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Editorial

The Economics of Information Control

Nearly a decade ago, in *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*, MIT professor Janet H. Murray presented her vision of the future for the newly burgeoning World Wide Web. She dreamed of "a single comprehensive global library of paintings, films, books, newspapers, television programs, and databases, a library that would be accessible from any point on the globe." Gauged by her level of enthusiasm, it was as if she anticipated a modern library of Alexandria to materialize in the infinite expanses of cyberspace.

In more sober reflections on the practical realities of the new digital age, however, Murray did acknowledge that no two things are more difficult to predict "than the future of art and the future of software," and in this she is certainly correct. Indeed, since Murray's book appeared in 1997, scholars have increasingly decried the role of market forces as a hindrance to the global production and dissemination of knowledge, which has led to the rise of the Open Access movement—a movement of scholars advocating free electronic dissemination of research in the natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities.

In *Digital History: A Guide to Gathering, Preserving, and Presenting the Past on the Web*, Open Access advocates Daniel J. Cohen and Roy Rosenzweig complain of "the balkanization of the web into privately owned digital storehouses," and the fact that "the most important commerical purveyors of [knowledge] are … global multibillion-dollar information conglomerates like ProQuest, Reed Elsevier, and the Thomson Corporation, which charge libraries high prices for the vast digital databases of journals, magazines, newspapers,

books, and historical documents that they control." To challenge the economics of traditional publishing arrangements, Cohen and Rosenzweig concurrently released the text of their digital history guide in a freely accessible and readably formatted web version, as well as in the traditional paper form for sale published by the University of Pennsylvania Press.

Like Murray, Open Access proponents praise the untold possibilities the new digital age affords for scholarship but, like Cohen and Rosenzweig, are highly critical of its commerical side. Many of them believe the serials crisis in journal publishing—which is tied to the thirty-year weakening of the scholarly book market with libraries as the chief purchasers of these books—is due to the "commodification of information" by the powerful conglomerates mentioned above.

Open Access directly challenges the standard economic instrument—price—used to control and distribute information by promoting free electronic dissemination of research findings to libraries and readers by traditional publishers (i.e., university presses, commerical academic publishers, professional and scholarly organizations) and also by "nontraditional publishers" (i.e., academic departments, schools, colleges, universities, or groups of scholars). As of 24 May 2006, there were 2,248 Open Access journals listed in the Directory of Open Access Journals (www.doaj.org). Some Open Access journals are completely free; others charge authors a submission fee.

An Open Access journal is a published electronic journal that does not use the traditional dual-revenue subscription pattern (i.e., subscription fees charged to libraries or individuals and insertion fees charged to advertisers). Open Access is generally viewed as a process that allows individuals the right to read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to the full text of an article. To be included in the Directory, a journal must exercise a peer-review process; it must report research results to the scholarly community it serves; it must appear at regular intervals; and each issue must be numbered and dated and must contain separate articles, stories, or other entries.

A study published in the most recent *Journal of Scholarly Publishing* (JSP), which analyses data from the Institute for Scientific Information regarding 1,317 scholarly journals in 25 marker fields during the years 1981–2000, found the vast majority of nonopen access journals were reasonably priced and fairly accessible—a conclusion that ought to temper the reformist zeal of the Open Access movement. While the researchers applaud the desire of academics and their educational institutions "to take back ownership of the scholarship they have developed or paid for," their findings compel them "to raise some issues, and indeed some concerns, about the Open Access movement."

"Will prominent academics currently serving as editors, associate and assistant editors, and members of editorial boards abandon their leadership roles at reputable print journals? Will academics cancel their subscriptions to print journals and subscribe only to Open Access journals? Will academics, specialists in an academic field, have the needed publishing, financial, and technological skills to create, launch, and sustain (and not only in the short term) an Open Access journal? What is the likelihood that all or even some of the existing Open Access journals will survive?"

These are tough questions indeed. The economic reality is that revenue from journal publication is what often keeps a university press's book divisions afloat. What will likely happen if these publishers lose subscription and advertising revenues, or their editors and authors? There is a symbiotic relationship between the price of a journal, the public estimation of its importance, and the probability that it will be sustainable for decades to come. Open Access journals that are completely free have no mechanism for determining just how much readers value the service it provides. In this respect, the JSP researchers provide a fitting admonition: "Academics who believe they can transform the scholarly communication process via Open Access journals will probably find out, and rather quickly, that the economics of publishing are harsh and unforgiving."

—Stephen J. Grabill, Ph.D.