

Leaving Elsevier's "big deal": an evaluation of the Italian National Institute of Health experience inside the Bibliosan Consortium

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English abstract

In 2011 the Istituto Superiore di Sanità (ISS), the Italian National Institute of Health, has been forced, due to economic reason, to leave the Bibliosan Consortium contract with the publisher Elsevier. The contract, following the "big deal" model, provided for the maintenance of paper subscriptions and the payment of an additional fee for the whole electronic collection (more than 2,000 journal titles). The continuous increase of annual costs has led to unsustainable growth in costs and to the subsequent cancellation of the contract. This meant that more than 500 researchers of the Institute have suddenly had access to just 180 Elsevier current titles instead of the previous 2,000. The study traces the various stages which led to taking this unavoidable decision to cut about half of the Elsevier's journals and analyzes its impact.

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Leaving Elsevier's "big deal": an evaluation of the Italian National Institute of Health experience inside the Bibliosan Consortium

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Abstract: In 2011 the Istituto Superiore di Sanità (ISS), the Italian National Institute of Health, has been forced, due to economic reason, to leave the Bibliosan Consortium contract with the publisher Elsevier. The contract, following the “big deal” model, provided for the maintenance of paper subscriptions and the payment of an additional fee for the whole electronic collection (more than 2,000 journal titles). The continuous increase of annual costs has led to unsustainable growth in costs and to the subsequent cancellation of the contract. This meant that more than 500 researchers of the Institute have suddenly had access to just 180 Elsevier current titles instead of the previous 2,000. The study traces the various stages which led to taking this unavoidable decision to cut about half of the Elsevier’s journals and analyzes its impact.

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Introduction

The Library of the Italian National Institute of Health (Istituto Superiore di Sanità – ISS) is certainly the most important institution in our country concerning the field of biomedical sciences documentation. Ten years ago, when the history of our relationship with Elsevier for the purchase of electronic journals began, the library subscribed to several publishers over 1700 current printed periodicals and just a couple of hundreds in electronic format.

Starting from 2002 a contract has been signed with Caspur, one of the three most important Italian Consortia, which supplies the electronic version of Elsevier’s journals as well. At the time the library bought 262 titles from the Dutch publisher for a total amount of 551,000 EUR and the agent gave us the proposal to pay a fee of 7% for the subscribed journals plus an additional fee of 3,5% for enhancing the access to the whole journals’ collection (more than 1400 at the time). The agreement seemed very convenient and was immediately signed. This was the start of our relationship with the practice that is commonly called the “big deal”, a very common contract model at the beginning of this century that even now constitutes the basis for the majority of contracts proposed by the big editors. According to it a moderate increase

of the fee assured a great growth in the journals collection access. This represented a great leap forward from the previous model of cross access, in which we could see only papers signed by at least one of the partners of the consortium.

The following year the contract was further improved with a reduction of the total fee from 10.5 % to 8% and this model was maintained until 2005.

Nevertheless the contract included a heavy term that was to maintain the subscription of all the titles that were part of the initial set, without the possibility of cutting any of them other than replacing them with other journals of equivalent value. In order to partially balance this obligation, a price cap of 5% per year was introduced on the prices increase of the subscriptions on print. However this refund was applied to the fee for the electronic version one year later, that is if a journal costs 1,000 EUR in 2002 and 1,100 in 2003 (10% more) I get back the exceeding 50 EUR only on the electronic fee concerning 2004.

The story continues...

In 2006 Bibliosan was established, the System that grouped all the libraries of the research institutes of the Ministry of Health, and it started to act as a real Consortium in order to centrally purchase shared electronic resources for all the partners involved. Using funds granted by the Ministry, Bibliosan signed a series of contracts with many publishers including Elsevier, and was able to obtain very favorable conditions. In this context the ISS left the previous agreement with Caspur to join the new contract. However this did not mean that terms and conditions and overall value of the collection - as indicated in our previous contract - were cleared. We were always forced to maintain the whole collection of journals on paper or at least its value in the case of switching to the electronic version. Moreover, during the previous five years Elsevier had acquired a new set of editorial brands (Academic Press, Mosby, Saunders, etc.) that greatly increased the number of journals and their costs. So in 2006 the Institute had 336 subscribed journals while the total expenditure rocketed to 873,000 EUR. In 2008 the first Bibliosan contract was converted into a long term 5 years agreement. The electronic access fee to the whole catalogue, the famous “big deal” model, was fixed at a percentage of 6% of total cost per year and the price cap remain at 5 % per year.

