

Information Doesn't Want to Be Free: The Irreducible Costs of Information

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ABSTRACT

Since first being pronounced in 1984, the phrase "information wants to be free" has echoed through the corridors of information management as a rallying cry, an aspiration, and a fact. But can it be true?

The champions of Web 2.0 propose that we live in an age when anyone can be a publisher. Wiki media and institutional repositories allow authors to publish freely and allow users free access. No-fee services are widely available for blogs, instantaneous status updates, and widespread dissemination of even the most trivial communications, to even the most micro-scale niche audiences. Have we finally reached an age when information can really be free?

The costs of producing information are undeniable. The funding models for publishing it are clearly shifting, and the business of scholarly communication is being revolutionized—increasingly corporatized on the one hand, and in search of viable open-source options on the other. It is critical that information professionals examine the economic issues of information distribution during this transformation process to ensure greatest success for reliable, stable, accessible, and equitable dissemination of scholarly knowledge.

This poster examines the real financial costs of producing and providing information. Open publishing formats depend on actual people doing actual work—often unseen and unacknowledged. The chain of funding and support for academic research is complicated and hierarchical; researchers providing knowledge "for free" as a service to their field are typically drawing a salary from the university, which is itself funded by taxpayers and donors. Research is funded by corporate grants and academic salaries. Yet would deducting the acknowledged costs of research

and publication create a free-information model? We conclude that it would not. By comparing the costs of traditional publishing with their open-access "cost-free" alternatives, we find that we still cannot eliminate the actual expenses of publishing scholarly research. Development costs for open-access architecture remain legitimate and undissolvable costs, regardless of access philosophy. When research is posted, hosted, edited, and peer-reviewed voluntarily by an open scholastic community, we may remove those fiscal expenses from the publication equation. What remains—the invisible work of infrastructure, architecture, testing, implementation, and the like—must still be funded. From software developers to hardware assembly line workers, the work of non-academic participants cannot be deducted from the university funding model.

Additionally, the open-publishing options that require unpaid scholarly services still depend on a variation of the traditional for-compensation economic model: We trade the commodity of time for the currencies of information exchange, academic prestige, and publication credit. We rely increasingly on unpaid academic labor for editing and vetting scholarly output. These "free" services are not without costs. Mindful of the time and skill put into this work, the community must examine the ethics of using "free" labor. What are the guarantors of quality in a no-compensation work-place? How much are faculty willing to contribute beyond being on reviewing boards? Will they, and can they, perform the tasks that hired professional copy editors, indexers, proofreaders, and catalogers once performed? What price do faculty pay for the increased pressure to donate extracurricular labor?

Acknowledging the real costs of open-access scholarly publication will better enable information professionals to seek reasonable long-term solutions to the problems of information distribution. Ignoring these costs leaves information vulnerable to corporate influence and to obsolescence. Moreover, suggesting that information wants to be free disregards the morality of compensating all players—not just the professors and journal editors, but the code scripters and the server masters and the third-shift IT techs—for real work provided. In the end, information may want to be free, but it is unlikely that it ever will be.

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