2009

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Recommended Citation

Davis, Mitchell (2009) "Open Access, Sustainability and Helping the Kids," *Collaborative Librarianship*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 4 , Article 9.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.29087/2009.1.4.09>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/collaborativelibrarianship/vol1/iss4/9>

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Open Access, Sustainability and Helping the Kids

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DISCLAIMER: because I know I may be under-informed, I do welcome anyone to contact me with a working open access business model that does not rely on outside institutional funding. I truly do want to know if this is working and welcome the expansion of my horizons.

The problem with companies who have built their business around free is that it is far from free to remain successful.
-Mark Cuban

At the end of the day, all we really have are words and language. In the field of human endeavor, anything starts with words -- spoken or thought -- that form the concepts of what we want to do (typically succeed, survive, etc.) or avoid (typically pain, failure, etc.). We live entirely within the context of the language we choose to use. And one of the biggest challenges we face in the world today is a lack of appropriate language to describe reality. We are forced to "look at the world through a rear view mirror," as Marshall McLuhan so eloquently put it. That is a challenge for all of us in every facet of our lives, but since we spend most of our waking hours working, we grapple intellectually with these issues constantly in our professional lives.

During the past eighteen months I have been somewhat oriented to the business of academia (and libraries) as an outsider. Through numerous conversations during that time I have sensed a desire to embrace a new way of being. This seems partly driven by a sense that a true flowering of the idealism on which the foundation of academia is built is within reach. From both a business and a human perspective this drive for the academic world to self-manage itself seems to be a natural reaction to having paid arbitrary and inflated prices for information for

so many years. But the rhetoric also sometimes seems to forget that academia is also a business, just as it is in the for-profit world: lobbyists lobby, budgets are approved, agendas are pursued, people take risks, people are rewarded, new jobs are created, ladders are climbed, consulting contracts are signed, and raises are awarded. And never underestimate the currency of cultural influence, where academia plays a huge role.

One of the largest movements of influence being evangelized currently is the concept of Open Access to content. This idea is being discussed, debated, and tested, and it has made strides toward mainstream acceptance within the academic community. It all feels like a new phenomenon to an outsider like me, but as far back as the mid-1990s universities were rolling out models for Open Access by using subsidies and grants to get started. So now, fifteen years later, Open Access still seems like a "start-up" in the same sense that any endeavor that seeks to create new value, become sustainable, or create a new model with meaningful work for people is a "start-up."

And contrary to the headlines, start-ups are not nearly as sexy as some people would think. For example, I am now in my third "start-up" company during the last fifteen years, and my experience of start-ups goes something like this:

1. You find a small group of great people, promise that you will be able to pay them what they are worth "someday," and work sixty-hour weeks to create something people will pay money for.
2. Then you sell things every day, and you continue to remember that this is what gives life to your business.
3. Then the business becomes profitable.

4. Then you start paying yourself.
5. Then you pursue an abundance of ideas with limited resources as you watch press releases fly, speculations circulate, and chess pieces move all around you.
6. And you show up the next day and make sure that your business is still working, growing, and – most importantly – making money. Because if you are making money you get to come back another day, you get to iterate, you get to improve. You get to make sure that your employees' paychecks don't bounce.

Sustainable Open Access

"But is this really an experiment? If the creation of a funding line to support a particular form of publishing is designed as a hypothesis, what results are expected? What constitutes a successful or failed experiment?...If budget lines for OA are to be given the same fair treatment as budget lines for traditional resources, one would expect a similar form of fiscal responsibility and accountability."

- Society for Scholarly Publishing article

I want to be sold on Open Access. No business I have ever been a part of has been involved in the use of grant dollars, tax dollars, or other public or NGO funding. Therefore, it is a world I do not understand. It also means I may be overly naïve or off base in my perception of how these types of funding mechanisms work. I am happy that this money is being used to help create more access to information, but beyond the grants, studies, experiments, pacts, and articles I am still looking for a pragmatic underpinning to the concept. I certainly don't have all the answers, but I do think the context in which you ask the questions is important.

I struggle because the language being used to describe this start-up effort is anathema to the start-up language I know. I sit in library meetings having a hard time deciphering the coded language of *non-profits* that want to make money and *for-profits* that want to

do the right thing for libraries. I have been coached on an entire lexicon that tries to make selling appear to be something that is not making sales and doing business seem like a morally infused cooperative project. I have read numerous articles that argue for the societal benefits of Open Access while glossing over the nuts and bolts of sustainability in a throw-away sentence or two.

Since the idea has been around for more than fifteen years, I researched case studies for this article that show a real sustainable business model to Open Access that does not rely on outside funding. What I found most were studies (also funded in some way, I presumed) on why initiatives had not worked to achieve sustainability. The net-net summary of why most had not worked was that they had had challenges getting people to "pay their share" in support of the effort. Join the club. At the end of the day, that is no different than the struggle of any business. What makes me nervous about the articles and conversations is that in my experience making money is difficult, and these articles make it seem like it is easy.

