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After the Big Deals Are Done

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Here is comfort for those on the verge of leaving Big Deals, solace for those who already have. Whether you arrived at this juncture by principle or lack of principal, the message is the same: the survival of the academy is not at stake.

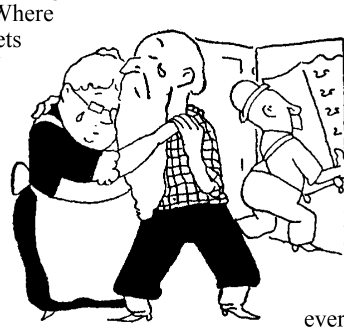
Southern Illinois University Carbondale's Morris Library left three Big Deals over the course of 2009 and 2010. Yet faculty continue to conduct research, publish, and teach their students, who continue to write their theses and dissertations and get their degrees. Grants continue to be secured. People continue to come into the Library to use our resources. All evidence indicates that subscriptions to entire publisher portfolios are not essential to the functioning of a modern research university. Not that this serves as some kind of epiphany for higher education; **SIUC**, like every other higher education institution, functioned quite well for over a hundred years before the advent of the Big Deal — thrived, and even grew.

SIUC *is* a modern research university, in the *Doctoral University: Higher Research Activity* category, according to the 2016 Carnegie Classification. We are not in the top tier, we are in the second tier. This puts us in the same category with 106 other U.S. higher education institutions, including **Auburn**, **Dartmouth**, **Oklahoma State**, the **University of Rhode Island**, and the like.

Our participation in Big Deals foundered on the faulty premise underlying the model, which is predicated on the maintenance of a library's expenditure at the point of time in which it signs on to the agreement (its "historical spend"), plus an annual percentage increase. The faulty premise is that our budget would continue, at least on average, to increase enough to meet the Big Deals' increases. This did not happen, as it did not and still does not happen for many institutions — probably for the majority of the 106 *Highers* like us.

In practice, because the Deals' annual increases exceeded the increases in the Library's budget, they were consuming an ever larger share of our budget. In 2004, we spent 24% of our budget on these Deals; by 2008, the figure had risen to 33%. This, in turn, meant less money for the universe of resources available for us to choose from — even while that universe is always expanding. There are two costs associated with this: the cutting of the Library's existing resources to compensate, and the opportunity cost of not adding new resources because the budget is squeezed and there is no additional funding available. Assessments of the value of Big Deals (discussed further below) that do not include these costs fail to present the whole story.

They also ignore the big picture — the impact of Big Deals on the scholarly publishing marketplace as a whole. The costs mentioned above also reverberate in the marketplace, since institutions locked into Big Deals are spending less elsewhere. Where do libraries go to find offsets for the increasing costs of the Big Deals? To those publishers and vendors who do not operate on that model, particularly academic and professional societies, university presses, and independent publishers. This has the effect of forcing these publishers, who are not driven by the search for profit and who charge lower subscription prices than do commercial publishers, to consider other arrangements for their publishing, all too often resulting in their consumption by the commercial publishers. There are diverse reasons for smaller publishers to pursue such a move, but one important consideration is the guaranteed subscription base (and hence income) provided by libraries' participation in Big Deals. We are indisputably contributing to market consolidation, which results in ever higher prices for all of us.



Leaving the Big Deals levels the playing field for all publishers and vendors in our collection development decisions. We decide, of course channeling the preferences of the University community, what we will buy or subscribe to, based on all those traditional and developing factors and metrics that librarians have at their disposal. This allows us to develop a true freedom collection.

Locally, then, an important outcome of leaving Big Deals is the increased flexibility and control over the collection gained, since less of the budget is tied up in arrangements that lock in an ever-increasing obligation. Unfortunately, in these times of scarcity, the flexibility we have achieved is measured out not in what new products we can add, but which existing resources we will cut. Nevertheless, the problem would be exacerbated if we had maintained our Deals — the estimate is that we save annually between $300,000 and $400,000 (depending on what annual increase percentage is used) since our departure; that is the amount we would we paying *each and every year* to the three publishers above what we are paying now, if we had not left the Deals. The figure would of course increase every year. To compensate for this difference, we would be forced to cut other resources, not because they are less valuable, but because they are not protected by similar agreements. To put it in perspective, this is about the amount we spend on books each year.

Greater flexibility is also achieved in the ability to adjust our current subscriptions from the Big Deal publishers, since we are not contractually bound to maintain our current spend. Optimal pricing is achieved on an annual basis if we do maintain our subscriptions, but we have

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A bull represents the attitude of an investor with an optimistic, "bullish" outlook. A bear looks at the market pessimistically and has a grumpy, "bearish" outlook. And then there is "the farm," or the chickens and the pigs. Chickens are characterized by investors who are afraid to take risks and tend to see a low return on their investment. Pigs on the other hand are the opposite of Chickens. These are high-risk investors are looking for a big score in a short length of time. They tend to follow hot tips and invest without sound decision making. Often, the bulls and bears reap profits from pigs because of the latter's recklessness in investing. Thus the old stock market saying, "Bulls make money, bears make money, but pigs just get slaughtered."

Taking the TBL approach when considering Options vs. Needs and Costs vs. Budgets relies on: evaluating data, considering and setting value thresholds, balancing patrons' wants along with mission of the library and factoring risk aversion in the current fiscal economy to arrive at sustainable decisions concerning Big Deal packages. There is no easy answer. As with investments, we all have to be diligent in watching the economy and assessing how the supply and demand will play out, for there are never any guarantees. You may be a bull or a bear, but always learn from the chickens and pigs.

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been able to reduce our expenditures with the publishers when needed. The important point is that we can do so much more easily now.

