

Essential Academic Journals Tend to Be of Universal Importance, While Many Journals Available on For-Profit Platforms Appear to Be Ancillary

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Evidence Summary

Essential Academic Journals Tend to Be of Universal Importance, While Many Journals Available on For-Profit Platforms Appear to Be Ancillary

A Review of:

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Abstract

Objective – (1) Present a method of journal appraisal that combines reference list, article download, and survey data. (2) Gauge journal usage patterns across selected universities.

Design – Analysis of reference lists, article downloads, and survey data.

Setting – 28 Canadian universities.

Subjects – 47,012 distinct academic journal titles.

Methods – Download data for the 2011-2015 period was sourced from standard Journal Report 1 (JR1) usage reports as supplied by the vendors. Download figures were summed for journals that were available through multiple platforms. Reference list data (i.e., the number of times documents published in each journal were cited by authors affiliated with a participating institution) was sourced from Clarivate Analytics' Web of Science, limiting for the years 2011-2015. An unknown number of researchers at 23 of the 28 participating universities were invited by email to complete a survey. The survey asked respondents to list the scholarly journals they considered essential

for their research and teaching (up to 10 journals for each purpose).

The three datasets (download, reference list, and survey data) were then merged. Duplicates and non-academic journals were removed. Journals were then grouped into broad discipline areas. A list of “core journals” (p. 228) was created for each institution. These journals produce 80% of downloads, 80% of citations, or 80% of survey mentions at each institution. A journal only had to reach the threshold in one category (i.e., in either downloads, citations, or mentions) to make it onto the core journals list. A “low” (p. 228) survey response rate meant “one mention [was] generally enough” (p. 228) for a journal to be classified as core.

Main results – Fewer than 500 titles ($n=484$, ~1%) made it to the core journals list at all 28 universities. Two thirds (66%, n unknown) of journals did not make it onto the core list of any university. Of the journals deemed to be core, most (60%, n unknown) were shared across all institutions. On average, platforms from not-for-profit organizations and scientific societies contain a higher proportion of core journals than for-profit platforms. Notably, 63.6% of Springer journals, 58.9% of Taylor & Francis journals, and 45.8% of Elsevier’s journals do not appear on the core journal list of any university.

Conclusion – Libraries should consider ways to share resources and work more cooperatively in their negotiations with publishers. Further, libraries may be able to cancel entire journal bundles without this having a “sizable” (p. 233) impact on resource access.

Commentary

This study adds to the growing body of literature examining the value of big deals (Shu et al., 2018; Strieb & Blixrud, 2014). Big deals, or bundled journal subscriptions with major publishers, are said to be financially unsustainable due to rising costs and limited budgets (McKenzie, 2018).

The study was reviewed using a critical appraisal tool (Perryman, 2009). Both strengths and weaknesses were found.

A concise literature review outlines the context and rationale for the study. And, while the study is quite complex, the authors have reported their findings logically, making effective use of tables and figures. Further, the triangulation of reference list, download, and survey data was innovative and valuable.

The authors have provided their survey questions in full, allowing future researchers to replicate this work. Regrettably, there is a lack of clarity around how the researchers retrieved reference list data. Readers do not know whether the researchers performed an address or organizations-enhanced search when retrieving the articles.

More importantly, the authors have not disclosed how many of the journals analyzed were in fact part of a large journal bundle. This is odd considering the article’s title and bold claims made around the effectiveness of big deals. Notably, just because a journal is available on a publisher’s platform does not necessarily mean it was acquired through a big deal.

The authors’ suggestion that “a complete cancellation of [an entire] journal bundle would not have sizable effects on access to relevant resources” (p. 233) is questionable. Libraries need to provide access to more than a core list of resources based on an arbitrary threshold. The needs of faculty and students are often diverse. The fact that so many journals (66%, n unknown) did not make it to the core list of any institution calls into question the soundness of the 80% threshold used in the analysis. It does not necessarily mean those journals are not important to clients or that they do not offer value for money.

This study would be of interest to any library comprehensively reviewing its journal subscriptions. The triangulation of download, reference list, and survey data is particularly compelling. The suggestion that libraries

continue to join forces to negotiate better deals with publishers is also worthwhile.

The study's usefulness is limited, however, because cost and value for money were not considered. In practice, libraries cannot ignore the financial implications of collection decisions. They also cannot ignore the needs of the diverse communities they serve.

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