February 2017

Doubling Down on the Big Deal in Wisconsin

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Recommended Citation

Way, Doug (2017) "Doubling Down on the Big Deal in Wisconsin," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 29: Iss. 1, Article 9.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.7708>

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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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and escalating journal costs. These had led to the systematic cancellation of journals with “no end to the cutting in sight.”⁷³ Life without the Big Deal, according to **Frazier**, meant not having the resources users needed and “always having to say you are sorry to faculty and researchers.”⁷⁴ Within a few years of that article the university had signed agreements for two Big Deals.

A decade later the financial situation **Frazier** had described at **UW-Madison** had not improved. Over that time the Libraries’ collections budget had continued to stagnate, losing nearly \$4 million in buying power. Journal cancellations continued to be the norm, while the amount of money spent on interlibrary loan (ILL) had expanded dramatically. **Frazier** was no longer the University Librarian, but the Libraries still only had those two Big Deals. This was partly a result of **UW-Madison’s** principled stance against the Big Deal. In many ways, however, the impact of **Frazier’s** philosophy was secondary to structural barriers that existed at the university and the Libraries.

A decentralized administrative structure for libraries at **UW-Madison** hindered any move toward the acquisition of large journal packages. The university’s General Library System (GLS) consists of 16 of the larger campus libraries, but there were nearly 25 additional libraries on campus. While campus libraries cooperated on a variety of fronts, the large number of independent actors made it difficult to reach a consensus. Further exacerbating the problem was a historic desire for each library to pay “their fair share.” If a library was unable or unwilling to do so, this had the ability to derail any collaborative collections efforts. Finally, a budgetary model in the GLS that allocated collections funds at the lowest possible fund-level hampered efforts to make large central acquisitions like Big Deals.

I arrived at **UW-Madison** in 2014 and began to review the Libraries’ entire collections program, including the journal packages the university did and did not have. Through this initial analysis it became very clear to me that the library needed to take a closer look at journal packages from several publishers. That subsequent analysis focused almost solely on saving money, including an examination of both inflation and ILL costs. The library analyzed how much inflation it was seeing annually on existing subscriptions from specific publishers and then used that data to create projections for potential savings over time. ILL borrowing and lending over time was also analyzed to determine potential savings and to project potential revenue. The goal of this analysis was to identify at what point these potential Big Deals would begin saving **UW-Madison** money and how much those savings would be over time. In the end, we identified two Big Deals that had the potential to provide significant and immediate savings.

From the start I was very open and up front as I discussed the benefits and downsides of the Big Deals with selectors and campus libraries staff. While publishers almost invariably talked about the “value” of the new content the library would be adding, I deliberately downplayed that fact. It was felt that those discussions could be a distraction from the true focus, which was saving money. It was true that this added content was key to achieving savings on ILL, but I was also cognizant of philosophical concerns and arguments, such as the one **Frazier** made, regarding how Big Deals mix weak and strong titles together. Overall, however, the obstacles that needed to be overcome had to do almost exclusively with structural barriers rather than philosophical concerns.

In working with non-GLS campus libraries, the goal was to remove impediments to participation. The GLS needed to abandon the “fairness” approach and reassure these libraries that it would not cost them more to participate. To do that the GLS agreed to pick up the additional costs associated with these Big Deals. In these discussions, the inflation control aspect of these packages was promoted and the libraries were provided information on how much money these packages would be saving them over time.

For conversations with selectors the focus was on the big picture. They were shown how much money the libraries would be saving and how this benefited them in the end. To fund these Big Deals the Libraries were going to move money allocated for journal subscriptions that were part of these packages from selectors’ individual fund lines to a centralized fund line. This would remove the ongoing inflation burden from those funds for titles that they could no longer cancel. While there was some push back from some selectors, as they were concerned that their funds were now smaller, I explained that the appearance of the bigger budget was a façade, as they would have no control over many of those titles.

After laying the groundwork for several months, the addition of the two new Big Deals ended up being a non-issue. Being up front about the positive and negative aspects of these Big Deals demonstrated an awareness of the philosophical concerns surrounding them. Likewise, by providing comprehensive data, abandoning the “fairness” principle and centralizing the funding of Big Deals the Libraries were able to overcome structural barriers it faced. Finally, by articulating a succinct goal and using a thorough analysis to illustrate how that goal could be achieved, the Libraries were able to develop strong buy-in. And in the end, both packages acquired actually ended up saving the Libraries even more money in the first year than initially projected.

Now that the Libraries have doubled the number of Big Deals at our university, does this mean **UW-Madison** is a fan of the Big Deal? In a word, no. Many of the concerns that **Frazier** outlined fifteen years ago still exist. Big Deals do bundle “weak” journals with the “strong.” But libraries have found that “weak” journals often see greater use than “strong” journals. Big Deals do limit budgetary flexibility. **UW-Madison** has seen a decrease in spending on monographs that is, in part, directly related to additional spending on journals. At the same time, however, **UW-Madison** has transformed into a campus with a heavy STEM focus and perhaps the shift toward those kinds of resources is both inevitable and a sign that the Libraries are changing with the campus. Finally, Big Deals do diminish the role of serial vendors. Certainly the instability in this marketplace, as seen with the recent **SWETS** bankruptcy, can have negative impacts on libraries, but one has to question whether this is a valid reason to avoid the Big Deal.

Avoiding the Big Deal at **UW-Madison** did not solve the serials crisis, nor did it end up saving the university money. Journal publishing continues to exist in an environment that is devoid of normal market controls, and avoiding the Big Deal simply moved costs from our collections budget to our ILL budget. That doesn’t mean it was the wrong choice. Over time philosophies and approaches change. Interestingly, the biggest barrier the Libraries faced was not that shift in philosophy, but overcoming the structural barriers and intransigence that existed locally. The decision to add these Big Deals was based on practicality and saving money. If a better option had existed the Libraries would have gone down that road. **UW-Madison**, like many libraries, chose the Big Deal not because it was a wonderful model, but because sometimes it is pragmatism and not principles that wins the day. 🌸

Endnotes

1. **Kenneth Frazier**, “The Librarians’ Dilemma: Contemplating the Costs of the ‘Big Deal,’” *D-Lib Magazine* 7, no. 3 (2001).
2. **Kenneth Frazier**, “What’s the Big Deal?,” *The Serials Librarian* 48, no. 1/2 (2005): 49-59.
3. *Ibid.*, 54.
4. *Ibid.*, 54.