

## **Read/Write Culture:**

### **What Open Means for Learning, Research, and Creativity**

Barbara Fister

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[The Library is Open: Open Minds, Open Doors, Open Access](#)

Presentation slides [available online](#) at Prezi.com

Libraries have changed a lot, lately. The Internet has changed the way information and culture is shaped and shared, and libraries have done more than many cultural institutions to keep up and to integrate new possibilities with traditional values. But still we face some perplexing challenges. One sign that we are better at temporary solutions than at tackling the big questions is that many libraries, in order to provide information to their users when costs are growing but budgets are not, is to cancel unaffordable Big Deals, and instead serve our patrons by purchasing one article at a time. It makes sense in the short run, but when you stand back and think about it—we're using the equivalent of duct tape and string to fix a much bigger problem. And the fix is, quite honestly, a betrayal of libraries' role in society. Let me add, I'm not faulting anyone who has taken this step: the Big Deal is just as bad an idea. Subscribing to things we know we don't need in because our patrons need a little of what's in the package, creates an illusion of abundance. Our users don't know how big the annual ransom demand is; we often don't until the renewal comes up. But purchasing information for one user, one time, is not what libraries are for. As we try to bring balance to the impossible equation of making growing expectations, higher costs, and less money, we need to step back and look at the big picture. We need to fundamentally reexamine what happened to our values while we were mucking about with duct tape and string.

The questions we all need to ask are not just *What are libraries for?* But they go even deeper: *What are universities for?* Or even *Why does knowledge matter?* Unless we ask the big questions, our answers will fall short.

Since I work at a small college with an undergraduate focus, I'll start with students. What is it that we want to accomplish for them? When we talk about information literacy, what we really mean by it is preparing them to participate in society and to have the skills and habits that will help them contribute something valuable. This means helping them not only find and use information, but to recognize in themselves the ability to create new knowledge; to develop the skills that will not only help them recognize authority, but to become, themselves, authors of the world they're stepping into when they graduate. We tend to work hard to make students effective students so they can succeed on a particular assignment, in a course, in a major, using our library—but we need to keep our eye on the ultimate purpose: to be able to use critical skills for inquiry wherever they land, knowing it will be a different place. Learning how to use a particular library, while a necessary survival skill, is not enough.

Beyond teaching students, what is the role of libraries and of higher education in society? To learn and share learning, to create new knowledge, to preserve what we know and make sure it isn't corrupted, lost, or redacted for political reasons. We care about truth, even if we honor the fact that it can't be entirely captured, and we care about the conditions

that enable intellectual freedom. It's no accident that "liberal learning" and "liberty" share a Latin root. Higher education and libraries must preserve the conditions for a free society.

What are those conditions?

- We need to share information freely with as many people as we can
- We need to preserve the rights that allow people to explore ideas without risk
- We need to help people join the conversations that gives rise to knowledge

In a world of scarce resources, these conditions have natural limits – there are only so many copies you can make, so many things you can fit into a building, so many seats in a classroom - but we're currently in an era as unsettling as the 15<sup>th</sup> century, when the printing press was an agent of anxiety as well as an agent of change. We're at a moment in time when the only significant constraints to sharing knowledge freely and widely are not technicalities. They're artificial barriers created to preserve an industrial-era print and distribution model of production and consumption. We have to stop limiting our vision of the future of publishing, higher education, and libraries to business models based on print economics, because right now, they're only getting in the way.

A lot of ink—or perhaps, more accurately, pixels—have been spilled on the idea of read/write culture, that with the Internet and, particularly, Web 2.0 we have entered an era in which we can all contribute and culture can be a shared and malleable enterprise. Web 2.0 is conversation that simply makes it easier to start a conversation, contribute, link, and engage. In this fluid kind of publishing, it makes it obvious that knowledge is not discourse that travels in only one direction; rather it's made of multiple threads, multiple voices, and it's always changing.

What is new about read/write culture? Nothing but the technology, really. Fundamentally, culture has always been read/write. It is the nature of culture to be open to change while at the same time exerting some countervailing resistance in order to preserve itself. According to philosopher [Michael Oakeshott](#), knowledge is conversation:

We are the inheritors, neither of an inquiry about ourselves and the world, nor of an accumulating body of information, but of a conversation, begun in the primeval forests and extended and made more articulate in the course of centuries. It is a conversation that goes on both in public and within each of ourselves . . . And it is this conversation which, in the end, gives place and character to every human activity and utterance. Education, properly speaking, is an initiation into the skill and partnership of this conversation in which we learn to recognize the voices, to distinguish the proper occasions of utterance, and in which we acquire the intellectual and moral habits appropriate to conversation.

