

2018

Op Ed – Epistemology – Vision, Values and Making It Work

T. Scott Plutchak
splutchak@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/atg>



Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Plutchak, T. Scott (2018) "Op Ed – Epistemology – Vision, Values and Making It Work," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 30: Iss. 2, Article 16.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.8042>

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

Op Ed — Epistemology — Vision, Values and Making It Work

Column Editor: **T. Scott Plutchak** (Librarian, Epistemologist, Birmingham, Alabama)
 <splutchak@gmail.com> <http://tscott.typepad.com>

I've been thinking about how our values drive our decision making, how our decisions reflect those values, and how we get things done. What happens when our values are in conflict or lead us into blind alleys?

Back in September of 2017, **David Lewis**, Dean of the **IUPUI University Library**, published "The 2.5% Commitment," a think piece suggesting that libraries should "commit 2.5% of their total budgets to organizations and projects that contribute to the common digital infrastructure need to support the open scholarly commons."¹ The notion inspired **Lewis** and several of his colleagues to launch "Towards A Scholarly Commons," an "immodest effort to reclaim the system of scholarly communication by encouraging investment in open technologies and open content, and through collective action, create the infrastructure, policies, and practices needed to effect this change."² "Collective action" is the key problem here. More on that later.

Around that same time, the **Penn Libraries** announced "Operation beprex," their intention to sever their relationship with **bepress**, which had been hosting their institutional repository for a number of years, and find an open source solution that would be more in keeping with their values.³ The move was sparked by **Elsevier's** acquisition of **bepress**. Up to that point, **bepress** had been considered a valuable partner by many in the library community. But those **bepress** customers who view **Elsevier** as evil incarnate felt betrayed. One librarian wrote that it was the worst day of her professional life.

The **Penn** librarians took it quite hard. They'd been happy with their **bepress** partnership, but the **Elsevier** acquisition was too much to take. They cited **Elsevier's** "history of aggressive confidentiality agreements, steep price increases, and opaque data mining practices." (In fact, **Elsevier's** price increases have been below the industry averages for many years and their approach toward confidentiality agreements and data mining licenses are pretty standard. But they're still the poster child for all that's wrong about commercial scholarly publishing.)

Although these initiatives arose independently, they both reflect a growing alarm among some librarians over publishers moving beyond publications and toward control of the underlying infrastructure of scholarly communication.

The initiatives are linked by a quixotic idealism that seeks to take the tools of scholarly communication and will into being collaborative, open source infrastructures owned and managed by librarians and their academic colleagues.

In his essay, **Lewis** addresses the for-profit / non-profit conundrum. To his credit, he's not quite willing to categorically refuse to consider the possible positive contributions of for-profit organizations to building that open infrastructure. He settles for tabulating those contributions separately for now. But he also references an article by **Jefferson Poolley**, "Scholarly communications shouldn't just be open, but non-profit too."⁴ **Poolley** makes a lengthy and articulate case, which rests on his belief that "the profit motive is misaligned, fundamentally, with the core values of academic life. The market's restless rent-seeking corrodes ideals like unfettered inquiry, knowledge-sharing, and cooperative progress." (It is telling that **Poolley** equates all profit making with the pejorative "rent-seeking." Economists make a clear distinction between rent-seeking and the legitimate pursuit of profit.)

Poolley makes this claim with passion and determination, although he never quite articulates why it should be so. He describes the scholarly communication landscape as a battleground with the for-profits gathering their forces on one side and the non-profits (he singles out **Mellon Foundation** funded projects in particular) on the other, banners unfurled, lances at the ready, preparing to do battle for the soul of open. There's a clarity to this Manichean view of the terrain that is emotionally satisfying. But it obscures the reality that the actual landscape is murkier and the interests and resources of the various participants much more intertwined.

