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I Hear the Train A Comin’ — Institutional Repositories: The Promises of Tomorrow

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In last issue’s column, I wrote about what we have learned to date from the institutional repository experience some 7+ years after the category emerged. Here, I will braid that piece by looking at the future of institutional repositories within the larger context of a rapidly changing scholarly communication landscape. What can an IR truly be counted on to deliver, and what are the impediments to a successful IR that institutions must face?

Let’s dig in by rehashing just exactly why institutional repositories matter. IRs disseminate a wide range of scholarly information. There are thousands of repositories worldwide serving up millions of scholarly objects. This is a path to information which simply did not exist 7 years ago. It is neat to think about how institutional repositories have taken content which was heretofore buried and brought it to within a Google search of worldwide availability. Very much related is the notion that the IR helps preserve this accessibility for future generations. We don’t always know today what will be important tomorrow. The reduction in storage costs means repositories can err on the side of inclusion rather than exclusion. Thirdly, institutional repositories can, and sometimes do, push the envelope. They can be used to experiment with new publishing models, new ways of grouping content, new intramural and consortial partnerships, new forms of copyright management, and so forth. An IR is not a university press. In spirit it is more aligned with the Web 2.0 world, which values less formal, less rigid forms of communication.

Web 2.0 sites tend to maintain a sort of “beta” feel, subject to evolve based on market feedback and the trends of the day. And while librarians aren’t exactly the go-with-the-flowiest lot, there are numerous examples of IRs that experiment, adapt, and adjust, from JISC’s exploration of mechanisms to ingest and display experimental chemistry data to Boston College’s infrastructure integration with its digital asset management system.

While institutional repositories clearly matter, they nevertheless have a number of limitations. As I mentioned in last month’s column, no one has yet developed a replicable formula for convincing faculty to participate en masse in the repository. Some schools rely on library staff to acquire and deposit materials. Some attempt to utilize the support staff associated with each department to do the grunt work. Others rely on a hodgepodge of content acquisition activities. This is a tough nut to crack. Seven or so years into the IR Era, I am not convinced it is crackable, to be quite candid. I’ll revisit this momentarily.

A second big challenge is coordinating the repository with other units of the institution. Why, for example, can’t promotion and tenure forms be synched up with the IR so that each faculty member deposits his/her scholarly output into the repository? Why doesn’t the external relations department create a database of expert profiles using the IR? There simply have to be more ways to leverage both the technical sophistication and range of content the repository provides to advance the institution’s mission and create internal efficiencies.

Another key limitation is the fundamental disconnect between how institutional repositories collect resources and how researchers search for information. Does a materials engineer go onto the Web and say “I want to find some new working papers on polymers and plastics. Let’s check out the University of Nebraska or the Texas A&M repository”? Probably not. It is not efficient to conduct research this way, and it simply isn’t how scholars are wired. They want one-stop-shops to access information. It is true that there are umbrella sites like OA1ster, ResearchNow, Google Scholar, and Scirus that allow researchers to search across repositories, but they seem like primitive tools in many ways. There needs to be a better way for Joe or Jane Researcher to discover content by type, by subject, or other parameters, across repositories. This is important. The simpler, more inclusive, and more accurate such meta-repository searches are, the more traction they will get and the more visibility they will bring to repository content.

Given these benefits and limitations, how does the institutional repository impact the large scholarly communication landscape? Think about how scholars are communicating. Communication can be formal and it can be informal. It can be permanent or impermanent. It is interesting to think about just how effectively the institutional repository services each quadrant.

There are communications that are formal and permanent, like a journal article or a book. The IR plays a role in this quadrant by expanding access to alternative versions of commercially-held properties, and by changing the economic models for specialty publications and stretching the long tail as a result.

There are communications that are informal and permanent, like a working paper or a preprint. I would argue that the institutional repository has substantially impacted the scholarly communication landscape by making this quadrant a more arable place. Content that is not destined to end up in a journal, a bound volume, or a library stack is substantially more viable today as the result of the IR. It has found a home, as it were.

The fortunes of communications that are formal and impermanent — and by impermanent I mean they are delivered in the moment without much thought given to their long-term viability — have been similarly though less dramatically impacted by the rise of the IR. This information can now be captured and exposed to a wider audience. You don’t just have to be there, or rely on someone else’s interpretation of events that took place outside your presence. Video, audio, PowerPoints — it can all be captured, served, and curated. The impact of the IR here remains more hypothetical than practical in the sense that IRs provide the capacity to capture and serve this type of information, but the actual uptake has been slow.

Finally, there are communications that are both impermanent and informal — IMs, emails, texts, blog posts, and so forth. At present, the IR does very little here. Frankly, I am not sure whether it should.

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The University then made available online files for each of the digitized works. The bibliographic records were acquired and enhanced by librarians at the Auraria Library in Denver. After the records were loaded into Skyline, the Auraria Library online catalog, they were uploaded to Prospector, the union catalog of the Colorado Alliance of Research Libraries. Now library patrons from across Colorado have access to the online books via the Prospector catalog. Except for the University of Michigan where the books originated, the Auraria Library was the first library in the nation to make these books available to its users. For more information about Skyline and these records contact: Jeffrey Beall at Auraria Library <Jeffrey.Beall@ucdenver.edu> or for more information about Prospector contact George Machovec <george@coalliance.org> www.coalliance.org

Just back from a fabulous trip to Oxford, England where I attended a conference: “Exploring Acquisitions” from April 15-17. Wonderful. Ran into all kinds of great people from all over the world. More information coming on the ATG NewsChannel and in the June 2009 issue of ATG!

Guess we’re out of space. More Rumors on the ATG NewsChannel! See you there! www.against-the-grain.com.