A challenge to Goliath

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Megapublishers obligate librarians to buy hundreds of journals they do not need in order to access the journals their constituents actually read. The time has come to challenge this business model, which is unsustainable for the libraries.

The crime of engrossing

The crime of engrossing was explained by the 18th century legal scholar Sir William Blackstone in his book "Commentaries on the Laws of England":

"Engrossing was also described to be the getting into one's possession, or buying up, large quantities of corn, or other dead victual, with intent to sell them again. This must, of course, be injurious to the public, by putting it in the power of one or two rich men to raise the price of provisions at their own discretion. And so the total engrossing of any other commodity, with intent to sell it at an unreasonable price, is an offense indictable and finable at the common law." (Blackstone, 1795) Despite the fact that this transgression has been recognized for hundreds of years, thousands of biomedical research journals are currently engrossed by a few megapublishers, who bundle numerous titles together in large, online subscription packages.

For many years librarians have recognized that these package deals are not sustainable (Library Journal article, 2004), but the situation has now reached a crisis point. Librarians throughout the world are facing budget cuts in the coming fiscal year—some estimates are up to 15% in monetary terms (Van Orsdel and Born, 2009), which will result in even larger cuts in real terms as many subscription prices increase. Budget cuts, of course, translate into fewer subscriptions; this is not necessarily a bad thing, as I will discuss below. But librarians are concerned that they may have to drop important journals from smaller publishers because they are locked into multi-year deals with the megapublishers, effectively forcing them to purchase hundreds of journals they do not need.

"Don't worry, Ma—I'm too big to fail."

Pricing and bundling

What can publishers do to help librarians in these financially difficult times? Smaller publishers who do not have multi-year subscription deals with librarians can help by keeping their subscription prices flat for 2010. We at The Rockefeller University Press announced on April 6th that we will indeed keep our 2010 subscription rates at their 2009 levels.

For years librarians have been effectively forced by the megapublishers to buy poorly performing journals with taxpayers' money.

The largest financial burden on biomedical research librarians, however, comes from the megapublishers, who often bundle hundreds or even thousands of online journals into a multi-year contract. At The Rockefeller University library, the subscription packages from Elsevier, Springer, Wiley-Blackwell, and Nature Publishing Group take up 69% of the total serials budget in 2009. The megapublishers should address the global financial crisis by forgiving contracted price increases and by unbundling the journals in their deals, allowing librarians to choose only the titles they want and can afford.

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Although the advent of online publishing has had many benefits, the bundling of large numbers of journals into a single subscription package is not one of them. In the days when only print journals existed, librarians simply purchased subscriptions to the journals they wanted. The original subscription deals for online content were based on the number of print subscriptions at a particular institution (Research Information Network, 2009). Nearly 15 years later, librarians are still locked into bundled deals, preventing them from choosing only those journals that their constituents need.

The Rockefeller University library subscribes to bundles of online journals from several megapublishers. For one of the bundles, the top 10% of journals garner over 85% of the hits to the bundle from users at the University. Over 40% of the journals in the bundle had no hits at all from the University in 2008!

The American public was recently outraged to learn that federal bailout funds were used to pay bonuses to people in the financial sector despite their poor performances. Yet for years librarians have been effectively forced by the megapublishers to buy poorly performing journals with taxpayers' money, which indirectly supports most academic research libraries and directly supports those at state institutions.

Quality versus quantity

The megapublishers have preyed upon the long-held criterion that the quality of a library is measured by the quantity of journals available to its constituents. From recent conversations with librarians, it is clear that this approach is changing, and librarians are ready to give up their emphasis on quantity in favor of quality. They accept that it would take more effort to choose the 50 most important journals from a particular publisher rather than purchasing a bundle of hundreds of journals (although usage statistics make this easier), but they no longer can afford to pay for access to journals they do not need.

It may seem unlikely that the megapublishers will unbundle their subscription deals when they have made so much money from this business model in the past. But it is finally time for librarians to say "no" to this pricing structure and to start dropping the bundled subscriptions completely. This is particularly feasible with the megapublishers who do not have marquee journals, that is, journals for which there is a high demand from the librarians' constituents. But even for the marquee journals, it is possible to renegotiate a deal, as shown by the University of California system several years ago. There, a grassroots boycott of the Cell Press journals by the scientific community led to a reduction in the cost of the Elsevier subscription package (Library Journal article, 2004).

Niches and markets

Will the unbundling of journals mean the demise of some niche journals, that is, specialized journals with small audiences? Perhaps, but this is what market economies are all about, and why monopolies are not supposed to exist! In addition, niche publishing can be sustained by open access publishers, whose business model is based on the number of articles published rather than the number of readers. This role is already fulfilled by major open access publishers such as BioMed Central and Hindawi.

Even in years of economic boom, librarians have noted that the current subscription system for online content is unsustainable (Library Journal article, 2004). The pressure on that system is even greater now that we are in a global recession, but it can be substantially relieved if publishers allow librarians greater freedom of choice.

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