So we come to 2010 when the Library had a strong reduction in its budget of more than 30%. In this year on a assigned budget of 1,6 million EUR the impact of the Elsevier contract for the subscription of paper journals was 997,000 EUR, more than 60% of the total expenditure. In addition, the consortium paid the share of 6% (59,000 EUR) for electronic access to the “big deal”. As a result of this situation, the

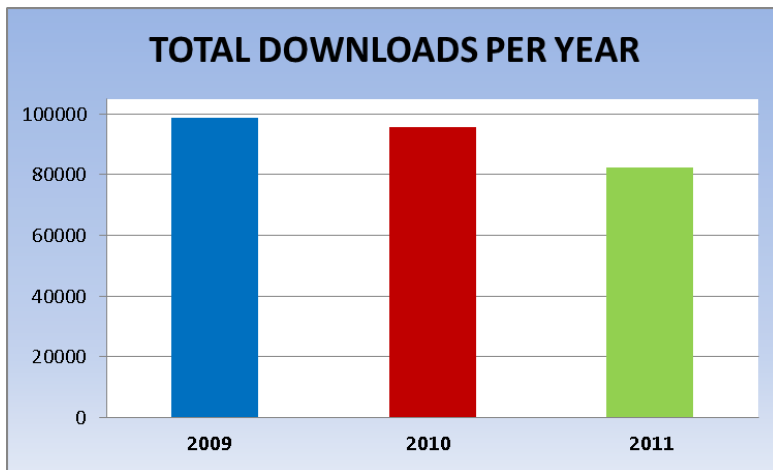
library was forced to ask Elsevier to exit from the consortium. A drastic cut in titles was made and the total number reduced to only 185 from the original 343. This set of titles has been the subject of a long and tough negotiation between the library and the publisher which has reduced its first request of more than 700,000 EUR to a more reasonable amount of 430,000 EUR only under threat of cancellation of all subscriptions for 2011. We were also forced to move to the electronic only option because maintaining the paper version as well would have meant a doubling of cost. This radical change had of course heavy consequences on the journals access. The exit from the contract of the consortium involved the loss of rights of access to the “big deal” journal set. Unlike some similar contracts signed with other big publishers, such as Wiley, the Elsevier agreement provided the loss of all access right to the complete collection including the years for which this fee was paid. So, the availability of journals for the researchers of our institute suddenly dropped from over 2200 to just 185 subscribed titles. The access to the 158 paper journals discharged in 2011 was granted for the period 1995-2010.

As a result of this events at the beginning of 2011 we started monitoring the trend of downloads in order to verify the impact of this heavy cut on the scientific activity of our researchers. At the same time also the document supply service for internal users has been carefully checked to audit if there was a significant increase in requests.

Although our catalog of electronic journals (AtoZ by Ebsco) had been updated since January, eliminating all the titles of the “big deal”, we were very surprised to discover that up to July no change was operated from the publisher in the access policy to his Science Direct database. This has meant that if our users started their searches from our library catalog they did not have the availability of most titles, whereas carrying out a query from Pubmed the result was a direct access to the full text through the link resolver utility. The reasons for this delay in updating the configuration of the ISS on Science Direct database are probably to be found in the low efficiency of the Elsevier’s internal communication system between its commercial and technical offices. As everyone can easily understand this situation has greatly influenced the analysis of statistics relating to the first half of the year.

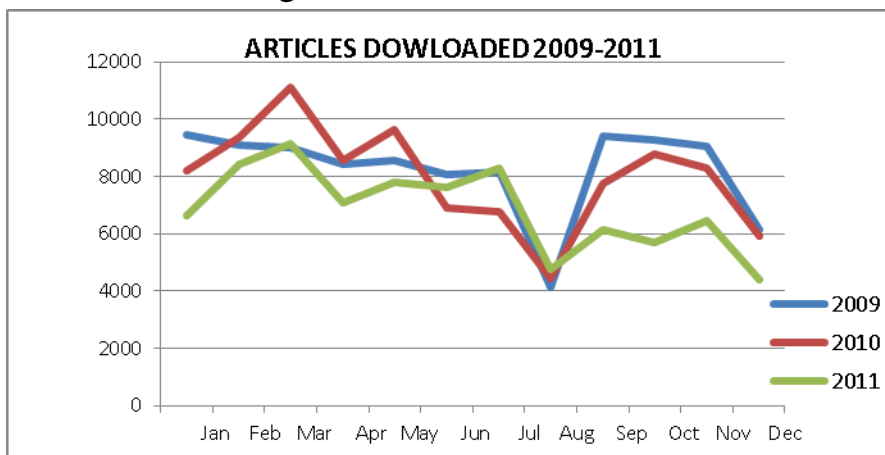
Downloads Analysis

The comparison of articles downloaded from Elsevier’s database during the last three years shows several interesting features.



If we take into account the years 2009 and 2010 we have a shortfall of approximately 3,000 items (about 3% less). Whereas, compared to 2010 and 2011 the difference becomes slightly less than 14%.

More in depth if we consider this last statistic as split in two different periods, January-July and August-December, respectively we have a difference of 9.36% between January and July (that is the period with free access from Pubmed) and of 21.95 between August and December.



	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	TOTAL
2009	9477	9090	9031	8417	8542	8068	8145	4118	9425	9293	9072	6152	98830
2010	8211	9386	11111	8548	9657	6921	6785	4432	7777	8788	8293	5901	95810
2011	6625	8423	9139	7069	7800	7603	8285	4779	6141	5687	6471	4386	82408

This last figure is even more significant since it reflects the real situation with access limited to the 185 subscribed journals. Therefore we can conclude that the big change from 2200 to less than 200 titles has led to a decrease of approximately 22% of downloads.

