Op Ed- Epistemology-Power, Control, and the Quest for Open Infrastructure

T. Scott Plutchak
It's not news that many librarians see
the future of scholarly communica-
tion as a fight between the forces of
good and evil. Some examples from this
week's mail:

A data services librarian asks, “I'm
curious if anyone has any concerns
around who ultimately owns Digital
Science (and Dimensions and FigShare
and Symplectic and Springer)? … I
have some feelings when I see lines
connecting to publishing entities, but maybe
that's unfounded.” (Not warm and fuzzy
feelings, I'm guessing.) A research data
manager replies, “Me, I have concerns!
I definitely have concerns — DigSci/
FigShare/Symplectic/Dimensions all
go back to McGraw Hill, so…yeah. So of-
ten commercial publishers are motivated
by maximizing immediate share holder
value, which is rarely in line with the val-
ues of academics/scholars/researchers,
and is such a source of friction.”

Pretty one-dimensional, but not as
hostile as this post from Eric Elmore
(UTSA, Electronic Resources Coor-
nator): “Librarians are interested in get-
ing the most content and value for our
dwindling budgets in an ethical manner.
Not an easy or simple task. Publishers,
on the other hand, are concerned with
extracting every penny, ruble, shekel,
pence, yuan, yen, and/or ounce of blood
they can from anyone who wants to use
the content they ‘publish’. … It’s Cap-
italism 101. Once you understand the
frame of mind of someone who works
for a publisher, of course they think
libraries are leveraging a free resource
such as SciHub. Because that’s exactly
what they would do if they were in the
libraries’ position. When the only ob-
tive is the endless acquisition of money
silly little things like whether or not a
resource is legal or ethical no longer
have relevance.”

“One you understand the frame
of mind of someone who works for a
publisher,” Elmore’s condescension
is breathtaking.

Fortunately, even among those who
share the Manichean view of things,
most stop short of claiming that every
person who works for a publishing
company considers legal and ethical
considerations to be irrelevant. Mike
Roy of Middlebury College also sees
publishers and librarians working in
opposition, but in much less inflamma-
tory language:

“The fight (and yes, it is a fight) over
Open Access is about reclaiming control
over a system that is now largely controlled by cor-
porate interests. Those who
have power rarely hand that
power over without a fight.”

He makes a crucial point here: The fight over
Open Access isn’t really about
Open Access. It hasn’t been
for a very long time. It’s a
fight over control.

It’s been obvious for
years that the Big Five have
fully embraced Open Access.
And the version they
embrace — immediate access to
the version of record on the publisher’s site
— is much closer to the ironic OA ideals
enshrined in the BBB declarations than the
various green versions championed
by many OA partisans (embargoed ac-
cess to an author’s manuscript version
buried in an institutional repository).
The disputes aren’t about whether to
make articles open, they’re about who
gets to set the terms. The pure of heart
librarians are absolutists. Roy says, “A
number of people have described the
challenge as one of needing to organize
and to act collectively in order to reclaim
control and ownership over this system.”

Shared control isn’t an option.

Last December, Roy and a couple of
his colleagues published a blog post in
which they discussed their efforts to “map
the infrastructure required to support
digital scholarly communications.” They
identify three “uncomfortable truths.”
One, there are two sets of actors working
in this space. There are several of the big
commercial companies on the one hand,
and on the other “a ragtag band of actors:
open source projects of various sizes and
capacities.” The conflict is “a bit like the
rebel alliance versus the empire and the
death star.”

Second, the bad guys companies
are well resourced and the ragtag good
guys are not. And third, there is very little
transparency, so it’s impossible to see
where investments are being made by
either group. It’s this last truth that they
hope to confront by setting up a mecha-
nism for identifying what “the commu-

nity” is currently spending on open
infrastructure projects. They argue that
better data and more transparency are
essential in order to leverage whatever
resources the academic community can
muster and make sound investments in
developing open infrastructure that can
compete with the death star… er, the
big commercial companies.

But data and transparen-
cy are still insufficient. Fig-
uring out where to make in-
vestments, and then making
those investments happen,
requires more, “…an organ-
izational and governance
structure that is trusted by
the community. Such an
organization does not exist
today. We need to start to
[sic] thinking about how to
create it.”

The results of some of
that thinking were revealed
in May with the launch of Invest in
Open Infrastructure. IOI isn’t quite
an organization. It’s billed as a global
collaboration among a number of highly
motivated organizations and individuals
with a shared belief in the importance
of open infrastructure for scholarly
communication. The cornerstone of their
effort, the fulcrum on which they hope
to leverage their data and transparency,
is the Framework. “To move [Open In-
frastucture] forward, it is time to create
a strategic, global body — The Frame-
work — with a mandate to facilitate and
shepherd a shared strategy and agenda
across international stakeholders.”

The IOI concept statement describes
The Why, The Issue, The Vision, The
Mission, The Framework. It is silent
on The How, which is the crux of the
issue. And which leads us back to The
Who and how dogmatic IOI is going to
be about power and control.

One of the ironies missed by the
commercial-organizations-bad folks is how
many of the successful collaborative
efforts in developing shared infrastruc-
ure have been publisher-led. ORCID,
CrossRef, CHORUS — they all got off
the ground because people in publishing
recognized that they could contribute
their expertise to a shared effort that
would result in a public good. I suppose
everyone involved wasn’t pure of heart,
but they knew how to get things done.

