Chapter 17

Knowledge in the Shrinking Commons:
Libraries and Open Access in a Market-Driven World

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ABSTRACT

Libraries and Open Access function in a variety of ways to make information freely available to the public, but the current era of market-driven globalization has reshaped the economic environment, and threatens to undermine their principle mission. The defining characteristic of this threat is the treatment of knowledge as a commodity. The idea of open access and the institution of the library exist as sources of self-directed learning and as representatives of the shrinking commons in the face of encroaching market forces. Libraries face challenges of relevance in regard to technology, budgets, privatization, and physical space. Open Access must find ways to define itself coherently—as publishers, researchers, libraries and businesses all try to manipulate the concept to fit their needs. This chapter looks at the shared obstacles and objectives of libraries and the open access movement, and analyzes some of the efforts being made to address current challenges and work toward a future of collaboration and continued relevance.

INTRODUCTION

Libraries have been working to make literature and research freely available to the public since long before the term "Open Access" entered the popular consciousness, but the rise and unfolding development of the open access movement has often paralleled the history and evolution of libraries. Libraries and open access share similar goals, face similar struggles, and operate in similar spheres. Their common objectives and overlapping operations present the potential for competition, but their futures will likely be shaped by an increasing need for mutual cooperation and collaboration.

The current market-driven model of globalization tends to squeeze free and public resources on a number of levels, and from a number of angles. Researchers, publishers, libraries and patrons are all affected by the same set of forces, and their

identities are reshaped in the process. Researchers become producers of products, publishers become marketing firms, libraries become bookstores, and everybody becomes customers. These transformations, while possibly inconsequential, semantic, or overly simplified, have the potential to change the nature of libraries and the modes by which people obtain information. This chapter is an attempt to address some of the pressures that market forces have exerted upon libraries and open access (OA). It analyzes possibilities for the survival of both within this context, and looks at the potential they share to help expand the availability of knowledge and information in years to come.

BACKGROUND

Libraries and the open access movement are, of course, not the same. They can both be viewed as educational institutions or gateways to self-directed learning. They are both key players in the curation, arrangement and storage of information. They are both engaged in the processes of making information readily available, but while both play similar educational and organizational roles, there are several distinctions that set them apart. Libraries are physical institutions, while OA is a primarily virtual idea. OA can take place within the structure of the library, may utilize the library as a tool toward its realization, or may mirror the library in its delivery of information, but it has no physical presence of its own. The access to information provided by a library, meanwhile, does not necessarily carry the same specificity as the access referred to within the "Open Access Movement." OA, as defined by Peter Suber's (2004) "A Very Brief Introduction to Open Access," refers specifically to scholarly literature and research of the sort not typically found on the shelves of public libraries. The particular *access* problem that OA attempts to address is the restrictive and rising cost of scholarly publications. The basic solution it presents is that research and information should

be digitized, archived and made available without charge. The reality of OA is far more complicated. Terms like *free* and *open* mean many different things in many different contexts. Access can be free in terms of cost, or free in terms of usage and permission. Information which is free to a reader is not necessarily free to produce. There are significant costs to providing things for free, and there are significant differences in the ways that various stakeholders propose to make that happen.

Open access, then, is a hotly contested concept, even while it is also a relatively specific one. It fits loosely into the framework of libraries – and roughly follows the library model – but it does not necessarily operate like the library itself. Direct comparisons may not be entirely accurate, but the obstacles and objectives shared by both seem to merit their consideration here together. Both are influenced—or perhaps under attack– by the forces of consumerism and market globalization (Buschman, 2003, D'Angelo, 2006, Rikowski, 2005). Both run the risk of witnessing their principle mission undermined by commodification, and both face considerable struggles with an economic future that seems inevitable.

In addition to these theoretical similarities and common challenges, libraries and OA will also be forced together in practical and procedural ways over the coming years. The open access movement came about largely as a response to the skyrocketing prices in academic publishing. These skyrocketing prices have resulted in a drastic reduction in the ability of individuals to afford journal subscriptions, and have left academic libraries as the only reasonable option for access to conventional toll publications (Suber, 2012). This means that libraries have essentially been positioned as the principle playing field on which issues of open access and academic publishing will be decided.

The bonds tying OA to the existing institution of the library may be even more pronounced in the developing world. In areas where infrastructural issues have led to the leapfrogging of entire phases

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