The detailed analysis of downloads for every individual journal allows us to individuate another interesting aspect. Bearing in mind that in 2011 cuts were made for all those titles that did not attain up to 100 downloads per year, the number of accesses for each journal remained always considerably high. However, we can also

see that about 50% of downloads must be referred to only 25% of the titles. Moreover if we consider the top 10 titles we can verify that they account for about 20% of total. Those data behave accordingly to the statistical laws but is still useful to demonstrate how the number of journals of real general interest to researchers is rather limited. Nevertheless this reflection risks penalizing those disciplines or those areas of research that require specialized journals concerning specific scientific fields. Whenever taking into account just the download parameter this can lead to making serious mistakes in the choice of cuts and this decision should be balanced by several other factors.

Impact of new deal

As it always happens when great changes are made, also in our case there were both pros and cons. Among the positives items we can include:

- The halving of total expenditure. This was the main goal to reach and we can say that we got it, even if we have paid dearly the attainment of the target.
- A relevant shortcut in the cost per download. When the Institute was involved in the consortium this item had a value of more than 10 EUR per article, while in 2011 the value decreased up to 6,3 EUR. However, this cost is still too high if compared with the average performance of all other publishers that is about 3/3,5 EUR.
- Against our expectations we found no relevant differences in the number of document delivery requests by our researchers. The value was roughly the same as the previous years with a total number lower than 1,000 documents. Therefore, the fall-off in supply has not produced a parallel increase in the request to obtain articles through alternative channels.
- The achievement of halving expenditure against a decline of about 20% download has confirmed that the right choices were made concerning what to cut and what to keep.

On the other hand we have the cons:

- The total number of journals is dramatically decreased. Even if we take into account that the health science titles amount to about half of the whole Science Direct catalog the sudden change from over 1,000 journals to only 185 has caused serious problems to many researchers.
- In particular those themes and disciplines that interest just a few specialized researchers inside the Institute have been especially penalized, with a very low number of downloaded articles and where the ratio cost per download was too high and no longer bearable.

- As previously mentioned, we have lost all access rights to the “big deal” titles for which we paid an handsome fee in the ten previous years.
- Moreover, the Bibliosan Consortium as well received relevant damage from the disengagement of the ISS. The weight of the Institute inside the consortium in terms of access fee was almost one third of the total expenditure but the final impact on the fee paid by the Consortium for the remaining 55 partners in 2011 has been considerably less than this percentage. Elsevier has justified this increase in costs arguing that it was impossible to maintain the basic value of historical expenditure of the consortium and consequently they revised prices upward.

Some additional considerations

The first remark is related to the extreme inelasticity of the contract model applied by this publishing giant. The long-term contract, when it was conceived at the beginning of this century, was considered by the librarians a safety instrument against the continuous prices increases practiced by publishers from year to year. As time passes and with the rise in the economic crisis the situation underwent a radical change and now we face a reversal of positions. The long-term model becomes a sort of trap that compels libraries to maintain their set of journals unmodified for several years even if their budget is continuously decreasing. These events lead to an unsustainable situation and close to the breaking point, as it happened in our case.

As a consequence of this topic librarians must direct their efforts in order to gain a greater flexibility from publishers in managing the agreements. In particular, with regards to the biomedical titles, it is no longer possible to continue to purchasing the same number of journals as we did ten years ago while the prices are now doubled.

We need transparency in the pricing policy. In this respect Elsevier doesn't allow us to exactly understand what is the cost for each journal or set of titles: they do not have an official price list but a lot of different ones and the cost is “tailored” according to the customer profile. Moreover, every year we see a continuous change in the commercial policy, through a splitting of the collection and the creation of new journal subsets with additional costs. In this jungle it becomes almost impossible for a librarian to make a correct evaluation of expenditures and to understand what he/she is really buying and its final price.

Conclusions

This case study demonstrates the serious difficulties faced by a research institute that is no longer able to meet its contractual commitments with a big publisher. But it also shows that a drastic cut in the journals set can turn out to be less damaging than one

may suppose. The most important factor is that compared to a halving of expenditure there was a considerably lower decrease in the percentage of downloads. This has confirmed both the validity of the choices made and that there is quite possibility to improve and rationalize the purchasing policy of the library. So, from an “earthquake” like the one we just described some positive aspects may also arise.

In my opinion the most important lesson we can learn from this occurrence is that the “big deal” contract model can no longer be the reference frame in the consortium negotiations and we need to force the publishers to propose new and more flexible agreements. It is no longer possible that in the future a biomedical consortium may be urged to sign an agreement including the access to hundreds of unnecessary journals, paying too expensive fees for this. The pathway to be undertaken necessarily passes through agreements based on lists of journals selected by discipline and that take into account the real use of resources such as the number of downloads and their cost per item.

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