Societies and online journal models

Learned societies often rely on revenues from journal publishing to fund important, long-term activities that support their discipline and community. A minority of societies withhold their journals from the 'big deals' and collections of commercial publishers, which frustrates end-users and irritates librarians. Reasons for exclusion include concerns that: their journal has just moved to the publisher; big deals limit pricing control and growth potential of the journal; they may erode the value of their subscription list, dilute their brand, and undermine a key society membership benefit. Publishers can work with societies to minimize the number of excluded titles, and reduce the turbulence associated with moving titles from publisher to publisher. They can explain what is excluded from collections, and give reasons why. Longer term, publishers should develop business models that reward good publishing, and develop new revenue streams and member benefits to help societies meet their goals.

ANDREW ROBINSON
Vice-President and Managing Director, Health Sciences
Wiley-Blackwell

For many academic and learned societies, their journal is an important mark of prestige, and a key indicator of their relevance and influence in their subject. Traditionally, it is one of the key benefits of membership, along with discounted attendance at society conferences. Revenues derived from journal publishing are also one of the principal sources of income for many societies, after membership dues (see Figure 1). Just like libraries, societies have been affected by the current economic situation, which has hit their memberships, conference income, donations and endowments. They often rely on their journal revenues to reinvest in the active development of their discipline – including research grants, travel awards, developing new member benefits, public outreach and, in some cases, lobbying. Many of these are long-term commitments, so in this volatile economic environment what societies value more than anything is a stable revenue base that is, preferably, growing.

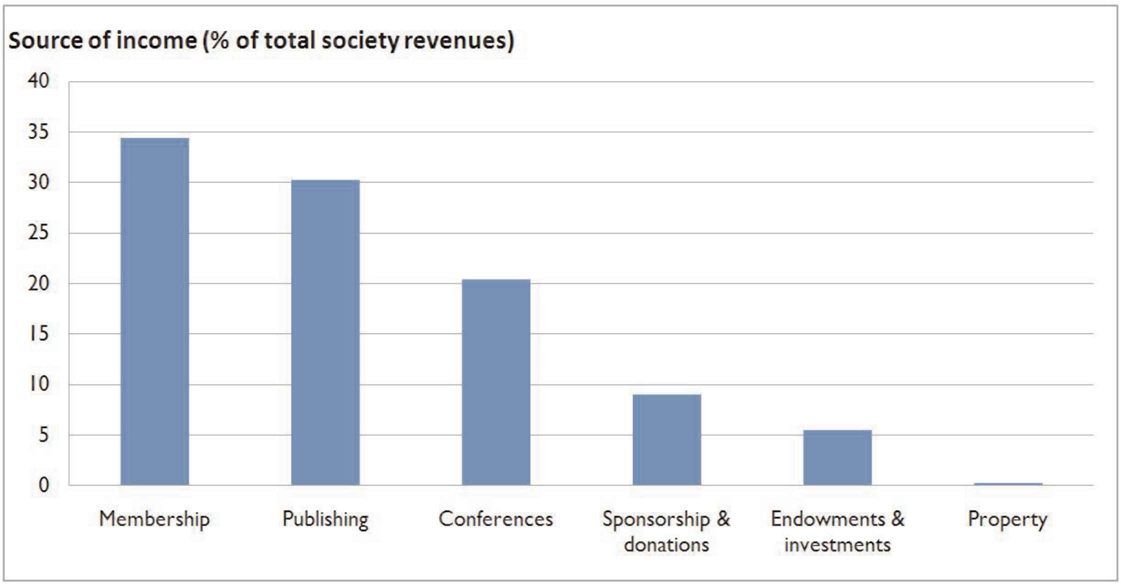

Figure 1. Sources of society income, from a survey of Wiley-Blackwell societies conducted in 2009. Data represents responses from 26 societies. A total of 47 societies responded to the overall survey, from an initial target list of 264 societies

Generally, societies either publish the journal themselves, or they contract out all or part of it to commercial publishers. There has been a discernable trend in recent years away from self-publishing: we have seen a big increase in the number of self-publishing societies turning to publishers for help with their journal. They recognize that the journal landscape is changing fast. They cannot keep up with the technology, nor the models of distribution, and they cannot emulate the sales reach of many publishers. When societies sub-contract out their journal, most publishers aim to create long-term strategic partnerships, rather than a 'fee-for-service' relationship. Most societies insist on retaining control of several key aspects of their journal including:

- editorial policies and selection
- design and branding
- page budgets and editorial costs
- pricing
- licensing.

