"Managing the Big Deal"

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• Familiarity with bundled content concepts that can extend beyond journals to cover eBooks, streaming video, and streaming music.
• Unlimited simultaneous user access which serves our large campus population.
• Remote access which serves our distance education programs.
• Opportunities for cost-per-use analysis through COUNTER statistics.
• Reduced demand for stack shelf space, opening up room for new library services.

As a research library, MSU prefers to collect with an eye to long-term ownership. The mix of “owned” and “rented” content in the Big Deal varies from that ideal: should we break some of these deals, we could lose access to content that came in via the top-up fee. However, limits on resources (not only acquisitions dollars but also building space and staff time) increasingly push us toward strategies that help us meet as many needs as we can, with the resources we have. We no longer expect that we can guess all of the resources that library users will want (so that we can buy those materials in advance), and we no longer expect that when we do pay for materials in advance, that library users will use every resource.

The Big Deal model with its mix of long-term ownership and conditional rented access complements other library strategies that move away from traditional expectations about what we own and how we own it:
• Consortial sharing is a step toward cooperative collection building, in which ILL fills a substantial role. MSU has ILL lending agreements across the CIC and also in our state through the MelCat system. As a rule of thumb, academic libraries have seen that perhaps half of monograph selections go unread (just as we now see that some portion of Big Deal content goes unread). When in doubt, it now makes sense to wait before we buy some titles, since we can borrow many books from other libraries … and in return, we lend widely.
• For eBooks, ILL is difficult or impossible, but eBook packages can offer a lot of titles at reasonable cost. MSU has both frontlist Big Deal agreements with major publishers, and also aggregated rental packages from ebrary and EBSCO. Once again, we understand that some content will go unread, and that we will not own some content forever.

• MSU also rents aggregations of periodical articles, such as EBSCO Business Source and ProQuest Academic Complete. While some content goes unread and content is not owned, pricing and convenience justify offering these tools.
• Finally, MSU has a few PDA/DDA plans (mainly for films at this time): some lead to ownership, some to rental access, and all begin with lists of titles in excess of what will be used or paid for.

While these concepts and approaches are not quite the same as Big Deals for journals, all of these models break out of the traditional model of title-by-title selection by library staff, in pursuit of other efficiencies that can reconcile user access with budget realities.

Conclusion

If MSU had limited academic programs, gaps in the science curriculum, a reduced emphasis on current research findings, or an uneven materials budget for the library, the Big Deal model would be far less congenial. Rising journal costs, particularly in the sciences, challenge the library budget and force us to prioritize our selections. Given conditions on our campus, however, Big Deals have been part of an array of strategies to stretch available budget dollars.

Further Reading


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“Managing The Big Deal”

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A recent query for “big deal” in a library science indexing database provided 109 hits, dating back to 1987. Not all of these articles related to what we as librarians think of when we hear that phrase. In fact, it’s striking that not very long ago, those two words put together did not mean something controversial and they were not always capitalized. When did the Big Deal become a big deal?

Coined in the early 2000s, it was originally used to describe an emerging acquisition model in which publishers offered aggregated collections of online journals for one price, through a multiyear contract with a fixed price increase. The impact of acquiring journal content in this fashion has been studied and reported on at conferences ever since, and continues to be discussed in this issue of ATG. The actual implementation of a Big Deal acquisition and the ongoing management of it often seems to be forgotten in these discussions.

Any time libraries buy or lease something in bulk, it requires translation into the infrastructure that we use to manage our library collection. This includes our integrated library system (ILS) and our discovery systems, and any type of knowledge base that includes the holdings information for the journals in a deal. There is a significant amount of staff time and resources involved with these efforts, not only for the initial acquisition, but for the ongoing management of this bundled content. Does this management represent a hidden cost that isn’t taken into consideration when we talk about costs of the Big Deal? What happens to the Big Deal once the ink on the license agreement is dry?

The Secret Life of The Big Deal

All libraries have some system for managing their print and their electronic resources, either through an ILS or some type of electronic resource management system (ERMS) or even a highly sophisticated, homegrown set of spreadsheets. All of these systems try to implement in some way the functional requirements of acquiring and managing electronic resources, initially defined and laid out by the Electronic Resources Management
Initiative (ERMI) of the Digital Library Federation (DLF) back in 2004. Specifically, Appendix A of ERMI lays out functional requirements for ERMS, which includes general requirements (resource discovery, bibliographic management, access management), and staff requirements (interface, selection and evaluation, resource administration and management, business). Some of these functions are harder with Big Deal content packages, simply because the systems built upon these requirements are geared toward an individual e-journal or e-resource, while publishers are increasingly offering content in bulk and as larger units or entities.

For libraries, tracking what we have when things are sold in bulk can be a challenge. Libraries are still required to track things at a more granular level, either for administrative reasons, or because the ILS requires this information, or because we have to provide lists of what we actually have access to in order to make the resources available and understandable to users who are looking for them. No one searches for Springer Core Collection or Wiley Journals Database. It often seems that the expectation for the unit of discovery is getting smaller, from a journal to an article to a webpage, or sent by the vendor, and calculating the individual cost for funds, and creating a larger, more multidisciplinary fund helps staff immensely, but it also requires an acknowledgement that moving resources between publishers can work on making the implementation of Big Deal acquisition models like the Big Deal, or even the new evidenced-based acquisition models. For example, a DDA model may need to have an e-book package and have immediate access on the publisher site, but the loading of the MARC records happens months later; an invoice for a large journal package may have to be itemized from a lump sum to individual title prices to be able to process payment for it. All of these things add up, in terms of staff time, and even access and discovery time (and this is crucial for any library that has undertaken an EBA pilot which has a set access period.)

Both libraries and publishers can work on making the implementation of Big Deal acquisition go more smoothly, in part by realizing the level of detail required, but also by providing solutions to the title-level tracking problem. A good example of something the publisher can do that makes electronic resource librarians smile is the creation and maintenance of Big Deal holdings in a specific target or collection database. (It was a good day at the Hesburgh Libraries when the new Wiley Journals Database target appeared in SFX.) Libraries can also rethink the way their funding is distributed and how narrowly funds have to be tracked. Taking subject-specific funds and creating a larger, more multidisciplinary fund helps staff immensely, but it also requires an acknowledgement that moving from a specific subject fund to a more general fund could affect reporting that is done out of the ILS. Subscription agents and services such as TRANSFER also provide support for this translation of invoices into title-by-title pricing and the movement of journals between publishers throughout the year. All of these efforts need to be based on a mutual understanding of the way libraries need to make information available and how publishers are vendors and supporting it.