THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION
Publishing

November 12, 2013

Librarians Accuse Harvard Business Publishing of Unfair Prices

By Christopher Shea

Harvard Business Publishing has angered librarians with an aggressive new tactic designed to increase its revenue from *Harvard Business Review* articles assigned in courses—or, as the publisher would put it, insisting on proper payments that business schools have been evading. Those articles, typically readable summaries of academic work geared toward practitioners, are a staple of the business-school curriculum.

Although *Harvard Business Review* articles have been included in the journal aggregator EBSCO since 2000, as of August 1 the publisher began blocking full access to the 500 most popular articles, meaning students and professors can no longer download, print, or link directly to them. Harvard has long asserted that a digital library subscription cannot substitute for the separate licenses and fees involved when the articles are assigned in courses. Yet it says it has encountered widespread abuse of that policy, with professors referring students to the digital subscriptions.

To restore the linking ability, some of the largest business-school libraries have received quotes of roughly $200,000 annually—a number the publisher, a nonprofit subsidiary of Harvard University, confirms—although the press says the average quote is below $10,000. Alternatively, business schools can pay for journal articles that are assigned in class on an à-la-carte basis or under various "umbrella" plans. Those latter arrangements have long existed. (Some business schools already have expansive licensing arrangements with Harvard that mean they are unaffected.)

Joshua Gans, a professor of business at the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management (whose e-book *Information Wants to Be Shared* was published last year by Harvard Business Review Press), drew attention to the dispute with an October blog post, at Digitopoly, charging that Harvard Business Publishing was flirting with "evil" behavior. Shouldn't one expensive electronic subscription be enough?, he asked Harvard, he wrote, "is violating a norm in academia so obvious that I didn't ever have to think much about it."

There and in a subsequent opinion piece for the *Financial Times,* he suggested that, as punishment, the *Financial Times* no longer count publication in the *Harvard Business Review* when assessing business-school faculties. (The Rotman school, for now, has decided not to pay the higher EBSCO fee but rather to buy the journal's articles on a per-student basis.)

'Being Held Hostage'

As it happens, many librarians agree with Mr. Gans's general point, if not his remedy. On October 28, business-reference librarians within the American Library Association approved a statement that the press's "profit-driven practices diverge from the intent of scholarly communication and impinge on higher education and libraries' core social mission to preserve and make accessible records of scholarship."

"There's a feeling of being held hostage: In order to get back the access you have enjoyed for over a decade, you have to pay these additional fees," said Andy Spackman, a business librarian at the Marriott School of Management at Brigham Young University and chair of the business-reference librarians' group.

Harvard Business Publishing has responded that, in essence, nothing has changed in its approach to providing the journal. "It has always been the norm to charge for [*HBR*] content when it's used for teaching purposes rather than research," e-mailed Brian Kenny, a spokesman for the Harvard Business School, speaking for the press. The new licenses, he explained, serve as a new way to meet that goal, and preserve the ability to create valuable content, as the landscape of publishing shifts. (One byproduct of the shift, he and others noted, is that the higher EBSCO fees fall on libraries while course-pack fees fall directly on business schools.)

The press first made moves in this direction in 2009, approaching some number of business schools in the United States and Britain—30, according to a 2009 *Library Journal* article—and offering the higher-priced EBSCO license, in the context of allegedly flouted course-license fees. About 15 universities signed on, Harvard now says. Others declined and had some of their linking abilities turned off.

One question is whether business schools will assign fewer *Harvard Business Review* articles as a result of the shift. Mr. Gans wrote that his dean in Toronto had asked the faculty to at least consider alternatives because of the potential for high per-article fees. And will anyone challenge Harvard on copyright grounds? So far, no one dares to do so directly. One British librarian who did not want to be named said that his library declines, as a matter of principle, to pay fees beyond EBSCO, even as professors continue to assign *Harvard Business Review* articles, as always.

Kevin Smith • 15 days ago
Shouldn't the price libraries pay for the EBSCO package be reduced by an amount commensurate with this new fee from HBP? After all , the value of the EBSCO package has been reduced, since functionality that has been available for years is now gone. The the amount of lost value is nicely quantified by the HBP license fee. So libraries should insist on paying the same amount in total

for the same functionality, if a portion of that amount now goes directly to HBP, that much less should go to EBSCO.

49 • Reply • Share ›

munibond • 15 days ago

Ah yes more predatory behavior from a publsiher who seesm to NOT understand that they are supposedly PART of academia see

http://chronicle.com/blogs/wir...

13 • Reply • Share ›

sand6432 • 14 days ago

Given the changes in copyright law in Canada that have vastly broadened the scope for "fair dealing" with copying for classroom use, the University of Toronto might be well positioned to challenge HBR's aggressive policy there.

6 • Reply • Share ›

B-School Dave • 14 days ago

"One question is whether business schools will assign fewer Harvard Business Review articles as a result of the shift."

For me (professor at a top 25 U.S. b-school), the answer is yes. I am purging my courses of HBR articles to the maximum extent possible. Harvard has the right to control rights to its content with whatever loopy terms and conditions it wishes to impose. We profs have the right to vote with our feet, so to speak, on the avarice and inconvenience those terms project.

48 • Reply • Share ›

moto_librarian • 14 days ago

This is simply outrageous. Licensing EBSCO is already an extremely expensive proposition, and asking libraries to pay even more on top of that for content that had previously been available as part of the subscription is bad faith on the part of Harvard. Librarians are striving to provide their users with online access to materials because it is convenient for our users and cuts down on the amount of physical space and upkeep required for print materials. Unfortunately, since we are now paying for access rather than ownership, we are subject to the whims of the publishers to a much greater extent. I can only hope that business schools will block this unethical behavior by Harvard by refusing to assign articles from HBR.

19 • Reply • Share ›

22251848 • 14 days ago

Meanwhile, Harvard libraries have openly stated (correctly) that subscription costs are unsustainable. Guess HBR missed the memo. Oh well, we'll stick to print.

12 • Reply • Share ›

draybeck • 14 days ago

It seems that Hahvahd is increasingly about business and decreasingly about education.

4 • Reply • Share ›

RealityBass • 14 days ago

Harvard Business Review has announced that it will implement additional upcharges to journalists and academic who question its predatory practices.

Contact HBR for an 'umbrella' plan or to sign a non-disclosure agreeement. #sarcasm

4 • Reply • Share ›

adelbert • 14 days ago

I notice that Harvard Business Publishing a non-profit entity.

Their parent institution Harvard University changed their tuition charges from a flat rate to a system based on ability to pay after the United States Senate threatened to take away the tax exempt status for their endowment.

Maybe, it is time for the Senate to make some similar inquiries into the non-profit status of the Harvard Business Publishing.

2 • Reply • Share ›

Anthony Greiner • 14 days ago

If Harvard Business Review is like most scholarly journals, it does not pay the authors of the articles it publishes. So another take would be for authors to charge Harvard Business Review $10000 per article. After all, if HBR's fee is around that, they only need to sell the article twice to make a profit, and the creator of the article can actually get a piece of the pie.

6 • Reply • Share ›

kwendeln • 9 days ago

I 'recommend' various HBR (and other) original articles to my students in order to get them in the habit of 'learning to learn' from original sources - which would ultimately benefit the HBR publishing when they subscribe or access during their careers. HBR wants it both ways - charge the libraries via the EBSCO access as well as expect professors to assign and students to pay additional fees for online reprints. Students are able to find most articles via Google searches. How inconvenient, naive ... and shortsighted. HBR should be befriending ... not alienating ... future subscribers and supporters for HBR publishing.

• Reply • Share ›