[Lawrence Lessig](#) has pointed out that it's only in the 20<sup>th</sup> century that culture became read-only. With the rise of mass production of cultural goods and the growth of corporations who distributed it, culture became a product created, largely as work for hire, by a professional class. Owners of this property—not necessarily its creators, but the people in a position to distribute and monetize it—sought protection over their revenue through longer copyrights and more punishing legal remedies when people made use of their property without permission.

All this assumes that culture is passively consumed. It isn't. When we read or listen or watch, a work is copied (imperfectly) into our memory. We remix cultural expression with

our own experiences, we hum songs to ourselves, we evoke in one another whole books, films, and musical traditions by quoting a few words or humming a line, and for none of this do we pay “permissions”. Creative work involves weaving strands of these shared experiences into new work. Though the physical copy has been the unit that made money, remixing and sharing was still how culture worked in a supposedly “read-only” world.

Now in the digital world, the very idea of “copy” is problematic. Every time we conjure up a work, we make a copy. Culture still works, as it always has, through conversation, sharing, reworking, and reweaving, but now cultural work is both easier to do and harder to contain. In order to retain the monetary value of the copy as a unit of sale, the sharing that we naturally do has to be disabled, if not technically, then legally—by making culture property that can be controlled through criminalizing sharing that isn’t paid for.

The library has a larger role to play in defending the value of sharing now that higher education has become a luxury good, not a public good. In the heady days when there was a lot of money sloshing around, we decided that research was A Good Thing, and that all universities, regardless of their mission, should hire highly-trained PdDs and measure their worth through the research productivity of their faculty. The amount of money a scholar could bring in through grants or prestige became far more important than the number of students’ lives those faculty would change; students, after all, are a dependable revenue stream. They pay the same tuition for a course, whether a TA, a permanent part-timer without benefits, or a distinguished professor teaches the class. Today, our concentration on research productivity is coupled with a nasty stinginess: institutions have found it much cheaper to produce classes in sweatshop mode. The majority of courses taught at US colleges and universities are taught by adjunct faculty, who make up nearly three quarters of the faculty. This is made possible by the fact that there is a more-than-adequate supply of PhDs available to fill open positions; the reward system for faculty has little to do with teaching but is almost entirely focused on producing intellectual property, so tenure hires and promotion criteria can demand more and more productivity, which of course feeds on itself; to produce, you need access to information. We know the end result of this vicious juggernaut. We in the library are expected to buy it back from the corporations who publish it so that our scholars can create more.

Yochai Benkler [has written about](#) the enormous positive potential for our new digital environment,

. . . one in which individuals are free to take a more active role than was possible in the industrial information economy of the twentieth century. This new freedom holds great practical promise: as a dimension of individual freedom; as a platform for better democratic participation; as a medium to foster a more critical and self-reflective culture; and, in an increasingly information dependent global economy, as a mechanism to achieve improvements in human development everywhere.

But he also warns that intellectual property battles going on right now are urgent:

How these battles turn out over the next decade or so will likely have a significant effect on how we come to know what is going on in the world we occupy, and to what extent and in what forms we will be able—as autonomous individuals, as

citizens, and as participants in cultures and communities—to affect how we and others see the world as it is and as it might be . . . How we make information, how we get it, how we speak to others, and how others speak to us are core components of the shape of freedom in any society.

Libraries need to oppose the privatization of knowledge and promote an alternative, healthier model. We need to ensure that our values align with our practices.

What are some of the problem areas?

