April 2006

Op Ed -- Free Is Good

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Recommended Citation

Rhind-Tutt, Stephen (2006) "Op Ed -- Free Is Good," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 18: Iss. 2, Article 13.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.4642>

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Op Ed — Free Is Good

by **Stephen Rhind-Tutt** (Alexander Street Press) <rhindtutt@astreetpress.com>

For many years now, the Web has introduced a steady stream of free content. It's become so well accepted that we no longer find it unusual that **Google** offers a gigabyte of free storage, that *freeconference.com* offers free conference calling capability, or that the **Reuter's** news feeds are available to users at no charge.

Last summer, I came to the conclusion that **Alexander Street Press**, a small scholarly publisher in the humanities, should also take the plunge and make something substantive, something with real value, free. At the **ALA** conference in Chicago, **Alexander Street** launched *In the First Person*, a free index to personal narratives on the Web. It's up there now at www.inthefirstperson.com.

I'd like to take a moment to share with you what a radical step this was for me. My business education and publishing background were well grounded long before the Web made its appearance. I looked on services such as **Google** as interesting experiments made possible by exuberant investors who had bought into a fiction. The fiction, I thought, was that it made business sense to surrender substantial value to customers without asking for payment. Sure, you might offer a service for a while to introduce or promote a service — but not a permanent, high-value service that was expensive to develop and maintain.

What changed my mind? Well, it began when I realized that users simply were having trouble getting to **Alexander Street's** letter and diary collections, because people were doing their searches through **Google** or one of the major aggregators. The user would wade through pages of results, and despite the relevance of our materials to historians, students of literature, genealogists and others, the person would get lost in the vast lists that form the entry points to most electronic library collections. Anecdotal evidence suggested that among undergraduates, some 70% of humanities searches began and ended on **Google**, thereby excluding much of what we had to offer.

One traditional response to this could be to invest in advertising and outreach. We could selectively expose part of our collections to search engines in order to increase the buzz. We could get our sales reps to call, email, and generally push things further. We could attend more shows. But the numbers are against us.

These days, 2% is considered a good response rate to a mailing. Our attendance at **ALA** costs more than \$30,000.

I also realized that we had a difficult message to get across, even if we did want to send you a mailing. You might not think of oral histories, letters, and diaries as very valuable. Perhaps you believe that the published word is a more accurate rendition of history, or that the value of personal narratives is restricted to research in the humanities. I would write to you that newspapers and books are heavily edited, and the stories they tell inevitably reflect social norms. I'd say that writing prepared for audiences talks very differently and less honestly than the writings of people talking for themselves. I'd argue that personal narratives offer us hundreds of thousands of unique voices that tell a more personal history... Yes, I'd put all of that in the mailing copy that you'd probably *never get around to reading!*

Or...I could create a database that showed this value and give it to libraries for free.

The epiphany was that I could spend a lot of money promoting the product, but that it would be much more effective to give the product away. I'd get users to understand the value not by my words, but by users' own actions as they enjoyed the database. I'd create the best quality service, so that it would become a high-traffic site — and then, while enjoying a vast, free service, users might happen to become aware of our other for-fee products along the way.

And so last June, we made our index to repositories and collections containing letters, diaries, and oral histories freely available on the Web. *In the First Person* uses **Alexander Street's** semantic indexing — it lets you search for first person narratives by keyword, date, place, subject, and many other fields.

The response has been great! The database now receives more than a million hits per month and is growing quickly. All kinds of users are seeing how valuable letters, diaries, and oral histories are in research across the humanities, the sciences, and virtually every subject and discipline area. And yes, awareness of our companion collections

has grown. Over the next months and years you can expect us to grow and build on the site.

The response has also shown that there's a psychological fence of sorts between the for-profit and the not-for-profit sectors.

If you're a librarian and question the idea of a free index that also leads to proprietary links, please consider this: We know and expect that users will come to the site and won't ever buy our companion products — and we welcome those users. More than 75% of the resources indexed are freely available on the Web, with thousands of links to free full-text, audio, and video. The other 25% of the indexed pages are proprietary. We want users to experience and enjoy what we've created and to share in what we consider valuable.

To that end, we've made it possible to check a box so that when you search you exclude all the for-fee content from your search results. We're even creating ways for libraries and individuals to upload their own collections or items, share ideas, and comment, through our free Scholarly Communities space.

If you're a publisher and this doesn't sound relevant to you, I suggest you check out *freeconference.com*. The site offers a full-featured free conference service to all comers. They're so eager to serve that they don't even require you to register to access the service. They make their money by selling ancillary services, such as conference recordings and transcripts on top of the basic conference service. This model must be devastating for the for-fee conference hosting services.

Libraries have, of course, done this from the first. So have many dot-com startups. What's different here is that a small, traditional publisher has realized that this kind of model isn't just for large companies and the dot-com world. We believe that offering our content much more broadly is in the best interest of both **Alexander Street** and our customers. We're focusing on the value we can give rather than the value we might be losing. It's paradoxical, but not wholly unintuitive — we need to give in order to receive. 🌱