Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Evidence Summary

Development of Deal- and Journal-level Metrics and Methods Assists Librarians to Evaluate Big Deals

A Review of:
Blecic, D.D., Wiberley, Jr., S.E., Fiscella, J.B., Bahnmaier-Blaszczak, S., & Lowery, R. (2013). Deal or no deal?: Evaluating Big Deals and their journals. *College & Research Libraries*, *74*(2), 178-193.

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Abstract

Objective – To assess the value of aggregated journal packages (Big Deals) and to select individual journal titles for continued subscription should a deal be cancelled.

Design – Case study.

Setting – Doctoral research university library in the United States of America.

Subjects – Three anonymous Big Deals.

Methods – The authors define metrics at two levels (deal and journal) to evaluate Big Deal packages. The metrics rely heavily on the COUNTER JR1 metric Successful Full-Text Article Request (SFTAR).

Main Results – The authors found that while 30% of journals provide 80% of SFTARs, the cost of subscribing to these journals individually would not save significant sums of money. Additionally, they speculate that library users would increase the number of interlibrary loan requests to access the 20% of SFTARs that would be inaccessible if a Big Deal was cut, amounting to increased costs.

Conclusion – With no sign of publishers moving to change the price and conditions of Big Deals, these arrangements are becoming unsustainable for libraries. As this occurs, librarians require methods of assessing which deals to keep and which to cut, as well as evidence of to which individual journals they should subscribe. The authors of this paper set out one method of conducting these assessments that they have found to be useful at an academic library. They conclude by stating that even with SFTAR data, individuals must keep in mind the necessity of providing equitable access to all of a university community's user groups.

Commentary

In a climate of financial difficulties, there is a need for metrics and methods to assist librarians in evaluating Big Deals, "an online aggregation of journals that publishers offer as a one-price, one size fits all package" (Frazier, 2001). Since Big Deals utilize significant financial resources of academic libraries, they continue to be under close scrutiny for their value to the institution. The authors present an approach used at one research library to assess Big Deals and to select individual journal titles for continued subscription should a deal be cancelled.

As an introduction to the assessment of Big Deals, this article is a must-read. It contains practical instructions for conducting assessment, interwoven with discussion of many of the critical issues and challenges librarians face when examining Big Deals. The authors' suggested assessment steps go beyond examining just a single metric like COUNTER's JR1 (successful full-text article requests), but are not so complex that they require difficult models and special training. There are two processes written about in detail: establishing deal-level metrics and journal-level metrics.

The authors give a thoughtful commentary on major pitfalls of their metrics, including devoting significant discussion to the importance of qualitative measures and individual judgment in addition to quantitative calculations. For example, using the three Big Deals as examples and breaking down each journal title into one of four subject areas (humanities, social sciences, STEM, and health sciences), the authors show that if the SFTAR numbers alone were relied upon, almost all access to humanities journals would have been cut. However, the authors do not formalize these qualitative steps in the Big Deal assessment model as clearly as the quantitative metrics steps. A subsequent paper that captures the qualitative process of assessing the value of add-ons to the packages such as mobile accessibility or interface design, for example, would be of use to those thinking about database assessment.

Additionally, the authors do not account for the value of having large numbers of resources discoverable to serve the long-tail of user searches. A resource may not be used for several years, and then be found to be useful by an individual. Having a comprehensive collection that is discoverable adds value to a library, although it is difficult to assign a specific dollar value to this strength of a Big Deal.

A final gap in the authors' analysis relates to the journal prices used in calculations. While the authors found that the savings projected by the analysis were not significant, they came to this conclusion based on the subscription price for individual journals listed on publishers' websites. It is not known if a library would get a discount on the list prices. If this occurred, it might change the significance of the total savings.

Despite a few minor aspects that could be strengthened, overall this article is a useful and thoughtful contribution to the literature on assessing Big Deals. The authors provide helpful examples of metrics and methods, as well as a roadmap through a potential minefield of mistakes and oversights that could befall librarians doing this type of assessment.

References

Frazier, K. (2001). The librarians' dilemma: Contemplating the costs of the "Big Deal." D-Lib Magazine, 7(3). Retrieved from http://www.dlib.org/dlib/march01/frazier/03frazier.html