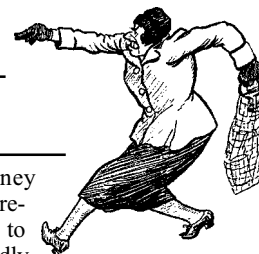


Back Talk — Closed to Open



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I am contemplating opposing “openness.” In the past I liked people who were open-minded, who opened up, who favored open-shop workplaces, who liked the open road, who like to watch the **US Open** on rainy days, and I like stores with signs that say “open” when I go there. But with the advent of the open access, open source and open archives movements, I think the word open is over-used at best and really means closed to lots of things at worst.

“Open Source,” according to THE source of all knowledge [the Web] means “a method and philosophy for software licensing and distribution designed to encourage use and improvement of software written by volunteers by ensuring that anyone can copy the source code and modify it freely.”¹ This sounds great, but in the context of universities and their libraries, it now relates to a millennial view of life in which universities which normally strive to kill each other in physical, bureaucratic, and intellectual sports contests, will somehow agree to pool huge sums of money to develop systems of mutual benefit. Moreover, they will then freely give these programs to the other institutions which were too cheap to pitch in to help in the first place. Open source requires them not to purchase a commercially produced e-portfolio, learning platform, e-resource repository, registration system that works, more or less, but instead work together to develop something that meets all their needs.

Recently, two good articles were published about open source. The first, entitled “Open Source 2007” by **Brad Wheeler** in the July/August issue of *Educause Review* sketches two possible scenarios for the future.² The second, “5 Challenges for Open Source” by **Jeffrey Young** in the September 24 issue of the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, notes that for the movement to be a success there must be community, an agreement on how open is open, a commitment of funds up to 75 to 80 percent of the off the shelf price, a willingness to work with the commercial sector, and a willingness to dump what was at least working in favor of something that might work better.³ I would like to be optimistic that open source will be a success, but my experience as a largely ignored preacher of cooperative collection development doesn’t give me much hope. While at **Columbia**, I was overjoyed when, after more than 170 years, **NYU** and **Columbia** agreed to allow each others students to freely enter each others libraries (stay tuned, mutual checkout privileges may come next). In Hong Kong, six out of eight university libraries recently agreed to relax access restrictions on undergraduates. So, while I would like to believe that there will be a rush for institutions to work together, I won’t hold my breath much longer than 60 seconds or so.

“Open Access” is another wonderful idea. It begins with the suggestion that authors and other copyright holders will agree to share with the world access to their work by depositing an electronic copy on a publicly accessible Website forever.⁴ Since these idealists recognize that

commercial publishers — albeit library-friendly ones — won’t survive unless someone pays their bills, open access also means that the authors or their sponsors must pay fees before their research can be published and so libraries won’t have to pay so much. This piece of genius requires one to ignore the possibility that once research universities finish paying the fees to these welfare publishers, their pockets may be empty. It also assumes that quality, not the availability of the needed subsidies, will dictate what gets published.

Another member of the current generation of opens is the “Open Archive” movement. An open archive is one “for which metadata is publicly available (i.e., ‘exposed’) to researchers via a service provider. The ‘open’ part of this technical term refers to the architectural aspect of the open archives idea — the definition and promotion of machine interfaces which facilitate the availability of content from a variety of providers.”⁵ This relative of open access is another wonderful idea and one I have championed myself. The only problem is it requires people to freely deposit their intellectual output in the electronic input box. This does not, unfortunately, seem to automatically happen. The “build it and they will come” theology doesn’t seem to apply here too well. Perhaps, like the cathedrals of Europe that are under eternal construction waiting for funds to appear, this may be a work of centuries, not weeks or months. The open archive movement assumes a culture change. Researchers who want to share their findings have to worry about securing funding. Well-received articles in internationally recognized journals can be parlayed for needed grant funding, released time, or lower teaching loads. What are the rewards for depositing articles in open archives?


An examination of the open source, open access, and open archive movements causes one to question the meaning of the word “open.” Open is supposed to mean “affording unobstructed entrance and exit; not shut or closed.”⁶ But in these cases what is it that one has access to because the gate is open? If open source means universities are free to develop mutually beneficial software, but the costs rival those of commercial products, can that mean that too much time is spent on getting ready to do a good thing instead of doing the good thing? Twenty years ago libraries were involved in the community development of integrated library systems. We were supposed to be buying turnkey systems but we all made so many conflicting demands upon the commercial developers that many went bust. Some libraries then banded together to take over the community development process themselves. All of these experiments ended in failure. Will the current attempts at community development succeed this time?

Similarly, open access is supposed to mean free or nearly free access to research by going around greedy publishers — yet the indications are that instead of giving the money to libraries, with which to purchase commercial publi-

cations, the money will be given to researchers to give to supposedly friendly publishers. Again the enormity of the cultural change that comes with the open access model is mind boggling. With hundreds upon hundreds of thousands of articles published annually, should we really contemplate pushing for this revolution in how information is shared?

Finally, what is the value of a near empty open archive? At my university a call is issued annually for the faculty to report what they have published. This year the number of articles reported in the first round was down, not because less had been published, but because the rewards for reporting their research to this general effort were not obvious. The value of sharing this information with colleagues, department chairs, or even one’s dean was clear but inputting the information to common list doesn’t seem to be valued. One of my staff members asked why we couldn’t make such submissions mandatory. I have toyed around with the idea of being open about my thoughts concerning how to achieve compliance, similar to those used by **Donald Rumsfeld** when enforcing democracy and freedom of choice in Iraq, but decided against doing so in this public forum. If it is difficult to get the faculty to provide a bibliography of their year’s work, how much more difficult is it to get them to upload their articles into an open archive. How can they be forced to comply? And for what reason?

Really, I am conceptually not against these three worthy attempts to openly share software and intellectual content. Yet, I wonder if we aren’t spending too much time selecting music to be played while Rome burns. In any event, I think it is wise to avoid getting on overloaded bandwagons. Based upon the following **Googlesearch**, I am going to focus my energies on open archives:

“open source” 11.8 million hits
“open access” 2.4 million hits
“open archive” 55,100 hits 

Endnotes

1. Open. (n.d.). Dictionary.com. Retrieved October 12, 2004 from <http://dictionary.reference.com/search?q=open+source&r=67>.
2. Wheeler, Brad. (2004). “Open source 2007: How did this happen?” *Educause Review*, 39, 12-27.
3. Young, Jeffrey. (2004, September 24). “5 Challenges for Open Source.” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, B2-B4.
4. For a better definition see Open access. (n.d.). Public Library of Science. Retrieved October 12, 2004 from <http://www.plos.org/about/openaccess.html>.
5. Open archives. (n.d.). Open Archives Forum. Retrieved October 12, 2004 from <http://www.oaforum.org/resources/glossary.php#o>.
6. Open. (n.d.). Dictionary.com. Retrieved October 12, 2004 from <http://dictionary.reference.com/search?q=open&r=67>.