Rapid price escalations in scholarly journal subscription rates have been adversely affecting access to scholarly information. Often referred to as the 'serials pricing crisis', the costs of academic journals have been sharply climbing for over two decades now. According to the Association of Research Libraries (ARL), the average cost of a serial subscription for ARL member libraries increased by 315% from 1989 to 2003. This increase far exceeds the rise in the Consumer Price Index of 68% for those years. From 2003 on, average journal prices have increased more slowly, but still continue to rise by about 9% a year.

Partially responsible for these increases is the ongoing consolidation of the journal publishing market. Over the past five years, mergers and acquisitions have resulted in 37 publishers being controlled by 6 entities. Thus, the market is dominated by a small number of large publishers who can demand very high prices for their publications.

Impact on libraries.

Journal price increases have far outpaced increases in library budgets and this has eroded libraries’ buying power significantly. Consequently, academic libraries have been forced to cancel subscriptions or shift monies from other areas of their budgets in order to purchase a smaller number of high priced journal titles. In most academic libraries, costly Science, Technology, and Medicine (STM) journals are consuming an ever-increasing share of library budgets. This is having a negative impact on other acquisitions, such as research monographs, textbooks and journal titles in other fields. Meanwhile, it has been estimated that the world production of scholarly outputs has doubled since the mid 1980s, increasing the pressure on libraries to acquire more.

In response to the rapidly rising prices of academic journals, research libraries have turned to site licensing as a means to increase their buying power and secure greater access to journals for their users. These licensing agreements, usually negotiated by libraries as a group (library consortia), have greatly enhanced access to scholarly publications in the last several years and provided some relief from the serials pricing crisis. However, despite the obvious benefits, there is concern that site licensing will further increase the market power of the large academic publishers. Licensing takes away some of the flexibility libraries have because the journals are "bundled" together and purchased as groups in such a way that individual journal subscriptions can no longer be cancelled. Over time, librarians are losing the ability to shape the content and quality of the journal literature at their institution. They face an all-or-nothing choice of paying whatever publishers want or giving up an indispensable resource for their patrons; and the largest publishers retain tremendous market power.

This system is simply not sustainable. Even the most well endowed research library cannot afford to provide access to all of the content requested by its faculty and students. The situation
is even more critical for smaller college and universities, and institutions in the developing world, which already have limited budgets. In 2003, the Director-General of UNESCO, Mr. Koïchiro Matsuura, stated that “Most developing countries have so far been unable to take full advantage of the advances offered by new information and communication technologies in terms of access to scientific and technological information and learning opportunities.”

Open Access offers a viable solution to the serials pricing crisis. Widespread open access will ensure that libraries can provide access to all journal publications needed by their constituents. As well, libraries will be able to cancel the financial support they provide to journals (through institutional memberships and other methods) without the risk of losing access to essential publications.

Libraries and open access

Not surprisingly, librarians have been amongst the most vocal advocates for open access. Librarians have shown their support for open access by signing on to open access initiatives and petitions. They have also been actively involved through their institutions or associations in support of OA in other ways:

- educating faculty and administrators on campus;
- building digital repositories to support self-archiving; and,
- supporting open access journals.

SEE ALSO:

Open Access and the mission of a research library

What can librarians do to support and implement Open Access?

Further information:


