Big deals: reflections on electronic journal acquisition 1996-2003

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Having participated in big deals for electronic journals since the early days of the Pilot Site Licence Initiative, the University of Sheffield Library has considerable experience of this method of acquisition. It is not the only way of packaging journal content, but in this it delivers a critical mass of current electronic titles. There is now limited financial headroom to sign up for further deals, and constraints arising from the local formularised subject funding system give rise to uncertainties about the ability to sustain existing deals assuming their content remains desirable. We need to evaluate our experience in terms of content, value for money, service quality and user reaction in order to plan for the future. This article presents some personal reflections on that process.

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Sheffield context

The University of Sheffield is a member of the Russell Group and with 73% of departments rated 5 and 5* in the 2001 Research Assessment Exercise is firmly committed to high level research activity. Its teaching reputation is equally sound with 29 areas scoring 22 points and above in the old style Teaching Quality Assessment ratings. Popular with students and voted *Sunday Times* UK University of the Year 2001/2002, Sheffield has more than 21,000 students and has secured funding for further expansion. In terms of subject coverage there are 73 departments grouped in seven Faculties, covering most areas except Veterinary Science, Agriculture and Fine Arts.

The University of Sheffield Library has a budget of £2m, which is somewhat less than some of the other CURL members. Serials consume around 71% of that, despite a succession of cancellation exercises which have reduced the print subscription baseline. A significant aspect of serial fund management is that 78% is derived from formularised subject funds which fluctuate according to student and staff numbers, research ratings and average material costs. This model does not sit well with the concept of one big bill for a publisher deal. Top-sliced journal funds are almost fully committed on supporting one major bibliographic resource for each subject area, and pump priming for development areas such as electronic books and offprints. Hence there is little scope for taking on new deals, and some anxiety about price inflation on existing ones.

History of big deals at Sheffield

Sheffield was an early participant in the Pilot Site Licence Initiative and perceived the publisher big deal as a way of stimulating interest in electronic journals. Take-up was significant and the PSLI Phase II evaluation report noted that Sheffield was a heavy user of all three publishers[1]. This success encouraged the take-up of further deals, some supported by top-sliced funds, so that by 2002 taking various publisher amalgamations into account there were seven big deal subscriptions. Only the Project Muse deal failed to be renewed due to low usage figures, but others were giving cause for concern due to substantial price increases. Big deals delivered over 2,500 or 58% of all electronic serial titles at a cost £127k. The total electronic spend could not be accurately assessed given the complexities of pricing for combined electronic and print subscriptions.

Content

Clearly, acquired content needed to reflect the developing needs of teaching and research for a growing and diverse clientele. In practice we found that both academics and library staff remain largely unfamiliar with publisher brands, so that a big deal requires detailed examination to reveal its correlation with subject focused needs. Our housekeeping system, Talis, initially contained little data about publishers and imprints and despite efforts to rectify this with data from subscription agents, this remains an area of difficulty. System developments for storage manipulation of publisher data are not moving rapidly enough to address this issue, and we have no satisfactory mechanism for ensuring the currency and accuracy of the information. Perhaps this is an area where subscription agents will continue to have a role.

When evaluating a publisher deal we want to know which of their titles we buy currently, have bought previously and how they relate to user needs. Assuming we can assemble this profile from our housekeeping data, a thorough examination of subject relevance is required. How much of the content is unique? Are there titles which no self-respecting department with a high research rating in the subject can live without? Relating more to teaching needs what proportion of the content is, to use an old fashioned term, serviceable? Are the articles sound, fit for the purpose but interchangeable with the material from other sources? Answers to these questions are not easily obtained and rely on the quality of interaction between library staff and their contacts in departments. In the last analysis journal titles must be valued locally in terms of academic respectability and relevance. Publisher branding is rather a blunt instrument in this context.

Knowing exactly what a deal covers has proved to be a less satisfactory aspect of big deals. It sounded simple when we started out, but we soon learnt that it was naïve to assume that 'all of the output' from a publisher meant that in real life. New titles were often excluded in year two or on renewal of a deal, titles disappeared without notice when acquired by other publishers, and combined with changes of title and URL, could result in strange black holes. Accurate lists of titles and amendments need to be a standard component if big deals are to remain a useful method of acquisition. These could be enhanced by details of coverage by resource discovery services, better information about mechanisms for linkage to them and the option of skeleton OPAC or other housekeeping records. How many libraries can and want to resource rapid creation of acquisition and catalogue records for an influx of over 1000 new titles? Is nationwide duplication of effort on this by libraries something that could be addressed as part of big deal negotiations, by add-on services from agents?

Licensing is another element of defining deal coverage where duplication of effort can arise. We view scrutiny of licences as a critical task, and note with concern the increasing divergence of national deals from model licence terms. One licence per publisher suggests an economy of scale compared with a title level approach, but the task remains non-trivial with annual renewals, variations from year to year and delays in resolving queries. Multiplied across a number of publishers considerable time and effort is required by each individual library, but is a vital part of defining usage and access rights especially archival ones.

Pricing concerns

Assuming evaluation of deal content has been completed, clear price information is essential to start assessing value, but in fact pricing complexities are legion. Establishing an agreed print spend baseline, cross-access fees, price capping, loyalty discounts for continued renewal combine to make it very difficult to discover the bottom line price. Strange anomalies have arisen such as the inclusion by publishers of departmental subscriptions which are not controlled by the Library. This is compounded by having to justify, explain or just understand the value for money equation for buying the same content twice, i.e. in both print and electronic. There is an inherent tension between simplicity and flexibility, but does it have to be this bad? The gain of a one-line invoice for multiple titles can seem to be lost when time has to be invested in understanding and validating the price it displays.

The underlying ethos of e-content pricing linked to print spend feels increasingly irksome and anachronistic from a library point of view. It seemed a logical approach in the early days, but other concerns have now emerged. Is it appropriate to provide e-access to exactly the same material as in the print collection. Is past subscription to print a valid predictor of e-use? For example our past usage of printed abstracts bears no relation to current use of their electronic equivalents. Should a library be forced to maintain a particular level of spend with a publisher although its list may vary from year to year?

The price paid to the publisher is not the only cost to be calculated and understood. As print acquisitions are reduced, there may be staff savings on check-in, shelving, binding and space costs. Research on this is rather limited[2], and it is uncertain whether such savings are cancelled out by dealing with licences, technical access queries, and linkage work. Are there also costs in the process of explaining all the complexities of pricing, content, access, etc. to budget holders, library staff outside serials and e-services, and individual end users?

Once deal content and costs have been specified, the question of fund management arises. For the University of Sheffield Library and probably others with devolved serials funding this becomes even more critical if delivery is changed to electronic only. To finance two e-only deals, we have 'frozen' the subject fund accreditations from the print era. This means that difficulties arise if a department wishes to cancel a title it can no longer afford. Can we substitute other titles from the same publisher for that or another department? Do we have the cash to fund centrally? Is that good sense politically, strategically? What happens if access to text ceases because a title is sold to another publisher. The deal cost may not go down, but another subscription might be needed. A static funding system cannot easily cope with changing selection needs and cannot easily withstand price increases.

Assuming all administrative concerns can be satisfied, the need to assess value to users remains. Libraries probably need to allocate more staff resource to doing this more thoroughly. Overall there are satisfyingly large numbers amongst our usage figures. We had no real idea about print usage, but we do know that we scored highly both in the PSLI and amongst libraries subscribing to NESLI deals. We have been top SwetsNet user on one occasion, and boasted one of the cheapest costs per download for Academic Press titles amongst CURL libraries. Without appropriate benchmarks it is difficult to interpret this evidence. Clearly there is more work to do, but big deals have set an important trend in making detailed data available. Increased standardisation with the advent of COUNTER[3] will aid further analysis and comparison of data from different publishers.

Usage of titles not previously offered in print is clear, but more detail is needed about the occurrence of specific publishers in reading lists, for example. Document supply requests have fallen, suggesting that some user needs are fulfilled by increased full text access. We now have some experience of offering new material and the ability to observe user reaction to it. This phenomenon has been observed in North American libraries[4] and leads to the inclusive, rather than exclusive approaches to selection. At Sheffield we find ourselves without further funds to try out new big deals and the uncomfortable feeling that 'we don't know that what we don't have is what we don't want'. However, there are also rows of zeroes in usage data, where titles have not been used by anyone. Does usage of other titles justify that? Subject clusters might offer a better model, but they need to be flexible. Sheffield would not want a biological cluster with a high proportion of agricultural titles, for example.

Meanwhile on the qualitative side, our limited surveys of users about going e-only for some publishers, show a continuing level of conservatism. Some younger IT-aware research staff still comment "the print remains a useful browsing medium". Other users refer to concerns about access to PCs, quality of images in e-versions, but above all the concern about archival access. The library shares that concern and advises full exploration of policies and options before going e-only. Users need to know if archival access might mean extra payments, and cd-roms or magnetic tape with limited functionality rather than continuing website access. On the other hand large scale electronic access has meant a user-friendly desktop service for those who found large print collections inaccessible and intimidating. "I favour e-versions… I am so depressed by the loss of my departmental library and the difficulty of using the Main Library" wrote one user. This feeling has been echoed by feedback from mature and part-time learners in a number of fields, notably education.

Conclusion

My feeling is that experience of big deals has allowed libraries to structure their ignorance of the impact of electronic journals. Perhaps they were complacent in the print era having pruned subscriptions to fit the budget, unaware of the potential effect on users of a wealth of hitherto unavailable material. Big deals have exposed a gulf of unfamiliarity between publishers and libraries, and questioned the role of inter-mediaries. Attempting to manage big deals has highlighted weaknesses in housekeeping systems and funding models. There are no simple solutions to the issues raised, but at least the big deal has kick-started the move towards electronic journal delivery and highlighted the big questions that need to be addressed.

References

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