



Sponsoring Resources for Public Benefit: A New Kind of Ownership

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This column started out being about UNdata—a resource with many great qualities—but I found myself getting stuck on the description of how UNdata is funded. According to its

“About Us” information, “This database service is part of a project . . . called ‘Statistics as a Public Good,’ whose objectives are to provide free access to global statistics, to educate users about the importance of statistics for evidence-based policy and decision-making and . . . implemented in partnership with Statistics Sweden and the Gapminder Foundation with partial financial support from the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA).” To restate, UNdata is free to every library because the SIDA and the United Nations cooperatively subsidize such access. Instances of resources like UNdata are not that common—much more common are instances in which a provider uses access to the data as a revenue source. The result is that many libraries spend many dollars, but the access is available only to those libraries that pay. In that way, access to many official sources is just like access to journals. At that point I found myself thinking once again about a talk I heard recently, and what GODORT might take away from it.

The University of Minnesota Libraries have taken a new approach to its planning process this year by hosting a speaker series. One of these speakers, Paul Courant, university librarian and dean of libraries at the University of Michigan, talked about the economics of scholarly communications and publishing.¹ Courant’s talk can be best described as a reflection on what we’d like to pay for versus what we do pay for. Courant meant academic libraries when he said “we,” but I think his points apply to all types of libraries because one thing all libraries do is spend funds to acquire or lease materials.

He first discussed university presses. At the University of Michigan, the university press is now part of the library system. In describing the situation, Courant said that he thought that this was a good move because the rest of the scholarly communication process is subsidized, so why not subsidize this part too? If it makes some money, great, but mostly, the important thing is to rationalize the finances so that the primary goal—enhanced scholarly communication—remains in the forefront.

Courant then discussed the role he hopes libraries will take with respect to journals. Namely, like the University of Michigan Press, he hopes libraries will begin to subsidize open

access journals. Yes, it would cost money, but then, as Courant notes, we already spend money on a situation that isn’t necessarily ideal for either individual libraries or scholarly communication in general. So why not start devoting some funds to creating a situation that benefits all libraries?

While some depository programs have no participation fees, all depository programs incur costs for storage, cataloging, and staff. And in cases in which government information isn’t available via a depository program, libraries expend funds to acquire documents just like they do for other materials. In a print-primary environment, retaining a local copy is an effective method of enhancing access to the greatest number of users. In the web-primary environment, I’m increasingly of the view that subsidizing free-to-everyone-else access is closer to the ideal method.

Another of our speakers, Jim Neal, vice president for information services and university librarian at Columbia University, noted that often the most successful library collaborations are bilateral or maybe trilateral.² We have almost no working examples of multilateral partnerships. Every library has its own needs, users to satisfy, financial picture, and so forth. For example, one of the regularly touted strengths of the U.S. Federal Depository Library Program (FDLP) is that it allows each library substantial latitude in implementing the program locally. The FDLP has been historically successful because its flexibility allows each library to act individually. Neal’s view also provides some explanation for why we have not succeeded in cooperatively cataloging the pre-1976 materials: such a project doesn’t allow for the individuality that traditional FDLP collecting does.

I’ve been feeling a bit worried about the prospects for long-term access to government information at any level because I’ve been worrying about the lack of multilateral cooperative projects to address government information. Now I’m beginning to think that maybe I’ve been worrying about the wrong thing. Instead, I think that a viable future for government information is one in which many unilateral projects, or bilateral and trilateral partnerships exist to subsidize and take ownership of individual government information resources like the UNdata project described above.

These partnerships may take all kinds of forms and may involve our usual vendors. I recently put part of my non-data collections funds into a pool to subsidize the digitization of a number of local newspapers in languages other than English.

A vendor that often works with government information is involved. I contributed because the project charter promises to eventually make all of the digitized content available for free. It won't be for about ten years, but then libraries weren't asked to contribute that much money up front, and this situation still improves on the alternatives because at least the digitized content will be freely available someday. None of the funds we expend on traditional journals or databases guarantee that the content will *ever* be available to the public for free.

Is there a role here for GODORT? I think so. Not necessarily to recommend what individual libraries do, but perhaps to maintain registries of subsidized resources, connect like-minded libraries, and connect libraries to the information producers. The long-standing success of depository programs shows that libraries are willing to spend at least some money to maintain government information. As we learn from the

changes to the information landscape inside and outside of the government information universe, we can develop new avenues for our collections funds, we can retain ownership of content in a way we've lost in the shift toward lease-based and centralized-source access, and be full partners in long-term public access to government information.

References

1. Paul Courant, "Enabling a Sustainable System of Scholarly Exchange" (presentation at the University of Minnesota, Dec. 17, 2009), tinyurl.com/ye3j5gb.
2. Jim Neal, "Defensive Diversification versus Radical Collaboration: The Strategic Context and Directions for Content and Collections in the Academic Research Library" (presentation at the University of Minnesota, Jan. 7, 2010), tinyurl.com/y82dvn7.

GODORT Needs a New Web Administrator

GODORT is seeking a new web administrator for a three-year initial term of office to begin in July 2010. The successful candidate will have responsibility for GODORT's online presence, serve as GODORT's liaison to ALA's web staff, and coordinate the round table's web managers to provide accurate and timely content. To assure consideration, applications should be submitted by April 30, 2010. For details, see wikis.ala.org/godort/index.php/Administrator.

—John A. Stevenson, Chair, GODORT Publications Committee