What people like Elmore miss every
time they bitch about the misalignment
of goals and values between publishers
and academics is that every one of us
operates out of a multiplicity of motiva-
tions in almost everything that we do.
People talk about “mission-driven” and
“maximizing revenue” as if they’re mu-
tually exclusive. Yet every organization
that has a mission needs to have a sound
financial structure and a company that

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I suppose it’s human nature to try to whittle the complexities of human behavior down to simplicities of good and evil. But that’s not how people really operate. Scientists might be driven by the desire to make world-changing discoveries while also having financially rewarding careers and winning prizes and being admired by their peers. An actor or musician might be determined to use their art to change how people think about their own lives, and might be determined to use their art to change how people really operate. Scientists might be driven by the desire to make world-changing discoveries while also having financially rewarding careers and winning prizes and being admired by their peers. An actor or musician might be determined to use their art to change how people think about their own lives, and might be determined to use their art to change how people really operate. Scientists might be driven by the desire to make world-changing discoveries while also having financially rewarding careers and winning prizes and being admired by their peers. An actor or musician might be determined to use their art to change how people think about their own lives, and might be determined to use their art to change how people really operate. Scientists might be driven by the desire to make world-changing discoveries while also having financially rewarding careers and winning prizes and being admired by their peers. An actor or musician might be determined to use their art to change how people think about their own lives, and might be determined to use their art to change how people really operate. Scientists might be driven by the desire to make world-changing discoveries while also having financially rewarding careers and winning prizes and being admired by their peers. An actor or musician might be determined to use their art to change how people think about their own lives, and might be determined to use their art to change how people really operate. Scientists might be driven by the desire to make world-changing discoveries while also having financially rewarding careers and winning prizes and being admired by their peers. An actor or musician might be determined to use their art to change how people think about their own lives, and might be determined to use their art to change how people really operate. Scientists might be driven by the desire to make world-changing discoveries while also having financially rewarding careers and winning prizes and being admired by their peers. An actor or musician might be determined to use their art to change how people think about their own lives, and might be determined to use their art to change how people really operate. Scientists might be driven by the desire to make world-changing discoveries while also having financially rewarding careers and winning prizes and being admired by their peers. An actor or musician might be determined to use their art to change how people think about their own lives, and might be determined to use their art to change how people really operate. Scientists might be driven by the desire to make world-changing discoveries while also having financially rewarding careers and winning prizes and being adm...
to the institution. Taking the example of **Lean Library**: it enables the librarian to deliver seamless remote access, saving faculty and students precious time. It also enables them to get out clear messaging about the libraries role in bringing resources to patrons thus raising the profile of the library. And it can help the end user find alternative routes to access the resources that they are looking for, automating interlibrary loan, or suggesting OA materials where relevant.

**ATG:** From your experience are these non-content offerings changing the dynamic among librarians, publishers, and scholars? Do these more sophisticated products call for changes and adjustments in the current relationship among stakeholders? In short, are they changing the traditional business model? If so, how?

**KP:** I think the main change is that technology makes the stakeholders more connected and gives the publisher and library more visibility on the types of content that faculty and researchers are using. It can better inform collection development and make it more targeted and responsive to patrons’ needs. The library and publisher may also become more seamlessly integrated into the natural workflow of the patron. For instance, rather than expecting the student or researcher to sign into the library website, technology enables the library to get relevant content instantaneously, as delivered via **Lean Library**.

Our **Lean Library** product is a good example of a technology solution that gets content into the researchers’ workflow. It not only supports remote access, but also enables access to content directly via the web browser that the researcher uses, giving them smooth access to library content.

An example of technology enabling changing business models is **Adam Matthew’s Quartex** platform. It constitutes a service to libraries, enabling them to easily display their special collections — without technical knowledge or recourse to IT teams — and make available to academics, researchers, and the public — material that previously may not have been accessible or easily searchable.

**ATG:** It also strikes us that such offerings provide opportunities for libraries and publishers to broaden their impact on the scholarly community. What is the evidence of that broadening impact? If so, how are scholars reacting to this increased role for librarians and publishers?

**KS:** I echo **Karen’s** point about increased connectivity. What’s also new and exciting for us is how these developments have encouraged us to develop a content-agnostic approach in some of our offerings. **Talis Aspire**, **Talis Elevate**, **Lean Library** and **Quartex** are all about software solutions that demonstrably make the best use of the content that students or scholars require from their libraries regardless of publisher, served up to them as readers wherever they are. But these tools are able to go beyond offering content to providing an experience of the task, be it learning or research, which can increase patron success.

**ATG:** We’ve been asking some serious and important questions, but we’d like to end on a lighter note. We were wondering how you like to unwind and relax? What fun things do you do when you can get away from the office and find some down time?

**KP:** I have two addictive hobbies that I love to follow when I have time. First, I love watching contemporary dance; I have a local theatre, Sadlers Wells, which shows the best contemporary dance in London. My next visit will be for a dance performance which combines Flamenco and Jazz! It should be interesting.

My other love is football (or soccer as you call it in the U.S.). I am a season ticket holder at Arsenal (a top football team in England). I love following the team’s performance, the stadium is spectacular and it’s great just sitting out in the fresh air watching the drama of a match. Right now I’m enjoying watching the women’s world cup and I’m looking forward to the football league starting up again in August!

**KS:** My hobby is swimming; I’ve always enjoyed the sensation of being in the water, it makes me feel free. I’ve been challenging myself to improve my stroke technique recently, and even signed up for a few lessons a month ago — and my tumble turn seems to be on the up!

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