Hey, It's for the Kids / Philanthropy in the 21st Century

Newmark abandoned the idea of running craigslist as a nonprofit, which would have required him to learn and follow too many rules. He realized that nobody could stop him from giving away his money if he made too much of it.

- Wired article on Craig Newmark, founder of Craigslist

The single common theme I see in the conversation about Open Access is the strong philanthropic drive behind the effort to free information. I have my own perspective on all of this because I like to create systems that make money, and I consider myself to be a pretty good person who wants to shape the world around me in some positive way.

The black-and-white world of philanthropy is dying. The concept of triple bottom line (3BL), social entrepreneurialism, and other ways of making philanthropy more "busi-

ness like” are becoming more mainstream every day. The time of “mission based” organizations needing to feel apologetic or sullied by making money while pursuing their goals is ending. Kiva.org and other sites use technology to enable fascinating new business models in which profit and social good live hand-in-hand. And grant making organizations are slowly becoming more conscious of tracking the return on their dollars by thinking of grants more as seed money than charity.

After BookSurge was acquired and integrated into Amazon, I left a Senior Management position there in the year 2007, dropping a hefty set of golden handcuffs in the process. I then had the privilege of being able to spend the rest of that year working full time on a self-proclaimed “for profit social venture” that I started with my wife in the year 2005 called - Organic Process Productions (OPP). OPP has produced a number of award winning social documentaries, art and spiritual books, and media-tour events. We have been able to donate more than fifty-thousand dollars to the people and projects featured in a wide body of work: artists and residents who were involved in a New Orleans documentary project that toured the country with Ani DiFranco during the later part of the year 2007, practical environmental education in schools, experimental art, and the support of many grassroots non-profits whom we saw in action first-hand as they were helping people.

Earlier this year OPP expanded by getting involved in local agriculture - launching what is now one of South Carolina’s largest Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) programs and making fresh, hand-made local goat cheese. Those initiatives have been successful and expanded the areas where we connect with our local community and make money – not a killing, but a fair return on the time and energy we invest. These are the same professional expectations anyone has for showing up every day. Having worked with numerous non-profits over the years, I saw that they spent inordinate

amounts of energy keeping the doors open and not nearly enough working for the cause they represent. On that note, I don’t apologize for OPP making money, because I know it helps us to do more cool stuff. And we started with that end in mind.

From my perspective, academic institutions still risk being caught in the “us and them world,” when in reality the “*hey, it’s for the kids*” pitch no longer cuts it. Life is more complicated than that. I don’t believe that you can will good things into existence. And you can’t fund sustainability into existence either. The Open Access movement faces a business challenge, not a philanthropic challenge. Espousing the idea of trying to provide universally free access to information is philanthropic achievement enough.

A Long Slog

A recent article forwarded to me by a colleague told of a campus wide vote at a mid-sized university that made all information produced or published on campus “Open Access.” When I told one friend about this, his confused reaction was, “oh, so I can take free classes at the university now – that is great to know!” Hardly. According to a recent issue of the Atlantic Magazine: *during twenty-seven of the past thirty years education costs have risen faster than health care costs.*

The most understated sentence in the article to me was the second sentence, which after reporting on the successful campus ‘open access’ vote, conceded that the road to sustainable Open Access was going to be “a long slog.” There was no further description of the “slog” beyond that sentence, but that slog is where Open Access is going to win or lose. If the fundamental idea of a University supporting its own students, faculty, and staff with access to information is changing to a model where university libraries are charged with providing universal support for anyone with a computer (the “open access” nirvana), then that is a big change. Whatever the outcome, one thing is

for certain. The new model is nothing that we can currently see in the rear view mirror.

So, back to my disclaimer, how can open access ever be made sustainable? In all my research, I haven't found anyone with a real solution that had shown it could be sustainable. There are services in the journal world (BioMed Central, for example) that have envisioned revenue models such as charging submission fees like self-publishing companies do. This shows great progress from a decade ago when academic publishers called this "vanity publishing," and it is a step in the right direction if it is believed that academics will pay to have their research peer reviewed. I am not sure if that idea will scale or not but it is a business model.

But if *open access* is going to prevail over the current library model of *managed access* (access by those who pay [students, faculty,

etc.], or for whom funds are paid [citizens by local governments]), then there must be a paradigm shift that occurs within both the university and government funding communities so that community A is willing to fund access by communities B through Z in the hope of gaining access to their material. Government and university funding is parochial, and I don't see a paradigm shift any time soon. Managed access is a centuries-old model that can achieve almost all the goals of open access with the huge benefit that it provides the business structure for sustainability without requiring a government-funding paradigm shift. It has an enormous benefit over open access because it can actually produce cultural preservation and dissemination instead of merely being a perfect goal to be achieved within the next one hundred years. I will gladly take half a loaf and eat, rather than stubbornly hold out for the whole loaf and starve.