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Journal Package Plans: An Update on Complex Considerations

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ABSTRACT

We are still in the early and dynamic stages of applying new price models to both paper and online journals, and the package plan approach offers new conditions for which we need to develop better understandings, appropriate review and decision trees, and adequate support models. This article will attempt to highlight a few of the recent modifications and situations science libraries are experiencing when considering and maintaining journal package plans.

The first implication is one of budget allocation and reallocation. Libraries have traditionally reviewed and tailored their journal profiles according to local user needs. This has become more difficult as a few large journal packages absorb and encumber significant percentages of entire budgets for periods of years. This effectively reduces discretionary journal purchasing power. This loss of discretionary purchasing is exacerbated by the many new association publisher package plans, be they tiered pricing or single pricing models. Modifications to existing profiles and adding new titles becomes more difficult as research areas change, new titles begin, or budgets become tighter. Often multi-year package plans include beneficial cancellation caps, but these caps often remove the opportunity for much internal adjustment – any savings due to duplicate removals or discontinued titles are used for minor modifications such as the addition of new titles or those added via publisher sales or mergers.

The death of a specific title within a package, such as has been seen when editorial boards leave for another less expensive publisher, do not result in one less title or a return of the dollars for reallocation to the new publisher. The original publisher either re-populates the title which is already part of the plan, or simply absorbs the base price into the next year's package plan. In the next year we then need to cover the cost of new less expensive title in addition to the cost for the re-populated or now non-existent title.

Due to our complicated arrangements, libraries must often notify vendors and/or agents each time they switch to e-only access or modify their title lists in order to adjust the historical base price and service fees.

Another major budget concern is the increasing number of new niche titles which established publishers develop in order to create branded packages. Certain publishers (e.g. Nature) continue to expand their high-priced titles at an untenable rate and fee structure. This will lead to even more instability as pressures increase, and libraries must then consider the alternative of canceling the few remaining non-package titles, which are often published by important but small publishers. This insensitive action is to be expected by those publishers required to generate profits for stakeholders, but it may soon provoke a backlash. Librarians are already fighting back against new titles by established publishers in niche areas, and continuing high prices will further raise the awareness of readers, authors, and editors of the predatory commercial nature of seemingly friendly publishing organizations.

Direct payments to publishers for journal packages is another trend that continues to increase. This often occurs when libraries switch to "Reverse" or e-journal based plans with additional charges for paper copies. This migration means that subscription agents are cut out of the process for large numbers of titles and dollars, which invariably results in higher service fees for the remaining subscription agent titles. The library community will still need to support the subscription agents as long as there continue to be significant efficiencies for obtaining materials from smaller publishers, many using different currencies and payment methods. The trend in many libraries is to outsource tasks, and this has resulted in many libraries that are now unable to switch back to direct payments even if they wanted to make this change.

The composition of certain journal packages can be problematic. For example, Eureka Prime is a package of somewhat distantly related materials that might be difficult to justify for non-comprehensive libraries. Their package does not allow for title-by-title selection; and therefore some titles of interest may not be purchased by smaller libraries. Other discipline-based publishers (e.g. IoP) are expanding their traditional package plans by covering new areas – and this means packages may no longer be logical to fund through one fund or selector. Interdisciplinary packages may create problems in terms of shared support and logistics for libraries. Consortia of publishers also provide varying degrees of overlap with other competing packages or stand-alone titles. For example, the GeoWorld aggregator offers titles that we already purchase from a direct association publisher package, but it is also the only portal for certain online titles. This scenario forces us to purchase multiple copies. Of course, large aggregators have always duplicated coverage, with often confusing differences in types of coverage (years, formats, browsing options, etc). Many of these large aggregators swap materials on an annual basis as publishers select or deselect specific platforms. Therefore, these aggregators often present unreliable preservation options and may influence our policies for paper journal reductions and transfers of paper materials to remote storage facilities.

An embarrassing situation exists for package plans that still only offer electronic access with a paper subscription (P+E). Instead of purchasing a reduced price (or even same price) electronic-only option, libraries now discard or recycle paper that is not wanted. This is a waste of resources in terms of dollars, effort, and environmental impact. This situation is partly due to the outsourcing of mailing operations, but surely it can be addressed in order to save money and effort. In a slightly ironic twist, funds for the overhead required to re-distribute this material is in short supply, and often directly conflicts with new "developing world" free access programs such as OARE.

