the big deal *http://bit.ly/1uVLXbN*

what is it?

"A Big Deal is a comprehensive licensing agreement in which a library or library consortium agrees to buy electronic access to all or a large portion of a publisher's journals for a cost based on expenditures for journals already subscribed to by the institution(s) plus an access fee" (Frazier, 2005), 50.

The Big Deal was a publisher response to the serials crisis libraries were facing in the late 1990's. Libraries were facing massive print cancellations because acquisitions budgets were losing purchasing power in relation to the cost of scholarly journals, the add-on costs for web access, and the proliferation of new journals.

Publishers offered an easy solution: if libraries maintained their current print subscription base, publishers would give them a "big deal" bundling large collections of electronic journals, thereby allowing libraries to expand access and develop collections without significant additional cost. The transparent cost of individual titles was bundled into a single price for the whole collection.

how does it work?

A publisher agrees to provide full-text access to all or most of its journal collection to a subscribing institution. This is also known as the "bundled approach" to licensing. The Big Deal has been largely identified with scholarly journal publishing. It is often based on consortial agreements, but it can also be a direct agreement between the institution and the publisher. The Library typically cancels its print subscriptions and individual electronic subscriptions and gains access to the full suite (with possible exclusions).

who's doing it?

Big Deals have become very prevalent in universities and colleges. According to Carlson & Pope's (2009) survey of academic libraries,"86.7% of respondents said that a vendor or publisher had approached them with a Big Deal offer, with 81.5% subscribing to the package as a result" (p.388). An ARL study (Streib & Blixrud, 2013) indicated that consortia negotiate many large bundles on behalf of libraries. In Canada, the first national university libraries Big Deals were negotiated by CNSLP (forerunner of CRKN) in 2001. In Ontario, the OCUL Projects Officer works in close collaboration with OCUL-IR (Information Resources Committee) to determine priorities and strategies. In addition to CRKN, regional consortia and other Canada-wide consortia, e.g., Consortia Canada, work on behalf of their member libraries to license various Big Deals.

why is it significant?

The Big Deal has been a defining characteristic of collection development strategy and consortial licensing of electronic resources since the early 2000s. Numerous structural problems have emerged:

- Sustainability: The cost for the Big Deal has grown dramatically, possibly as a result of annual increases or growth in collection size. As a result, it consumes an ever larger portion of the collections budget (snowball effect). Sustainability is very problematic in an era of budgetary restraint.
- Pricing model: The pricing model is typically still based on the historic print subscriptions prior to entering the Big Deal. This has also become extremely problematic as libraries have moved away from the print model.
- Usage dilemma: Usage of titles (e.g., downloads and searches) is often clustered around a small percentage of titles. Many titles are never used.
- Value assessment: In an era of demand-driven acquisition, the cost of the Big Deal leaves many questioning whether there is sufficient value. Non-disclosure provisions have been a source of much frustration.
- Perpetual access rights: usually granted only for previously subscribed titles (in print). Exiting the Big Deal can mean a massive loss of content.
- Cancellation or swapping allowance: Publishers can impose restrictive terms on what can be cancelled and what can be swapped in or out.
- Impact on collection development strategy: When Big Deals are prioritized, other scholarly resources often take a back seat and can't be acquired.

the big deal *http://bit.ly/1uVLXbN*

where is it going?

Libraries and consortia have been having heated discussion on the pros and cons of The Big Deal, and the implications of leaving such agreements. The challenge of crafting a cost-sharing model that would be perceived as equitable by all institutions (big, medium, and small) is often problematic. Exit strategies and checklists are being developed in order to provide options. There is active discussion on the need for more flexible options, e.g., full collection, subject collections, and customized collections, to retain the viability of the Big Deal.

Assessment of the Big Deal has become a widespread activity in recent years OhioLink in the U.S. developed an orderly retreat mechanism based on a ranking of articles-downloaded aggregated across member institutions, to minimize the impact of reduced content. The California Digital Library has developed a "weighted value algorithm" that assesses the value of journals based on metrics of utility, quality, and cost effectiveness; this has been used to assess objectively the value of licensed journals.

A 2014 study conducted by Bergstrom et al revealed the wide variation in pricing charged by publishers to institutions of different size and type, thus leading to much conversation about the fairness and value of the bundled approach. The broad global dialogue on the importance of making the results of publicly-funded research openly available has fuelled much conversation about the equity of commercial Big Deal agreements—and whether open access models will supplant the traditional strategies for acquiring and delivering scholarly content.

what are the implications for libraries?

There are weighty implications for libraries in assessing the pros and cons of the Big Deal, and the consequences for fulfilling the library's mandate. Here are some of the key issues:

- Sustainability: Is the agreement sustainable financially over the long term?
- Value: How does one measure value of the content, and what metrics are compelling to use?
- Reduced access to content: How would the unbundling of the Big Deal affect researchers' access to scholarly literature? Would document delivery or interlibrary loans need to be used in order to supply titles that would no longer be subscribed?
- Operational capacity: Technical services and subject librarian workflows would need to be reassessed to accommodate title-by-title selection, access, management, and payment.
- Collection budget: Reassessing how to distribute funds when there is no longer a large central cost for participation in Big Deals.
- Post-cancellation: Ensuring ongoing access to content for which your library has perpetual rights. This can be challenging to implement.
- Competitiveness: Would the cancellation of the Big Deal affect faculty recruitment in some disciplines?

All OCULA Information Briefs are available at http://bit.ly/1IKV9Jt

further reading

Bergstrom, T et al. (2014). Evaluating Big Deal Journal Bundles. *PNAS Early Edition*, Web 29 Aug. 2014.

Carlson, A. & Pope, B. (2009). The "Big Deal": A Survey of How Libraries are Responding and What the Alternatives Are *Serials Librarian*, 57(4), 380-398.

Cleary, C. (2009) Why the "Big Deal" Continues to Persist. *Serials Librarian*, 57(4), 364-379.

Frazier, K. (2005). What's the Big Deal? *Serials Librarian*, *48*(1/2), 49-59, Web 14 Aug. 2014.

Gatten, J. & Sanville, T (2004). An Orderly Retreat from the Big Deal: Is It Possible for Consortia? *D-Lib Magazine* *10*(10), Web 21 Aug. 2014.

Nabe, J., & Fowler, D. C. (2012). Leaving the "Big Deal": Consequences and Next Steps. *Serials Librarian*, *62*(1-4), 59-72.

Streib, K & Blixrud, J. (2013). The State of Large Publisher Bundles in 2012. *Research Library Issues, 282*, 13-26.

September 2014
Tony Horava
University of Ottawa Library