Pricing and licensing can cause serious issues for librarians, most notably when societies elect to exclude their journals from 'big deals' and other collections. Publishers often receive complaints that customers are unable to license the entire collection as some high-calibre society titles are excluded from the package.

Most societies trust their publishing partners and their business expertise and willingly participate in business models, including big deals. Wiley-Blackwell, for example, publishes 1,496 journals, of which 840 are published with societies. Of these, 806 are included in collection/big deal models for 2011, equating to 96% of our society journals. That leaves 34 society-owned titles excluded from collections (4% of society titles, or 2% of Wiley-Blackwell's overall journal portfolio). Of the 34 not in collections, 21 are temporarily excluded because they are titles newly transferred to Wiley, leaving 13 that are 'permanently' excluded, which is less than 1% of all of Wiley's titles. Several of these are relatively young (less than ten years old) and still growing their subscription base. Wiley-Blackwell has an evaluation methodology to determine when it is right to begin to include them in these deals. In the other cases, the societies themselves feel the interests of their journal would be better served by being excluded from collections/big deals.

So, why do some societies elect to keep their journals out of collections, and what can be done to minimize the inconvenience to librarians and readers, whilst maximizing access to content in the future?

There are some good reasons for this decision, and some less good. Starting with the 'less good', some societies still have a hard time understanding the change in journal business models, despite publishers explaining it to them on a regular basis. They cling to the notion of a traditional print circulation, and a list of subscribers. They struggle with the concept that circulation, as measured in units of subscribers, is no longer a good measure of market penetration and readership. They fail to embrace the positive increases in global access that inclusion in big deals can bring. They also fail to recognize the potential protection from subscription cancellation that big deals can provide, especially in these straightened financial times.

Some societies think: 'our journal is so important that the protection from subscription cancellation afforded by a licence is irrelevant. No one would cancel us'. They believe their journals are prestigious enough that they really are 'must-have content' for those institutions with an interest in their research area, and they discount the potential access to a wider pool of institutions as of secondary importance.

Other societies have difficulty accepting the status of their journal as part of a database rather than a unique stand-alone publication. They may also worry that by embracing big deals their journals will become so widely accessible that existing and potential members will cease to view their journal as a benefit of society membership. Given that receipt of the society journal is one of the key, and in some cases the only, significant benefit of membership, they think excluding titles from big deals will counteract the risk of declines in membership.

There are legitimate concerns that societies have about participating in big deals and collections. Two thirds of the society titles excluded from Wiley collections are new to Wiley, transferring to us from another publisher. Increasingly, a subscription is no longer just a 'subscription', it is embedded within a business model and all that supports it. Moving immediately from one business model to another can cause chaos for customers, societies and publishers, and it can take a year or two for 'subscriptions' to be allocated to the appropriate category within the publisher's journal portfolio. However, once this is done, publishers generally aim to put titles into collections. There may also be societies who feel that inclusion in big deals increases the risks associated with moving publisher, reducing their control of the subscription list. The UKSG Transfer initiative, and its associated Code of Practice, has definitely helped the situation, but problems persist.

Another legitimate concern of societies is that big deals may limit the growth potential of their journals. Many journals are still experiencing significant growth in high quality manuscript submissions, in response to increased funding of research and development, and increased researcher productivity. Historically, editors could accept a significant portion of these excellent papers, growing their page budgets, possibly increasing journal frequency, and covering the additional costs with higher-than-average price increases. Some editors now complain that they have to reject high quality papers to live within their journal's budget that is set within the context of a depressed library market. In many cases, the rejected authors are members of the society who are then forced to look elsewhere for an outlet for their work, which in turn means the society might be perceived as not fully meeting the needs of their members. For some societies, big deals can exacerbate the situation, since the prices are often discounted and capped for a number of years. Hence the claim that 'price caps in big deals remove our ability to control pricing and to grow pages even if the quality is very high'. Some feel that their content is so good that customers would still be willing to accept above average increases, even in the current budgetary climate.

Some other societies believe that the non-subscribed content fees are unfair since they give customers access at prices which do not reflect the importance of the content they are buying. Depending on the traditional print-based holdings of a library, its size, the nature of the deal, etc., a subscribed journal with a price of around $1,000 might be available to non-subscribing libraries at anywhere from $5-50. There are societies who complain that they cannot accept that a customer can buy their journal for such a heavily discounted price via a collection. They argue that collections limit growth since new customers will buy at the marginal cost not the full price. By excluding their title, they claim that customers will take out full-price subscriptions. For many publishers the non-subscribed content fees are allocated back to participating journals according to their list price. Some societies argue that the allocation of revenue from unsubscribed content fees is unfair, since libraries are spending to get access to the best journals (i.e. theirs), with the second-rate journals benefiting as a result. In their view, the allocation method should reflect desirability/quality and not just list price, especially as many society-owned titles tend to be at the lower end of the price spectrum.