Negotiations have not been adversely affected by our departures. Publishers still, and always will, want as much of our (and your) budget as they can get, and will negotiate to achieve that. This is why, contrary to what may seem obvious, we have for the most part been able to negotiate *lower* increases than what we had when we were in the Big Deals.

The advantages to not participating in Big Deals are clear. How to explain their resiliency? Most institutions are not so flush with funding that the costs of Big Deals, as described above, are avoided.

The value must be assumed to be worth those costs.

The appeal of Big Deals appears obvious: access to journals not otherwise available. The value also appears obvious, as most frequently shown by download numbers. We too were susceptible to the appeal, and impressed by the apparent value, of our Deals. When we looked more closely, which we were forced to do because the faulty premise of the model became more and more exposed, the lush landscape of plenty looked more like a mirage, and the numbers were printed on a house of cards.

Assessment of resources relies heavily on the number of downloads and a Cost Per Use calculation. (These may or may not be the only assessment components, but is anyone not using them?) These metrics, particularly the latter, can then be compared to those of other resources. The higher the download numbers, and the lower the Cost Per Use figure, the stronger the case for the Big Deal, or any resource.

Little attention is given to any interpretation of the numbers. Downloads are taken at face value as an objective criterion of assessment. A download is a "good thing," an accurate indicator of demand. Further, downloads are downloads, and it is assumed that there is no difference between a download from one publisher, vendor, or resource compared to another. Partly this is due to the success of the Counter standards that have been developed, which do achieve at least some consistency in the reporting of resource use. Partly it is due to the difficulty of tracing how downloaded content is actually used.

There is a real need for the profession to examine these assumptions more closely. Much is riding on them, but serious examination of them has only occurred around the edges. Our experience suggests that there are significant flaws in these assumptions, and that while download numbers are essential in assessment, they do not contain any meaning in and of themselves. A detailed description of the evidence provided by our experience at **SIUC** is outside the scope here, but is summarized below (more information can be found in **Nabe, Jonathan** and **Fowler, David**. "Leaving the 'Big Deal' … Five Years Later." *The Serials Librarian* 69, No. 1 (Jul 2015): 20-28. doi:10.1080/0361526X.2015.1048037). For the sake of brevity, the case of only one publisher is discussed here, but the observations and trends are applicable for the others as well.

Downloads of non-subscribed content alone from this publisher amounted to 11,254 from 597 titles in the year before we ceased our Big Deal. These are phenomenal numbers that would seem to go a long way to justifying the Deal. Closer examination revealed some concerns, however. To begin with, 62% of the non-subscribed titles had averaged less than 12 downloads per year, and a full 10% had received no downloads. By any measure, these were not essential titles for the University.

Even more clarification was provided by analysis conducted post-departure. We did this analysis because we wanted to measure the impact of our decisions; it was possible, after all, that they had been the wrong ones. The results indicated otherwise.

Downloads and the CPU calculations derived from them can only work for paid content. How do you assess the value of lost content, or measure the impact of a decision to end access to it? Requests via Interlibrary loan for lost titles can serve as a proxy for actual demand, and that is the method we have used. Objections can be made that ILLs do not fully represent all demand, either, since researchers can use professional and personal networks, individual subscriptions, open access repositories or websites, etc., to get the content. Download numbers over-report demand, ILL requests under-report it. The real demand lies somewhere in between, no one really knows where. But in addition to serving as a corrective to the download numbers in the attempt to measure demand and calculate value, analysis of ILL requests in this context also fulfills a practical need: it tells us the impact on library operations, staff time and outlays, of leaving Big Deals.

Again, for brevity's sake details are provided for the single publisher used above. Briefly, the annual number of ILL requests averages 2% of the pre-departure downloads of the non-subscribed titles, over the five year period post-departure. 47% percent of the lost titles which had some downloads pre-departure have not had any ILL requests. The average number of ILL requests per title is less than two. There has been no flood of requests for ILLs, putting pressure on the staff, or spike in our costs, putting pressure on our budget. While the ratio of requests to downloads has increased over the years — to be expected as additional issues of the journals are published — it has never reached a level that cannot be absorbed by the library as part of its everyday workflow. If any given title is shown by ILL requests to warrant an individual subscription, swapping for a lesser used title is always possible — but has not been indicated to date.

What this analysis shows is that for us, Big Deals were unaffordable overkill. Nice to have, for public relation's sake and for convenience's sake too. But they were not providing essential content; on the contrary, they were forcing us to cut essential resources, and would have done so at an accelerating rate had we maintained them. Leaving them has not led us to the brink of oblivion, it has just taken us back to the place we all came from: a Library with the subscriptions that the University needs and that we can afford.

Doubling Down on the Big Deal in Wisconsin

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The **University of Wisconsin-Madison** has a long history with the Big Deal. In 2001 **Ken Frazier**, who at the time was the University Librarian at **UW-Madison**, wrote an article in *D-Lib Magazine* in which he coined for the first time the phrase the "Big Deal" as a way to describe journal publishers' large-scale journal aggregations.[1] In his article, Frazier warned libraries against trading short-term benefits for long-term consequences. The Big Deal, he warned, weakened library collections with unwanted journals, increased libraries' dependence on publishers, reduced budgetary flexibility, limited libraries' ability to influence the scholarly communications system in the future, threatened serials vendors, and placed limits on resource sharing. **Frazier** said **UW-Madison** would take a principled stance and hold out against the Big Deal. It would license electronic access to only the highest-used journal titles. It would keep the rest of its journals in print, select journals title-by-title, and continue to rely on resource sharing for access to other content.

Four years later **Frazier** published another article on the Big Deal.[2] In it he outlined how **UW-Madison** was continuing to hold out against the Big Deal, but was also faced with both a difficult local budget situation

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