many faculty members and upper university administrators. One noteworthy highlight is the creation of a campus-wide task force to address scholarly communication on the KSU campus. Charged by the provost, the aim is to coordinate campus-wide education, advocacy, and policy around open and emerging models for scholarly communication.

The University of Oklahoma Libraries

Between FY11 and FY19, the University of Oklahoma Libraries (OU) experienced flat or reduced materials budgets, resulting in a deepening book/serial imbalance. In FY11, 24% of OU's materials budget was spent on books; in FY19, only 7%. FY18 saw a permanent materials budget reduction of $379K; across FY19–FY20 the materials budget was further reduced by $900K.

These reductions are similar in dollar amount to KSUL, but differ in two respects:

- Reductions occurred across a compact timeframe—three fiscal years
- Impact was not as severe because OU started with a larger materials budget than KSUL

OU left its first Big Deal agreement, with Oxford, in 2014, after experiencing several years of flat budgets. As we believed we'd need to leave other Big Deals in the future, leaving a relatively small agreement enabled us to learn how to approach this challenge and engage our campus community with the issues facing us.

We prepared extensively for reviewing the titles involved, and for communicating with university administration (they were onboard) and faculty. Unfortunately, when we held a town hall about the cancellation and why it was needed, library personnel outnumbered faculty attendees. We offered to present to departments and the Faculty Senate, but had no takers.

We prepared an online guide for the cancellation review; this became our primary communication tool for this and subsequent reviews. The guide offers general information on the Big Deal concept, national and OU trends, and FAQs. The guide provides the methodology and criteria utilized to review journal commitments, 3–5 years of download data per review, a key to interpreting the data, and the final decisions enacted.

We reestablished only one subscription demonstrating substantial ILL requests after our initial Oxford cancellation, but otherwise the overall impact on ILL has not been significant. Since 2014 we have canceled additional journal publisher agreements due to university-mandated permanent budget reductions. For details on the timeline we used for this process, see our conference presentation (Ohler, DePope, Rupp-Serrano, & Pitts, 2019). In 2019, we canceled Big Deal agreements with Wiley and Springer, agreeing to a smaller number of titles from these publishers for 2019. Due to legal review, we had access to the full complement of titles from these publishers through the spring 2019 semester, and thus we have not been out of those Big Deals long enough to assess campus impact. OU will cancel a Springer agreement at the end of 2019.

University-mandated permanent library budget reductions have extended the impact beyond Big Deals. Since FY18:

- Database commitments reduced $300K+
- Ongoing commitments $5,000+ subject to review, potential cancellation
- Approval plans shrinking: 70 social sciences and humanities publishers received on approval; all others and all science titles acquired via print or electronic DDA
- Foreign language plans canceled

At OU, the budget reductions we have experienced have occurred throughout campus; everyone is in the same boat. The positive: our community understands the situation cannot be avoided. The negative: campus constituents are reluctant to argue for maintaining the library materials budget; doing so may mean deeper cuts within other university areas. The campus-wide budget reduction mandate provides "cover" for leaving Big Deals and canceling databases, but limits opportunities to engage the university community with the issues facing us.

The University of Maryland Libraries

The University of Maryland Libraries' budget has been flat for 17 years. By 2016, we were spending over 90% of our annual budget on electronic resources, primarily continuing costs for journal and database subscriptions. Big Deal journal packages represented 47% of our yearly budget expenditures. With even a modest inflation rate of between

4%–6% per year, we were facing over $3 million additional yearly costs by FY22. To prevent this, we have undertaken a review process for the last four years, alternating between database and journal cancellations. During that time, we have canceled 1,110 titles, focusing first on non–Big Deal titles and databases and then breaking apart our Taylor and Francis package. We strive to spread the impact of a cancellation process across all subject areas equally, but that is becoming more and more difficult after multiple rounds of reviews.

As we planned for reviews, we started with our Collection Development Council (CDC) to ensure that the subject librarians understood the need for a review. Each of the subject groups have representatives on CDC and those representatives pass along communication from CDC to their respective groups. We also discussed the need for a review and the review process at library-wide meetings with subject librarians and other collection managers. The Collection Development Strategies unit also created and maintained both internal and public-facing webpages about each review. One of the ways we used the communication process to increase subject librarians' understanding of the impact of journal inflation on the budget was to have them perform a collection budget allocation exercise, but with a twist. In order to get them thinking beyond their own subject funds and more holistically about the budget, we asked them to consider collection allocation scenarios for fictional academic departments using a *Harry Potter* theme.

