

Against the Grain

“Linking Publishers, Vendors and Librarians”

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I Hear the Train A Comin' — Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy

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Several years ago, our company (**The Berkeley Electronic Press**) began publishing peer-reviewed, born digital journals. As an experiment, we offered all of our articles under what we deemed a “quasi-open access” policy. The idea was that, although we are a commercial publisher that hopes to make money, we nonetheless would be best served by having as wide a readership as possible. We thus allowed nonsubscribers to access our content by completing a short guest registration form. The form allows us to inform their library of their interest in reading our journals. When libraries were convinced of sufficient interest in the journal, we reckoned, they would subscribe, and afterwards access for all faculty, staff, and students at that institution would be immediate, with no more forms to fill out.

This model has proven to be a great success for us. Since that experiment began five years ago, we have begun deploying our technology in other areas of the academy as well, notably institutional repositories. Dozens of schools now use our repository technology — **Digital Commons**, co-marketed with **ProQuest**. These repositories house a wealth of interesting and valuable scholarly information. It seemed like a logical extension to us to capture and display this open access content alongside the 30 quasi-open access commercial journals we publish under our own imprint. When we announced plans for this co-mingling — called **ResearchNow** — at **ICOLC** this past spring, it met with intense discussion. Some felt strongly that there are open access materials, and there are commercial journals, and conscious or unconscious attempts to blur the line were problematic.

This **ICOLC** debate over **ResearchNow** set me to thinking. Are there other projects that rethink traditional divisions between “free” and “subscription” materials? Who is charting new

business models for scholarly communication, in nuance, rather than the broad brushstrokes of open access and commercial content? How did their models emerge, where do they break from the traditional norms of scholarly publishing, what have they learned to date from their efforts, and what do these lessons portend for the future?

Katina Strauch was kind enough to provide an excellent forum to examine these matters at the **2005 Charleston Conference**. I had the honor of moderating a session entitled, “The Confluence of Open Access and Licensed Content.” The session examined a number of emerging models that rethink traditional divisions between “free” and “subscription” materials. Presentations were given on the specific efforts of the American Political Science Association’s Political Research Online service (<http://www.politicalscience.org>), Cornell’s Industrial and Labor Relations Review’s new home within the School of Industrial and Labor Relations’ institutional repository (<http://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/ilrreview>), **Alexander Street Press**’s “free to the world” databases (<http://www.alexanderstreetpress.com>), and the **Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy**’s endowed content (<http://plato.stanford.edu>). In this month’s column, I will look at the latter as a fascinating case study of a new way to fund the dissemination of scholarly information.

The **Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (SEP)** — located at <http://plato.stanford.edu> — was launched in 1995 to serve as a “dynamic reference work” covering all areas of philoso-

phy. The goal of a dynamic reference work is not just to grow in word count or number of entries. Rather, entries are meant to be evolving rather than static, and can be changed as new developments emerge in the field. Each entry is maintained and kept up to date by an expert or group of experts in the field. Currently, an editorial board of 100 distinguished philosophers oversee information across 45 topics (e.g., aesthetics, metaphysics). These board members solicit contributions from authors around the

world (a small number of submissions are unsolicited), vet the drafts, oversee postings to the site, and work with authors to keep their contributions current as the scholarship in their topic evolves. In this latter regard, readers, too, play an important role. They are encouraged to contact the thousand or so contributing authors directly with comments, corrections, and other suggestions for improvements. As of late 2005, some 750 entries

have been posted to the **SEP**, typically in the 10,000 word range. For a complete list, see <http://plato.stanford.edu/published.html>.

While the content maintained within the **Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy** and the dynamic reference work approach are exemplary (indeed, the project recently received the Best Content Award from the **Charleston Advisor** in its Fifth Annual Readers’ Choice Awards), it is the unique business model that I wish to examine in greater detail. The **SEP** is maintained on an annual budget of approximately \$200,000. This includes 1.7 FTE, servers and other technology, as well as a small overhead allocation from **Stanford**. With the project managers committed to long-term unrestricted access for all, several funding options were discussed. Even-

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tually, the **SEP** crafted a most unusual model. It convinced **Stanford University**, its host, to partner with a number of libraries and library consortia for the purpose of building a protected operating fund. In other words, they set out to raise an endowment. After some negotiation, they enlisted the **Southeastern Library Network (SOLINET)**, the **International Coalition of Library Consortia (ICOLC)**, the **Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources Coalition (SPARC)**, and **Indiana University Libraries** to raise \$3 million over the course of 3 years. At the same time, **Stanford** agreed to raise \$1.125 million from private individuals and corporations. The intention is for the **SEP** to then live off the interest on that \$4.125 million fund.


The **Stanford** fundraising tentacles are leg-end, but from what sources would the libraries raise their share? Working with the **Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy**, they drew up a target list of libraries at academic institutions offering degrees in philosophy. Beyond the warm feeling one gets from contributing to the greater good, the libraries were provided some concrete incentives and assurances. The **SEP** Web pages accessed by participating universities' readers are to be stamped with a customized banner acknowledging the support of the local library. Contributing libraries have access to the **Encyclopedia's** quarterly archives as a single compressed file, providing a local archive option should the project ever terminate. Importantly, contributors are ensured governing input over the project.

Another intriguing aspect of the **Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy** funding model is this: **Stanford University** has agreed to return all library contributions (together with any interest and appreciation in excess of the annual payout) should the **SEP** project ever terminate. This is a unique element in the business plan: the libraries will see that their contribution appreciates through endowment management as it is put to work, yet is protected so they can in-

vest in some other worthy open access project should this project ever cease.

So, is that warm feeling combined with these practical benefits enough to secure mass participation? If the price is right, yes. In the United States, the requested amount is \$5,000 a year for three years for Ph.D. institutions, \$2,000 a year for schools offering Master's degrees, and \$1,000 for institutions with undergraduate programs. More than 400 libraries worldwide have committed to the project. Combined with a National Endowment for the Humanities challenge grant, the library fundraising arms secured commitments of \$1.3 million in its first year.

To be sure, there is a free rider problem that the **Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy** has not fully overcome. Some schools have not contributed (and may not be aware of the importance of their contribution), but nonetheless benefit from the contributions of others. The **SEP** has an outreach plan that targets institutions meeting criteria such as size, location, the kind of degree in philosophy it awards, and so forth. When a reader from one of the targeted institutions attempts to access an entry, the system (using IP checking) returns a note at the top of the page gently reminding the reader to speak to his/her library about the benefits of financial participation. The hope is that, much like **NPR's** pledge drives (or **bepress's** own quasi-open access policy), the demonstrated researcher interest will convince the library to support the model.

The **Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy** is forging a new path in scholarly publishing. It is neither a subscription service nor an author pays model. Its content is free, but only so long as the community that benefits from it provides the necessary funding to attain its endowment threshold. It is operated not by individual scholars or university administrators or libraries, but by a combination of all the above. Will the **Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy** succeed? Early returns, both in terms of content quality and financial planning, are promising. Will the model be replicated and extended by others? Time will tell. 

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Unconventional ...

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