Mind the Gap: A Landscape Analysis of Open Source Publishing Tools and Platforms

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Mind the Gap: A Landscape Analysis of Open Source Publishing Tools and Platforms

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Abstract

This presentation gave an overview and high-level discussion of a landscape analysis study done in 2018–2019. The “Mind the Gap” study cataloged and provided analysis of available open source publishing tools and platforms.

A Brief Précis . . .

In August 2019 we published the final report on a year-long landscape analysis of available open source publishing tools and platforms. The report—*Mind the Gap*—is available on MIT Press’s PubPub platform at <https://mindthegap.pubpub.org/> and slides are available at <https://tinyurl.com/y48qy572>.

The context came from MIT Press’s Terry Ehling, who, in discussions with the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation’s scholarly communications funding program, was interested in “What’s out there, what are their characteristics, and is there a path to sustainability?” as a guide to further development of open source infrastructure pieces. The Mellon Foundation has in recent years devoted over \$30 million to software projects in this area. MIT Press asked, “Where’s the gap? What needs to be built next?” I was asked if I wanted to work on a landscape analysis study.

We began by merging many lists of projects that various people had already assembled. In an effort to keep the numbers under control, we limited our scope to the following:

- Open source software in a public repository, not cloud services
- Publishing tools, not research support or communications
- Publishing, not library infrastructure
- Purpose-built tools, not baling-wire DIY projects (though we love these and have built them ourselves)
- Alive and well, with active developer and user communities

We eventually winnowed the list down to 52 projects that met all of these criteria. It remains an extremely complex landscape with a great number of niche

applications, and often small-scope projects. Indeed, even where functionality overlaps, the use cases and contexts are often defined uniquely. Similarly, there is much variation in the funding, scope, and ambitions of the projects we looked at.

The *Mind the Gap* report provides a great deal of detail on these projects, and our slide deck from the Charleston Conference (<https://tinyurl.com/y48qy572>) provides some overview and topsight on the landscape overall.

Where’s the Gap?

One of the key findings of this study is that there doesn’t seem to be any shortage of *code*; in fact, there is a great deal of overlapping functionality. But projects have to compete with one another for funding, resources, and attention; there is effectively a market system for open source projects. Such a situation might make sense in a commercial context, but if what we want is a coherent open infrastructure for scholarly publishing—and there is a rising chorus of calls for this today—we have a risky and inefficient arrangement currently.

The real “gap” we found is in coordination across projects and between funders, institutions, developers, and users. Much of the available funding for scholarly infrastructure projects privileges innovation and shiny new tools; it doesn’t do as well with longer-term sustainability issues. Relatedly, many valuable projects are too small—in their development and user communities—to attract substantial investment, community contributions, or indeed market-based revenue.

If we care about infrastructure owned and controlled by the scholarly community, the challenge seems to be collective action.

Please see the full *Mind the Gap* report at <https://mindthegap.pubpub.org/> for much more detail and discussion.