

ANALYSING THE “BIG DEAL” USING COUNTER REPORTS

at a UK University

Case Study

COUNTER

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CASE STUDY: ANALYSING THE “BIG DEAL” USING COUNTER REPORTS

The following case study demonstrates the value of COUNTER data in analysing “big deals” at a UK university.

CASE STUDY PROFILE

1. University X has 23,200 students. 299 are postgraduate students, and it employs 2,500 researchers
2. The university is a member of the library consortium, and the “big deals” negotiated by the consortium account for 53% of the library’s total collection expenditure and 73% of all journal expenditure. Most other journals (not in the “big deals”) are acquired through a subscription agent, and around 10% are acquired directly from the publishers

ANALYSIS

Expenditure on the “big deals” accounts for a large part of the libraries acquisition budget, and the library evaluates all the deals on an annual basis.

In 2020, the library used the “Total_Item_Requests” as the metric for its analysis. This is because, before calculating cost per use, the library compared the 2020 usage for all big deal agreements in 2020 with the same usage in 2018 and 2019. The librarians wanted to see if any deal showed more than a 5% increase or decrease. “Total_Item_Requests” is the COUNTER Release 5 metric used to compare with the Release 4 “Number of Successful Full-Text Article Requests”. The library found that usage has been flat over this period with no significant increase or decrease for any one of the deals.

Calculating cost per use and number of journals with usage

The library used the “TR_J1” report for this analysis, to exclude counting the usage of fully open access (OA) journals and OA_Gold papers from hybrid journals. The library wanted to calculate Price per “Total_Item_Requests” on only the content behind the paywall for which they pay.

Table 1: Cost per “Total_Item_Requests” and Journals with Usage

Publisher	2020 price	“Total_Item_Requests”	Price per “Total_Item-Request”	No. of journals with usage	% of journals accounting for 80% usage	Comment
Publisher A	1,500,000	1,284,860	1.17	1,921	17.0%	
Publisher B	480,000	241,892	1.98	1,474	18.1%	
Publisher C	420,000	152,243	2.76	2,095	19.7%	
Publisher D	225,000	85,931	2.61	1,552	17.1%	
Publisher E	190,000	207,000	0.92	40	30.8%	
Publisher G	148,000	135,843	1.09	63	30.0%	
Publisher H	69,000	70,332	0.98	779	16.2%	
Publisher I	59,800	33,479	1.79	41	29.3%	
Publisher J	59,000	17,935	3.29	307	10.0%	One title accounts for 43% of usage
Publisher K	12,500	28,265	0.44	192	26.6%	
Publisher L	9,700	11,825	0.82	189	20.1%	
Publisher M	5,900	1,229	4.80	91	12.1%	One title accounts for 59% of usage
Publisher N	4,300	1,815	2.37	83	24.1%	List prices not available for all journals

An initial review of the data flagged Publisher J and Publisher M as having a relatively high cost per use. The library decided to further examine Publisher J and Publisher M to see if these deals are candidates for disaggregation.

PUBLISHER J

Publisher J required investigation because of the high cost per use, and because a large part of the value of the deal is driven by just one journal.

The list prices for journals included in this deal indicate that the £59,000 currently spent on the deal would pay for individual subscriptions to the most used journal titles, which account for 90% of the usage.

The licence agreement with Publisher J does not include post cancellation access (PCA), so disaggregation from the deal would mean a loss of all access, not just access to newly published content.

The unknown factor is the extent to which users would request ILL (Inter Library Loans) for articles if they became unavailable because the library disaggregated the deal. Currently users may be using these articles because they are readily available, but they may not be willing to make an ILL request as this would cause a delay in access.

Analysis showed that savings would be achieved if fewer than 30% of the non-available articles were requested as ILLs.

This library considered the disadvantages of disaggregation:

- Reduced service to users: A small proportion of usage could be satisfied with ILL, but this would require effort and time on the part of the user
- The additional effort and cost (including hidden costs, such as staff time) to the library of undertaking ILL requests
- The library might be able to strike better deals than the published list price, but this would require administrative effort in terms of negotiation. The publisher might be unwilling to compromise on the list price, especially as this might send a signal to other libraries to disaggregate, and thus negotiation effort would be wasted

The library leadership team concluded that this big deal agreement needs careful review every year, plus the consortium negotiators should be made aware (if they are not already) of the relative high cost per use before they embark on their renewal negotiations with Publisher J.

PUBLISHER M

Although the cost of this deal is low in terms of the overall budget, it required investigation because of the high cost per use. The licence agreement with Publisher M includes archival access, so the first step was to investigate usage by year of publication. For this analysis, the library used the “TR_J4”, which shows ‘Journal Requests by year of publication (YOP), excluding OA_Gold’.

Table 2: Publisher M “Total_Item_Requests” by year of publication in 2020.

YOP	“Total_Item_Requests”	% of usage by YOP	Cumulative % of usage
2020	102	9.4%	9.4%
2019	208	19.2%	28.7%
2018	83	7.7%	36.3%
2017	114	10.5%	46.9%
2016	141	13.0%	59.9%
2015	99	9.1%	69.0%
2014	152	14.0%	83.1%
2013	57	5.3%	88.4%
2012	65	6.0%	94.4%
2011	58	5.4%	99.7%
2010 and previous years	3	0.3%	100.0%
Total	1,082		

This shows that just over 9% of the usage comes from the current year of publication. 28.7% of usage comes from the current year and previous year, and so on. This publisher’s licence allows for PCA. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that, in the first year following cancellation of the deal, around 9% of usage would be lost. By the fourth year after cancellation, about half (46.9%) of usage would be available through post cancellation access.

Further investigation showed that this deal aggregates journals from over 140 small publishers. In some cases, these journals are only available from this deal (or possible other aggregated packages) and cannot be purchased directly from the publisher.

The library could not find individual list prices for all of the journals included in this agreement. However, published prices were available for the top 11 journals, which account for 75% of the total usage. The library could only find list prices for eight of these journals. Bought individually, the eight journals would cost £3,300 (package cost is £5,900).

Although Publisher M’s cost per use prices are high, there would be a considerable administration cost of dealing with many small publishers. The library will reconsider its subscription to this deal annually.

CLOSING REFLECTIONS

Journal packages, or “big deals”, take up the lion’s share of library budgets. In recent years, some libraries have cancelled these deals because their library budgets are not growing at the same rate as the cost of subscriptions. The alternative to continuing to pay for these deals is for libraries to subscribe only to the journals they determine they need the most. However, there is evidence that institutions have come to this decision, and unbundled these deals, only to return to them later (McKenzie, 2018).¹

Cost per use is one indicator that a deal may need further investigation. As this case study shows, there are several factors that contribute to decision-making in relation to “big deals”, but a relatively high cost per use can raise a flag for further investigation by the library.

COUNTER data provides a standardised reliable metric for comparing deal data across packages and over time, and the library involved in this case study will conduct this annual review of all the packages it subscribes to. Increasingly, as they enter into OA deals with publishers, they will also consider citation data and publication data in addition to usage data.

¹ Lindsay McKenzie, ‘Big Deal’ Cancellations Gain Momentum, Inside Higher Ed, May 8, 2018, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2018/05/08/more-institutions-consider-ending-their-big-deals-publishers>

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