Escalating Costs of Journals

In early 2000, the average scholar at a university such as Oregon State University read about 130 journal articles each year, up from 100 a decade earlier. While scholars read more journal articles, they subscribe to fewer journals, from an average 5.8 personal subscriptions in 1975 to 2.2 in 2002. In other words, scholars are increasingly reliant on libraries to quench their thirst for access to timely research.

Yet libraries are increasingly challenged to provide scholarly journals for university faculty and students because of increasing journal prices, an expanding number of journals, and shrinking budgets. For several decades, library budgets have not kept pace with either overall inflation or price inflation for journal subscriptions. Annual subscriptions for a few journals cost as much as $20,000. Most journals cost less, but subscriptions still commonly exceed $1000 per year. Between 1986 and 1998, real prices for academic journals doubled, while real acquisition budgets rose by only 50 percent and the number of academic journal titles increased by 60 percent. These trends have continued or accelerated the last decade.

Libraries have responded to the increasing difficulty of providing access to journals by cost cutting. Overall, libraries have cut the number of books purchased by 26 percent and cancelled more journal subscriptions than they have added, cutting the total number of journal subscriptions by 6 percent. Libraries are also experimenting with more effective ways to deliver timely scholarly research, including group purchase agreements, package discounts, and shared databases.

While innovations in library purchasing may help, they will not deal with the fundamental problem of escalating journal prices. Some researchers contend that the problem lies in increased dominance of the journal publishing industry by commercial publishers, rather than nonprofit journals published by professional organizations. For example, Theodore Bergstrom, an economist at University of California Santa Barbara has found that the six most cited economics journals listed in the Social Science Citation Index are all nonprofit journals with library subscription prices averaging $180 per year. In contrast, the five most cited commercially published journals cost an average $1660 per year. Measuring the value of a journal in terms of the citations a typical published article receives, Bergstrom also contends that nonprofit journals are a better bargain. Bergstrom estimates that a library could spend less than 10 percent of its subscription budget on nonprofit economics journals and these journals would contain 60 percent of all articles cited in economics. In contrast, spending 80 percent of its budget on commercial economics journals would yield only 33 percent of all cited articles. Bergstrom has found similar commercial/nonprofit differences in chemistry, agriculture, mathematics, physics, and medicine. See the OSU Library Web site (below) for price comparisons for specific journals in which OSU faculty publish.

With evidence of monopolistic pricing on the part of commercial journals, Bergstrom and others urge scholars help discipline commercial publishers to price more like their nonprofit counterparts. One possible remedy is the expansion of nonprofit journals, either by the sponsoring professional organizations publishing more pages in their flagship, general interest journals or facilitating publication of specialized papers in satellite journals. Another suggested remedy is support for electronic journals. Some electronic journals are designed to directly compete with large commercial publishers.

Others have pledged to charge libraries lower prices and may help cover expenses by charging submission fees to potential authors. A third potential remedy is for libraries to pay close attention to the cost effectiveness of journals and cancel subscriptions to overpriced journals whose articles obtain few citations per subscription dollar. Finally, Bergstrom and others argue that scholars can help rein in high commercial journal prices by using their clout as editors and referees and considering a journal's pricing policy in deciding where to submit new papers for publication.

Actions by scholars may be part of the solution, but Phillip Davis, a Cornell University librarian, argues that libraries must also be proactive. He urges libraries to pay attention to cost and relevancy in selecting journals, to explore means of paying for information only when it is used, and to accelerate information exchange with other libraries. Davis also suggests that that libraries consider providing incentives for campus scholars to submit papers to cost-effective journals and, perhaps, to charge scholars for journal access to increase awareness of the true cost of obtaining information. Additional information on the cost of journals, including cost comparisons for specific scientific fields can be found at the OSU Library Web site at http://osulibrary.oregonstate.edu/scholarly_communication/.

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