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How librarians make decisions: The interplay of subjective and quantitative factors in the cancellation of the “Big Deal”.

Abstract:

This study examines the attempt of Western University librarians to cancel the Wiley big deal in 2016 through interviews with 13 librarians involved in the cancellation project. The motivation for the study is to understand the difficulties the librarians faced in cancelling the Wiley package and to design a model that would take into consideration both the quantitative and qualitative factors involved in their decision-making. Using the Evidence-based Library and Information Practice model, the study found that subjective factors played a large part in their decisions, making it difficult to cancel journals even when quantitative factors provided strong evidence for cancellation.

1. Introduction

Over the last two decades large commercial publishers have succeeded in establishing a stranglehold over the dissemination of scholarly research (Lariviere, Haustein & Mongeon, 2015). In addition, scholars are writing more articles and looking for places to publish them, and publishers have responded with producing more journals (Beverungen, Bohm & Land, 2012; Tenopir & King, 2009). Through mergers and acquisitions over the last 30 years, five major publishing companies have emerged that produce more than 50% of academic output for both natural and medical sciences and social sciences and humanities. The major way in which publishers make journals available to academic libraries is through ejournal packages that they provide at a reduced price, called “Big Deals”. Although the cost per title is low, a significant proportion of the journals in the package are of little use to the university community. In an attempt to gain some control over their costs, university libraries have attempted to break apart the journal packages and acquire only those titles that are highly used by the university community, with varying success. This paper reports on a study that examined the experiences of academic librarians at the University of Western Ontario who attempted to cancel the Wiley ejournal package. Ultimately a consensus could not be reached that would have led to the cancellation of the package. By understanding the factors that librarians consider when making cancellation decisions, it may be possible to create a model that will make it easier to make decisions concerning journal cancellations. The main goal of this study is to determine the interplay of quantitative and subjective factors that influenced the librarians’ decision-making process and how they interact during a cancellation project.

2. Literature review

One significant obstacle to cancelling big deals relates to their pricing structures where high use journals are priced so that the cost of buying them back as individual subscriptions often surpasses the cost of the package (Weicher & Zhang, 2012). In a survey of ARL members in 2012, Strieb and Blizrud (2014) found that although a few libraries have succeeded in reducing costs by reducing the number of titles in their ejournal packages, these cost savings are often not substantial since they have only been able to cancel a small percentage of the titles. In 2015, Memorial University of Newfoundland cancelled four large journal packages (Ambi, Alcock Morgan, & Tiller-Hackett, 2016). Using cost, use and alternate access data they created a list of 220 titles that they would buy back. Feedback from faculty, however, indicated that “many of those engaged in research and teaching...feel that resources of high value to them have been cancelled” (p. 61).

Although most studies of big deal cancellation projects have focused on the quantitative factors that facilitate the unbundling of the big deal, studies are starting to consider the emotional, cognitive and other more qualitative variables that may have an effect on the success and failure of cancellation initiatives. The Université de Montréal project (Gagnon, 2016) to identify essential titles stressed the importance of consulting faculty and formed several committees that incorporated faculty feedback. Williamson, Fernandez and Dixon (2013) concluded that although quantitative data such as usage and cost per use were consistently important factors in the librarians’ decisions, the influence of subjective factors should also be considered when examining librarians’ decision-making process. An issue currently affecting collection management at academic libraries and may have a bearing on future attempts to break apart big deals is the movement away from subject librarians to centralized collection management. In such an arrangement, where most of the decisions are made by a small team of librarians who may not have subject expertise, there may be more reliance on quantitative data to make decisions. A question emerging from these studies and relating to the conference theme, is whether librarians can make cancellation decisions based on quantitative data alone or are subjective factors such as librarians’ knowledge of the subject area and length of experience important for building quality collections?

3. Conceptual model

This project is guided by the conceptual framework of Evidence-Based Library and Information Practice (EBLIP). The EBLIP conceptual model is a relatively new model (adapted from the Evidence Based Medicine model) that prioritizes the use of research studies as the source of evidence in library science practice (Booth, 2002; Crumley & Koufogiannakis, 2002; Koufogiannakis, 2012). An ongoing concern in understanding evidence-based practice is defining what is meant by evidence (Miller et al, 2017; Booth 2010, Eldredge, 2012, Partridge et al, 2010). In a recent study Koufogiannakis’ (2012) identified two types of evidence used in practice: hard evidence and soft evidence. She defined hard evidence as something that is derived from research, external to the practitioner and can be pointed to, such as statistics (p. 12). Soft evidence focuses on experience and accumulated knowledge, opinion, and instinct; evidence that is internal to the practitioner. Tacit knowledge is one form of soft evidence and refers to the practitioner’s “own professional knowledge acquired via experience and education, professional judgement, intuition, and reflection as elements they draw upon to guide their decision-making” (p. 14). Koufogiannakis concludes that EBLIP should adopt a more holistic model that includes soft evidence since “professional knowledge and evidence sources are used together, and they are important aspects of the decision-making process” (p. 18). Our early findings indicate the important role of tacit knowledge, or soft evidence, in the librarians’ decision-making process that often overrides hard evidence.

4. Methodology

The ethics protocol was approved by the Research Ethics Board at Western University in late May of 2017, and recruitment emails were sent out to 25 librarians involved in the Wiley cancellation project shortly afterwards. If the librarians agreed to participate they were asked to complete a short online survey that collected information about their collection subject responsibilities, level of knowledge of their subject area, their relationship with faculty, and their confidence in the cancellation process. They were also asked to rank the factors they used to evaluate the journals. Following the completion of the survey, the librarians were invited to participate in an interview. Fifteen librarians completed the survey, and 13 agreed to be interviewed. Both researchers coded the interview transcripts using N'Vivo software. Similar codes were combined until common themes emerged. The survey data were analysed using SPSS software.

5. Findings

Through an analysis of the survey data two distinct groups formed when comparing the three top ranked factors the participants chose from the survey. We found that while all respondents valued quantitative data to some extent in making decisions, many of the participants also showed a preference for more subjective factors. A natural group emerged who preferred faculty consultation, subject knowledge, and importance to discipline variables, in addition to usage or program reviews. We labelled this group the 'subjective criteria group' consisting of seven participants. The second group, referred to as the 'data-driven criteria group' clearly favoured cost, usage and faculty survey data in their decision-making processes. Six librarians fell in the 'data-driven criteria group'. The following quotation illustrates the interplay between the qualitative and quantitative factors: "I have no problem at all with somebody crunching all those numbers and making all those spread sheets, as long as I get to see the outcome, and have an influence over the final decision."

We found that those participants who had a closer relationship with the faculties in their subject areas or worked in the embedded libraries, had more difficulty in cancelling journals. A fear of backlash from faculty members or a strong identification with the faculty or discipline also made cancellation decisions difficult with participants often preferring to keep a journal if they thought it would be of some use to faculty. Only in a very few cases did the participants feel that they could rely on the quantitative data alone in their decision-making. These participants often had little interactions with faculty members and had worked fewer years in their positions. While most of the participants were in favour of cancelling the big deals and lessening the power of the big publishers, very few offered any solutions that would correct the power imbalance. The participants felt, however, that if faculty were more involved in collection decisions and more aware of the challenges faced by academic libraries, a dialogue would be created between the two groups that could lead to working together to devise a workable solution.

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