Some journal packages are based upon regional authors and/or publishers. These packages of science journals are composed of national or regional peer review boards, and provide publication outlets for regional authors. They either emphasize subsidies and protection for local associations and laboratories or serve as opportunities for commercial publishers to find a previously unexplored niche. How do you evaluate these journals in comparison to most other "open" journals? At what point do you place support for non-publishing concerns above that of purely quality peer review filtering? These are tough decisions, and they become even more difficult as tightening budgets move us into a just-in-time access model rather than a just-in-case collection mode.

Mergers of publishers, or sales of titles between publishers, also impacts our ability to control or provide access to specific titles. After the sale or transfer of a title (or set of titles), libraries must determine who is the new owner, distributor, and archive holder. Some titles are automatically picked up on existing packages as part of the annual inflation cap agreement, other tiles are not automatically covered but can be added for an additional cost, and some are specifically excluded from existing package plans. Some titles simply are dropped and may become orphan titles, regardless of what our previous contracts have stated. In orphan cases we may be able to turn to Portico archives for consortial access and navigation, or perhaps LOCKKS depositories for simple pdf delivery. This is an area that requires further industry-wide exploration and action.
Licensing concerns are often no easier to address for packages than they are for individual titles, but this is too large a topic for such a quick review. It is amazing that we still do not have at least a small number of simple templates. Enough said about this in this article, but there are thankfully many people working on this complicated issue.

Open Access (OA) issues are quite disruptive to existing models, and this is also too large a topic for such a quick review. Membership payments and author charges are still the major revenue streams under consideration, but this is not often our biggest problem. The new "hybrid" OA option, in which an author can pay for open access to one specific article, is a problem for libraries attempting to provide seamless access. Both CrossRef pointers and library resolvers are based upon subscription and journal title information rather than article level information. In a strange paradox, our expensive and coordinated services will not point to web-based eprint versions that may be found using free web search engines such as Google and Google Scholar. But OA raises so many concerns that these issues are just a few among many which must be raised in other more appropriate venues.

As these changes occur, libraries must be proactively informed of them in order to make local modifications to our systems. RSS feeds are now being used to broadcast changes, and libraries must distribute this information to all stakeholders, be they selectors, public service personnel, acquisitions staff, and technology support folks. However, not all publishers provide timely information about changes, and these changes often occur in the middle of a fiscal year after journal renewal decisions have been made. Keeping track of all the changes that must be recorded on next year's renewal list can be quite cumbersome and labor intensive.

Even after libraries discover these changes, there are often lengthy delays until some subscription agents have all the options available on their systems. The situation is made even more complicated by the need to inform and then modify the agent subscription prices to account for the many consortial details that are arranged before an agent is ever involved. To add yet another layer of complexity, in some cases consortia act as subscription agents, and the indirect overhead costs must be included into the price of these package deals. Often the support for Electronic Resource Management (ERM) and link resolver technology is also shared across organizations, and these overhead costs and accompanying organizational delays in making subscription changes must be addressed.

Another new aspect of journal packaging is the Virtual journal. These amalgamations of previously published articles may be free if parts are already drawn from materials within existing packages, or they may be provided for a fee if materials are consolidated from across publishers. This means that libraries are essentially paying for duplicated materials once again. There may also be resolver issues as these materials in some cases are referred to as entirely different entities.

One final concern that might be addressed by journal packages, as a prototype for all other individual journals, is the issue of checking the actual availability of online journals. A program of checking packages for the actual creation, mounting, and continuing uninterrupted access to ejournal material seems like a logical place to explore viable solutions for the "claiming" of online serial materials. This approach could easily be expanded to cover monographic standing orders. The economies of scale of doing this in packages makes it a fine testing ground for this badly needed service.

As this brief review of concerns demonstrates, there are many questions and varying opinions about long-term solutions to the challenges presented by journal package plans. I assume no one solution will satisfy all organizations, but some concentrated efforts to provide a few clear options, a more complete understanding of the day-to-day considerations, and a table of pros and cons would go a long way toward influencing the industry and developing appropriate library solutions.

Feel free to contact me with your additional concerns, and I will post them in a future update on this topic.