

Pork Bellies and Silk Purses

OK, so I mixed a few metaphors in constructing the title of this column. Bear with me for a few minutes, and you will see where I am going. An old article in the now defunct *Lingua Franca* magazine had a fairly large impact when it was published in 1995. The article, “Indecent Disposal” by Charlotte Allen, described, in a mood reminiscent of Upton Sinclair’s description of livestock in the meat-packing industry, the relationship between scholarly book publishing and the commercial remainders market. The article opens with the following:

“It’s amazing,” says Niko Pfund, editor in chief at New York University Press, while describing his recent trip to London. “You walk by the tables and they’re saying: ‘Four dollars apiece? I can’t do it at \$4, but I can do it at \$3.50. Okay, I’ll take a thousand at \$3.50.’ You might as well be dealing in pork bellies.”¹

The article went on to describe the commodity-like nature of the remainders market, where books are bartered on the dollars-per-ton scale.

Allen wrote her article at a time when the economics of scholarly communication was at its most tumultuous state. Had she published her article today, she might have written it not about the remainders market but rather about the commodity-like transactions involving current publications sold in the “big deal.” You know the “big deal”: Zephyrsmann Pubs. GmbH. agrees to license the state library consortia of South California its entire yearly publishing output, in digital format, for \$.00074 per citizen, based on the 2000 U.S. census...

As higher education increasingly acquires scholarly content through consortia of one form or another, more purchases from commercial sources are made as part of a “big deal.” Colleges and universities may seek to acquire publications of quality, but the deals are structured as commodity purchases. For a single dollars-per-unit cost contract, the institution will receive, in the aggregate, the quality publications it desired—plus many more publications that someone might want someday. This is exactly the model used by resellers when they buy remainders by the ton. Some books sell, and those that sell cover the cost of the purchase and earn some profit for the reseller.

Those of us in higher education make the “big deal” for one basic reason: it is cheaper, both in absolute costs and in human resources, to buy one contract for all of us and for everything than it is for each of us to buy many contracts for subsets of everything. The “big deal” usually gets us what we want, plus a whole lot more, for the price we would have paid for what we originally wanted and with far less use of our human resources. The question now becomes, once we make the consortial “pork belly” purchase, what do each of our institutions do with the savings in human resources that are freed up by the “big deal”? The answer is that we make silk purses.

Academic libraries recognize that higher education institutions are the source of valuable intellectual property.

A new economic model for the management of intellectual property is being defined by the concept of open-source institutional repositories.

University presses knew this long ago, but their economic model for the management of that intellectual property was flawed. It depended on institutional subvention of a basically commercial model, and when breaking even in the commercial model required subsidies that were increasing yearly against strained institutional budgets, the model failed. Colleges and universities are now at the tipping point of a new model, one defined by the concept of open-source institutional repositories—and therein lie the makings of our silk purses.

The advent of new content-management software and the experience of several early-adopter institutions have provided the needed tools and processes to construct institutional repositories with relative ease. Much is owed to the groundbreaking work of the Universities of Michigan, Washington, and Virginia, as well as MIT, Carnegie Mellon, Columbia, and Cornell, in this effort. Building on their work-flow development, on digital content-management software such as DSpace, CONTENTdm, and Fedora, and on the middleware that these schools and organizations such as Internet2 and the OCLC (Online Computer Library Center) have developed, any college or university is within reach of creating an institutional repository.

As the classic scholarly publication system collapses under the commodity model and as institutional resources are freed for other purposes, more institutional repositories will be created and



made operational. As scholars use and gain confidence in the open-source institutional repository model of publishing, scholarship will be placed in the public domain and will be administered by scholarly communities and higher education institutions. Libraries will be the managers of this content, as they have managed content for so many generations. If we are as effective as I believe we will be, it may not be too long before the next skinny volume of the journal *Brain Research* can be had for cents on the dollar

at your local Buck-a-Book outlet. At that point, we will indeed have created a silk purse from our pork belly purchase.

Note

1. Charlotte Allen, "Indecent Disposal: Where Academic Books Go When They Die," *Lingua Franca*, vol. 5 (May/June 1995): 44-53.

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EDUCAUSE Review

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