- Licensing access under unacceptable terms, such as not allowing materials we license for the campus to use to be linked in syllabi or from course management systems. We've traded instant gratification for preservation. Instant gratification is all well and good, but licensed information can disappear without warning, as Meredith Farkas has recently pointed out.
- Not promoting that which is free and open; we sometimes tell students what is in the library is good because we pay a lot of money for it. That's a message that needs reframing. Not only does it devalue open access research, it's just plain wrong. A lot of the information we pay for is rubbish, and we know it.
- Not practicing what we preach. The fact that both *College and Research Libraries* and *portal* now post open access preprints is a step in the right direction, but librarians who publish are rarely willing to take a few minutes to make their own work accessible. We should refuse to publish in journals that are not at the very least OA green. We should not support library organizations that prohibit sharing. OCLC is a symbol of what goes wrong when we let business models drive our practices; this cooperative organization founded to help share library records can't imagine a future that includes sharing beyond the cooperative. All its leaders can think about is how to preserve their business model. That's a huge failure of imagination.
- Thinking too locally. The conversations that knowledge come from are not limited to a college or university, they happen in disciplines and they happen globally. Perhaps we should be promoting free disciplinary archives rather than institutional ones. The prestige factor of university presses which seek to publish good work wherever it comes from is a significant but undervalued resource for its host university; the prestige factor of an institutional repository, often held together with duct tape and string, is near zero.
- Not thinking about what happens to our students after they graduate. We need to make our learning outcomes focused on life-long learning, and that almost certainly requires working more closely with faculty.
- Not giving faculty a story compelling enough story about why information matters to overcome the training they received in graduate school that is entirely focused on self-interest, career advancement, and on playing the game as it currently exists, not on changing it. We have a better view than any other faculty of the big picture. We have to help them see it, and we have to make clear to them that our duct-tape-and-string solutions are not the answer. This isn't a library problem. It's much bigger than that, but we have done an incredibly good job of making the crisis nearly invisible.

The open access movement is making some progress. Mandates have been passed at many institutions this year, the NIH initiative has been a huge stride forward, and FRPAA has been reintroduced in Congress and may stand a chance this time. All that said, there's a big problem smack in the middle of all of this activity. We know that we're already supporting the work that advances knowledge through faculty salaries, sabbaticals, grants, and access to resources such as libraries and laboratories. We realize that much of the activity that provides for peer review of scholarly work is generally performed as a service, free of charge. We know we can host free versions of the finished product in institutional repositories—if we can just persuade our faculty to pay attention.

But we still somehow expect that in the middle of this process, a publisher will continue to do what it does: organize this work of filtering and preparing final copy of publications, managing the competition for recognition, doing the work of vetting scholars for tenure and promotion committees—and somehow, they will continue to provide this service while scholars and libraries demand that the finished product be free. Let me add that the “author pays” model is really shorthand for “taxpayer pays” and it only works in a few select fields where grants are available. If we think knowledge matters, we can't blithely assume that a wasteful system based on business models will continue to work.

We're expecting publishers to reinvent themselves to accommodate a new open publishing environment. If the Georgia State University lawsuit over e-reserves is any indication, they are not any more imaginative than OCLC is about how to support their activities. Sandy Thatcher, an articulate defender of university presses, has argued [in a recent article](#) in *Against the Grain*, that if library materials are to be the basis of teaching and learning, not an occasional supplement to textbooks, then having libraries purchase the materials on behalf of the campus is not enough. Library collections apparently are for research, but not for classroom-based learning. For that, you should pay extra. It's odd to have university presses sue universities, but presses are a barely-tolerated prestige-generators that are expected to pay for themselves. Our own universities don't see a connection between research, publishing, learning, and libraries. They see a revenue streams and supply chains.

I believe that libraries need to think more imaginatively about supporting the generation of new knowledge—a future not focused on purchasing limited access to published information, but on creating it and setting it free; not focused on being the purchasing agent for researchers, but a laboratory and a studio. We can't solve this problem ourselves, but we must work with partners to offer new publishing models that retain the rigorous filters of well-executed peer review, resulting in knowledge that can be shared freely. And in the end, it will cost us all less.

What if libraries pooled our considerable economic resources to publish and set work free? Technology enables us to do this at far less cost than in the past, and many of the people involved do much of the work without recompense, but still it would require that we reallocate resources. Good editorial work is not free. Deciding which books deserve the effort to make them better takes real skill. Organizing the work that goes on behind the scenes of a journal can't be done in one's spare time, after the real business of buying proprietary information is done. If we reimagine the role of libraries as being preservers and producers of knowledge rather than purchasing agents, we'll have to hire people to do new work—and stop doing other things. I know this is hard. But I don't believe it's impossible.