At the recent **ALA** meeting, **Chealsey Bowley** of **Ubiquity Press** (a for-profit company eager to partner with disaffected **bepress** customers) tackled this head on. She maintains that there is no necessary misalignment and argues that librarians should partner with "value aligned providers" and insist on contracts that reflect their values.⁵ **Ubiquity** launched a library advisory board last May in order to help them insure that their services "align with library

values." Presumably the librarians who agreed to serve are not offended by the notion of **Ubiquity** making a profit while delivering those services.

bepress certainly continues to view itself as a "value aligned provider." They've also established a library advisory board, designed to help them stay focused on the things that matter the most to their librarian partners. The image many have of the **bepress** acquisition is of **Elsevier** rapaciously gobbling up small, helpless **bepress** as it rumbles toward world domination. On the contrary,

JG Bankier, the **bepress** managing director, has been at pains to express in numerous public presentations that he went looking for funding in order to keep doing more of what his customers wanted. Without more resources, he would have been unable to. He and his team remain committed to maintaining the culture they've worked so hard to build.

I wonder if the new fans of **Ubiquity** have considered that if the company is successful and grows, its leaders may find themselves in that same situation, looking for an infusion of cash so that they can continue to deliver the services their customers clamor for. What then?

The **Penn** librarians are trying to be thoughtful and deliberate. The decision to break with **bepress** may have been driven by emotion as much as by fact, but now that they've embarked on this path they're engaging in some careful needs assessment, an analysis of what the available options are, with a two to three year timeline to make the move. It's not entirely clear if all commercial options are off the table, although that would be the logically consistent thing to do.

The **Penn** librarians refer to their decision as "values-based." One of the values is the belief that anyone and everyone should have equitable access to the recorded and vetted results of scholarship, particularly publicly funded scholarship, regardless of their ability to pay. This is a value that most librarians share. For some librarians, this slides into the belief that no organization should make a hefty profit from helping facilitate that equitable access. This is a rather different claim and one that is not as widely shared.

continued on page 34



Op Ed — Epistemology from page 32

One can be firmly committed to the principles of open access and still comfortable with the notion of a publisher generating profits for making it happen. There's no necessary contradiction. So the values being expressed by those who want to drive commercial companies out of scholarly communication altogether are more complex than a simple commitment to open and equitable access to information. Presumably the librarians who have agreed to participate in the **bepress** and **Ubiquity** advisory boards are fully committed to the one without being put off by the other.

The value proposition for the Scholarly Commons folks adds another dimension. **Lewis** et. al. point out that the other item motivating them (aside from the **bepress** acquisition) was an article by **John Wenzler** "that suggested that academic libraries faced a collective action problem, and that as a result they would never be able to create the open scholarly commons they aspired to."⁶ **Wenzler's** article⁷ is well worth reading and **Lewis** acknowledges the strength of the arguments. His solution? "We believe that with some focused attention on the problem and by raising awareness of the consequences of inaction, we can change our behavior and create incentives for ever larger contributions to the common good." In other words, they'll will the problem away.

The Scholarly Commons folks and the **Penn** librarians share a kind of blindness that afflicts many in libraryland (as well as many of the OA partisans) — they have a vision of the

way they want the world to be, but they don't have a strategy for getting from here to there. The vision is the right one, the way it ought to be. So it must come to pass.

Because the **Penn** librarians don't want to engage with the commercial interests they despise, they are at risk of implementing a solution that is not the best one for the members of their community. They would argue, I presume, that the greater interest of building a non-profit ecosystem outweighs any compromises in efficiency and effectiveness of the solution they eventually turn to. But if the moral superiority of the non-profit system is illusory, then they've made those compromises for nothing.

The Scholarly Commons project attempts to identify library funding that is directed towards building open infrastructure, but they have no plan to address the reality of the collective action problem. Once they've tabulated the money and categorized the expenses, what then? They hope that focused attention and raising awareness will lead to behavioral changes. But they're still no closer to creating the organizational structure that will be required to sustain and implement those changes.