These may be legitimate concerns but we have evidence that inclusion in collections is not necessarily limiting growth. We have some well-established journals in hot subject areas that are posting significant double-digit growth rates. But the concern about big deals suppressing growth potential is what persuades us to keep new and young, growing journals out of collections until they achieve maturity. It would be impossible to launch new society-owned titles if the average subscription price was in the $5-50 range. Figure 2 shows the subscription growth of a journal launched with a society in 2003. The number of subscriptions has grown to in excess of 350. This Society left its old publisher because of an ownership dispute and because the Society felt it was not able to control publication policies, nor to reap a fair share of the rewards. It has quickly established itself as the number one journal in its field, with an impact factor of more than 6, far eclipsing its predecessor – demonstrating the power of the Society brand and the loyalty of its members. The Society is receiving a greater proportion of the revenues, and is actively reinvesting it in developing its subject community.

In summary, a small minority of societies choose to exclude their journals from big deals and collections because they:

- feel big deals undermine a core part (i.e. the list of subscribers) of one of their key assets
- fear that inclusion might dilute their brand and a key benefit to society members
- think it limits their pricing control and the growth potential of the journal, in terms of revenues and page budget
- may feel it restricts their ability to move from one publisher to another.

So, what can we do as publishers to help resolve these concerns, whilst at the same time maximizing access and providing good value for money?

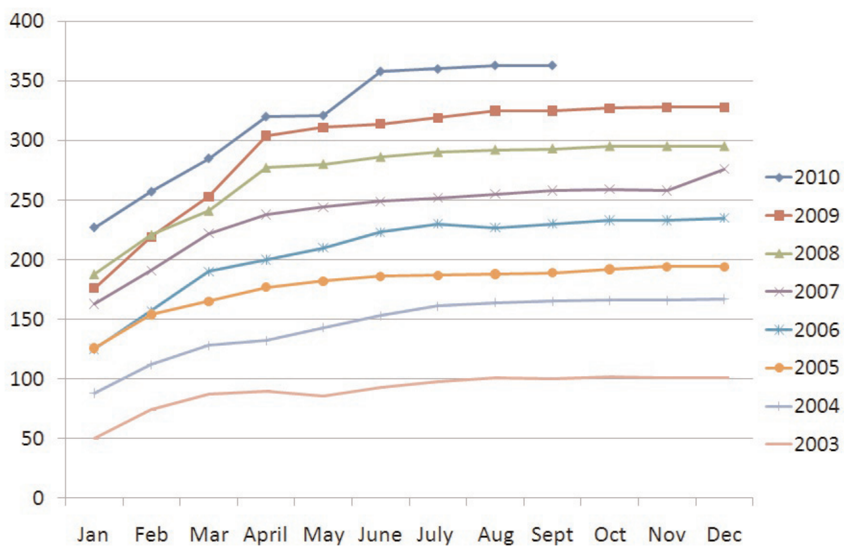

Figure 2. Subscription growth of a society journal launched in 2003 and excluded from the Wiley-Blackwell collection

Publishers need to be clearer with customers about what is included and what is excluded from big deals and collections, and give reasons why. We need to work on new business models that encourage good publishing, not just more publishing. This means rewarding journals that perform well in terms of quantifiable and fair performance metrics – usage and prestige metrics that work across a wide range of subject areas and specialities. Publishers can also work on making it easier to transfer titles from one publisher to another, improving the consistency and our ability to share customer data, and the portability of 'subscriptions' from one publisher's business model to another. We must also continue the dialogue with those societies who withhold their journals, to convince them that these business models will work for them in the short and longer term. And finally, we must help societies develop new revenue-generating opportunities, accessing non-library budgets, that will help them meet their goals and thus benefit their communities of interest.

Andrew Robinson
Vice-President and Managing Director, Health Sciences
Wiley-Blackwell
E-mail: Andrew.robinson@wiley.com

To view the original copy of this article, published in *Serials*, click here:
http://serials.uksg.org/openurl.asp?genre=article&issn=0953-0460&volume=24&issue=1&spage=56
The DOI for this article is 10.1629/2456. Click here to access via DOI:
http://dx.doi.org/10.1629/2456
For a link to the full table of contents for the issue of *Serials* in which this article first appeared, click here:
http://serials.uksg.org/openurl.asp?genre=issue&issn=0953-0460&volume=24&issue=1