Doubling Down on the Big Deal in Wisconsin

Doug Way

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by Doug Way (Associate University Librarian for Collections and Research Services at University of Wisconsin-Madison, Memorial Library, 728 State Street, Madison, WI 53706; Phone: 608-265-5466) <doug.way@wisc.edu>

The University of Wisconsin-Madison has a long history with the Big Deal. In 2001 Ken Frazier, who at the time was the University Librarian at UW-Madison, wrote an article in D-Lib Magazine in which he coined for the first time the phrase the “Big Deal” as a way to describe journal publishers’ large-scale journal aggregations. In his article, Frazier warned libraries against trading short-term benefits for long-term consequences.

The Big Deal, he warned, weakened library collections with unwanted journals, increased libraries’ dependence on publishers, reduced budgetary flexibility, limited libraries’ ability to influence the scholarly communications system in the future, threatened serials vendors, and placed limits on resource sharing. Frazier said UW-Madison would take a principled stance and hold out against the Big Deal. It would license electronic access to only the highest-used journal titles. It would keep the rest of its journals in print, select journals title-by-title, and continue to rely on resource sharing for access to other content.

Four years later Frazier published another article on the Big Deal. In it he outlined how UW-Madison was continuing to hold out against the Big Deal, but was also faced with both a difficult local budget situation...
and escalating journal costs. These had led to the systematic cancelation of journals with “no end to the cutting in sight.” Life without the Big Deal, according to Frazier, meant not having the resources users needed and “always having to say you are sorry to faculty and researchers.”4 Within a few years of that article the university had signed agreements for two Big Deals.

A decade later the financial situation Frazier had described at UW-Madison had not improved. Over that time the Libraries’ collections budget had continued to stagnate, losing nearly $4 million in buying power. Journal cancelations continued to be the norm, while the amount of money spent on interlibrary loan (ILL) had expanded dramatically. Frazier was no longer the University Librarian, but the Libraries still only had those two Big Deals. This was partly a result of UW-Madison’s principled stance against the Big Deal. In many ways, however, the impact of Frazier’s philosophy was secondary to structural barriers that existed at the university and the Libraries.

A decentralized administrative structure for libraries at UW-Madison hindered any move toward the acquisition of large journal packages. The university’s General Library System (GLS) consists of 16 of the larger campus libraries, but there were nearly 25 additional libraries on campus. While campus libraries cooperated on a variety of fronts, the large number of independent actors made it difficult to reach a consensus. Further exacerbating the problem was a historic desire for each library to pay “their fair share.” If a library was unable or unwilling to do so, this had the ability to derail any collaborative collections efforts. Finally, a budgetary model in which a single unit had the ability to derail any collaborative collection efforts. If a library was unable or unwilling to do so, this had the ability to derail any collaborative collections efforts. Finally, a budgetary model in which a single unit had the ability to derail any collaborative collection efforts. If a library was unable or unwilling to do so, this had the ability to derail any collaborative collections efforts. Finally, a budgetary model in which a single unit had the ability to derail any collaborative collection efforts. If a library was unable or unwilling to do so, this had the ability to derail any collaborative collections efforts. Finally, a budgetary model in which a single unit had the ability to derail any collaborative collection efforts. If a library was unable or unwilling to do so, this had the ability to derail any collaborative collections efforts. Finally, a budgetary model in which a single unit had the ability to derail any collaborative collection efforts. If a library was unable or unwilling to do so, this had the ability to derail any collaborative collections efforts. Finally, a budgetary model in which a single unit had the ability to derail any collaborative collection efforts. If a library was unable or unwilling to do so, this had the ability to derail any collaborative collections efforts. Finally, a budgetary model in which a single unit had the ability to derail any collaborative collection efforts. If a library was unable or unwilling to do so, this had the ability to derail any collaborative collections efforts. Finally, a budgetary model in which a single unit had the ability to derail any collaborative collection efforts. If a library was unable or unwilling to do so, this had the ability to derail any collaborative collections efforts. Finally, a budgetary model in which a single unit had the ability to derail any collaborative collection efforts. If a library was unable or unwilling to do so, this had the ability to derail any collaborative collections efforts. Finally, a budgetary model in which a single unit had the ability to derail any collaborative collection efforts. If a library was unable or unwilling to do so, this had the ability to derail any collaborative collections efforts. Finally, a budgetary model in which a single unit had the ability to derail any collaborative collection efforts. If a library was unable or unwilling to do so, this had the ability to derail any collaborative collections efforts. Finally, a budgetary model in which a single unit had the ability to derail any collaborative collection efforts. If a library was unable or unwilling to do so, this had the ability to derail any collaborative collections efforts. Finally, a budgetary model in which a single unit had the ability to derail any collaborative collection efforts. If a library was unable or unwilling to do so, this had the ability to derail any collaborative collections efforts. Finally, a budgetary model in which a single unit had the ability to derail any collaborative collection efforts. If a library was unable or unwilling to do so, this had the ability to derail any collaborative collections efforts. Finally, a budgetary model in which a single unit had the ability to derail any collaborative collection efforts. If a library was unable or unwilling to do so, this had the ability to derail any collaborative collections efforts. Finally, a budgetary model in which a single unit had the ability to derail any collaborative collection efforts. If a library was unable or unwilling to do so, this had the ability to derail any collaborate...