It's important to make decisions that don't conflict with our values and I can appreciate the satisfaction that neatly dividing the world into right and wrong can bring. But values are complicated and sometimes conflict. Creating the changes we want to see requires dealing with the realities of economics, the varying values and incentives of a diverse set of participants, and a willingness to confront the messy challenges of developing strategy. 🍄

Endnotes

1. **Lewis, David W.** "The 2.5% Commitment." September 11, 2017. <http://doi.org/10.7912/C2JD29>
2. Toward A Scholarly Commons. <https://scholarlycommons.net/>
3. Operation beprexit: Documenting Penn libraries' journey toward open source repository solutions. <https://beprexit.wordpress.com/>
4. **Pooley, Jefferson.** "Scholarly communications shouldn't just be open, but non-profit too." *LSE Impact Blog*. August 15, 2017. <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2017/08/15/scholarly-communications-shouldnt-just-be-open-but-non-profit-too/>
5. **Bowley, Chealsye.** "Community aligned service providers." 2018 ACRL/SPARC Forum. February 10, 2018. <https://osf.io/preprints/lissa/8wn5p>
6. **Lewis, David W., Lori Goetsch, Diane Graves, Mike Roy.** "Funding community controlled open infrastructure for scholarly communication." *College & Research Libraries News*. Vol 79, No 3 (2018).
7. **Wenzler, John.** "Scholarly Communication and the Dilemma of Collective Action: Why Academic Journals Cost Too Much," *College & Research Libraries* 78, no. 2 (February 2017):183-200. doi: <https://doi.org/10.5860/crl.78.2.16581>

Rumors from page 10

presentation. A passionate advocate for librarians, **Lankes** will discuss the essential role that libraries play through facilitating knowledge creation in the community.
www.innovativeusers.org

Data USA is a free data visualization tool, pulling data from the **U.S. Department of Education's Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System**, it offers profiles of 7,300 postsecondary institutions in the U.S., including acceptance rates, net price, student loan default rates, enrollment numbers, graduation rates, and student expenses. For more see "Surfing University Data: A New Tool" from the **Higher Ed Impact Daily Pulse**, August 24, Datausa.io/search/.

The **2018 Julius Springer Prize for Applied Physics** will be awarded to **Guus Rijnders** of the **University of Twente** in the Netherlands for his research on **pulsed laser deposition (PLD)**. The award, which includes a prize of \$5,000 USD, will be presented at the Magnus-Haus in Berlin, Germany on 5 October 2018, and will be accompanied by a public lecture given by the winner. The

Correction!

The **Library Analytics** column in the February print *ATG* did not include all the authors who wrote the column. Apologies! Oops! Here is the complete column title and information for all of the authors. The online version is accurate! "**Library Analytics: Shaping the Future — Applying Data Analysis: Demonstrate Value, Shape Services, and Broaden Information Literacy**" by **Rachael Cohen** (Discovery User Experience Librarian, Indiana University Bloomington) <rachoche@indiana.edu>, and **Angie Thorpe Pusnik** (Digital User Experience Librarian, Indiana University Kokomo) <atthorpe@iuk.edu>, Column Editors are **John McDonald** (EBSCO Information Services) <johnmcdonald@ebSCO.com>, and **Kathleen McEvoy** (EBSCO Information Services) <k.mcevoy@ebSCO.com>. Thanks, all! 🍄

Julius Springer Prize for Applied Physics recognizes researchers who have made an outstanding and innovative contribution to the field of applied physics. It has been awarded annually since 1998 by the editors-in-chief of the **Springer** journals *Applied Physics A – Materials Science & Processing* and *Applied Physics B – Lasers and Optics*.
Springer.com

Alexander Street Press was acquired by **ProQuest** in the summer of 2016. **ProQuest** is also sponsoring the **National Media Market this summer**. I remember **NMM**. It was held twice in Charleston right before and during the

Charleston Conference. Long time colleague **deg farrelly** thought it was a good idea which it was, and our colleague **Jared Seay**, the **College of Charleston's** Media Librarian (see his column in this issue p.58) was an attendee. **deg farrelly** has retired from **Arizona State University Libraries** but I first met him when he was working for my good friend **Susan Campbell**, then the director of the **Troy State Library**. (A side memory — **Susan** and **Pam Censer** initiated the **Mentors** part of the **Charleston Conference**).

This announcement came during the visit of **French President Emmanuel Macron**

continued on page 36