For external communications, we asked each subject liaison librarian to send e-mails to their departments and provided them with template language including:

- A Big Deal definition
- The impact of journal inflation on the UMD collections budget
- The reason we selected Taylor and Francis (timing; of our seven Big Deal contracts, that one was up for renegotiation)
- Data used to make decisions
- Announcing new resources we were able to purchase with reallocated funds

Collections budget allocation exercise #2: sample allocation:

Scenario: You have $1 million in the collections budget. Using the following data for five disciplinary areas, please answer the following questions:

1. Do you have enough data to allocate funds across all subject areas? For the purpose of this exercise, do not worry about whether funds are for one-time or continuing purchases. If you do have enough data, how would you allocate these funds?
2. If you do not have enough data, what other data would be useful?
3. What qualitative or other non-data information would be useful?

Academic Departments

Transfiguration

- Bachelor: 0; Masters: 49; Doctorate: 0
- Registered majors: 4821 FT, 8 PT
- Faculty: 46 FT; 9 PT

Charms

- Bachelor: 31; Masters: 16; Doctorate: 19
- Registered majors: 141 FT, 3 FT
- Faculty: 43 FT; 41 PT

Potions

- Bachelor: 378; Masters: 35; Doctorate: 23
- Registered majors: 2,659 FT, 299 PT
- Faculty: 56 FT; 1 PT

Figure 2. Collection budget allocation exercise designed by Daniel Mack, associate dean of Collection Strategies and Services, UMD Libraries.

Across campus, we worked with the University Library Council (ULC), an advisory body to the dean of Libraries, which reports to the provost and the University Senate. At the request of ULC, we created a white paper examining the impact of journal inflation, the role of open access, and alternative methods of acquiring materials (University of Maryland Libraries 2018). The ULC has been a challenging group because the campus faculty members rotate every 2–3 years, creating a continuous learning curve depending on the faculty members' familiarity with the UMD Libraries and the challenges we face. Working with this group was even more challenging given that we were experiencing what would become four years without a permanent dean of Libraries, and our associate dean for Collection Strategies and Services was not made an ex-officio member of ULC until 2019.

Regarding impacts, the bright spot is that our interlibrary loan costs were $7,800 for the 437 Taylor and Francis titles the year after cancellation, representing only 5.3% of our ILL costs for 2018. We were prepared for the worst given that the e-journal use of these titles the year before cancellation was 50 times higher. So far, other large publishers have been motivated to keep us, offering much more favorable terms to keep us in contracts with them. There has also been little pushback from either students or faculty to our cancellations, likely because we were able to use some cost savings to purchase other resources long requested, which we couldn't acquire because our funds were committed to Big Deals. This will change because inflation will continue to erode our purchasing power and we will continue to have to cut resources. Also, our efforts with the ULC did not produce the advocacy we had hoped on campus. The focus never moved from what was wrong with the libraries' budget, which is not a compelling argument for change. With our new dean on board, we will begin working with a campus faculty task force to shift the conversation to publishing, access, contracts, and terms.

Survey Results

Prior to and just as our presentation began, we offered a brief survey to the attendees, gauging current actions on Big Deals. Responses to each question are listed below:

1. Have you gotten out of a Big Deal?
   79 indicated YES, 125 indicated NO
2. Are you planning to get out of a Big Deal?
   92 indicated YES, 107 indicated NO
3. If you have gotten out of a Big Deal or are planning to, what was/is your reasoning behind the decision?

   104 indicated Budget, 10 indicated Principle, 1 indicated Mandate, 32 indicated Other

4. If your decision to get out of a Big Deal was on principle, where did you reinvest the funds?

   3 indicated APCs, 3 indicated Open Initiatives, 9 indicated On Demand Resources, 20 indicated Subscriptions to Other Resources, and 76 indicated they have not gotten out of a Big Deal

5. If you had the funds to renegotiate your journal packages with a publisher, would you reenter a Big Deal?

   20 indicated YES, 86 indicated MAYBE, 30 indicated NO, 62 indicated they have not gotten out of a Big Deal

These responses reflect the respondent's circumstances and decision-making processes at their respective institutions. While no new insights were gained as a result of this informal survey, the results do reinforce that many libraries already have, or will be, canceling Big Deals if the terms are not in line with their budgets and principles.

Conclusions

The common experience of ILL costs not reflecting the journal usage prior to cancellation does mirror what other institutions have reported (Nabe & Fowler, 2012, 2015). In fact, our data seems to add weight to those studies, suggesting that libraries need to understand the factors that drive e-journal usage versus interlibrary loan use (Pedersen, Arcand, & Forbis, 2014; Smith, 2019). An area for further study is how users access content no longer provided via a Big Deal. It seems clear that if they are seeking that content, they are not doing so via ILL. Considering the number of attendees who reported canceling or planning to cancel a Big Deal, libraries really must find out if users are contacting the author directly for the content, using open access or IR-accessible content instead, or in the worst case, accessing content through journal article pirating sites. This data also might call into question the increasingly common practice of libraries using ILL data as a part of their own budgeting, planning, and collections decisions.

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Further Reading

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