The irony that the read/write web and access to production is threatening to traditional industries, but not to the way knowledge works. The waste is phenomenal. And it's everywhere in the system.

Let's look at scholars: they complain that they are asked to do too much, that they aren't getting enough support, but when you ask "what would make things better?" they generally say "give me more time to do research, more funds for equipment, more money for conference travel." Their training in graduate school is all about how to promote their career: which journals count? How do I get a university press to publish my dissertation? What connections should I cultivate at conferences? How can I land that first million-dollar federal grant? The question they aren't trained to ask: what difference will my research make? How will my life as a biologist, a historian, a professor of education contribute to the greater good? That's assumed, somehow, but not examined.

Let's look at how our colleges and universities contribute to the waste. There's one huge problem: they've outsourced the work of validating their faculty (and their own prestige) to multinational publishing corporations. Tenure and promotion committees ask "how much" instead of "so what? What difference will this research make?" That, right there, is a huge source of waste—wasted money and wasted opportunities. Wasted public support.

Let's look at how our own disciplinary organizations contribute to the problem. We all know that societies like the ACS, which serves both academics and industry, has gotten very good at protecting their very valuable assets. But even tiny societies that have no market value beyond academia use publications and the library budgets that support them to fund their existence. I was just talking about this problem with a colleague, saying that we might be able to get scholars and libraries on the same page, but I didn't know what to do about scholarly societies. And she said "why do we need scholarly societies?"

It's a brilliant question. Scholarly societies were founded to support sharing information and the disinterested pursuit of knowledge. Today, they support sharing information through conferences and publications, but to do so, they rely on turning conferences into vendor-funded trade shows and outsource their publications to for-profit publishers. A lot of money is involved. Disinterestedness and the sharing of knowledge have gone out the window, but we now have all kinds of ways to gather and exchange ideas without having to rent space in a conference hall or print and distribute journals. We could return to our philosophical roots. We could shun corporate sponsors and do it all much more inexpensively. But we would have to change our rewards system.

Don't let's be distracted by the business entrepreneurs' notion that "free" is just another price point, that we should subsidize access with celebrity gigs or micropayments of personal information. We have at least one other model. It's something of a miracle that in the United States we have free public libraries, and that the public continues to support them. Oh, there have been closures and lots of cutbacks, but by and large the general public recognizes the intrinsic value of public libraries and is willing to stand up for them without accusing them of [socializing literacy](#). We need to think similarly about the common good as we reform the terms of our scholarly conversations.

The fate of the music industry and of newspapers provides some interesting lessons in how not to survive a shared future. In the case of journalism, [it turns out](#) that only about 14% of what it costs to run a newspaper is spent on newsgathering and editing. The rest goes to supporting the business, which experienced enormous growth and profitability at

about the same time as scholarly publishing did. What has brought newspapers down isn't lack of interest in news—80% of blog links to news [point toward legacy journalism](#) sources—but lack of imagination. As Scott Rosenberg [has written](#):

It's backwards. The newsrooms of today acquired their size and shape and structure thanks to the business model that supported institutions of their size. The world has changed; that model is vanishing. We shouldn't be asking 'What sort of business can support a newsroom online?' The question is, 'What's the best kind of newsroom that the online business can support?'

Or, in the case of scholarly work, "what's the best kind of scholarship that scholars, libraries, and their institutions can support?" And the answer is "a lot"—if we decide to spend our money differently and keep thinking about the big questions. Why are we doing this? How will the knowledge we create benefit the world?

And it's not just about scholarship written for scholars. It's about all kinds of social and cultural practices. Librarians can look beyond scholarly communications to open our minds and those of the people we serve.

- Open courses – can we encourage our institutions to share what goes on in our classrooms for the greater good? That does not diminish the value of learning together, but it can remind us that learning is not just the purchase of a credentialing unit, that it's for a lifetime. Instead, we treat courses as currency to be hoarded. Let's stop doing that.
- Open textbooks – some libraries, sensing a very real need among students, are purchasing overpriced textbooks so students can have access to them. We'd do better to support the open textbook movement, helping faculty identify material they can use that won't cost students so much money.
- Open government – need I say more? This is incredibly important. We need to defend transparency in government and fight against abuses such as inappropriate state secrets claims to conceal embarrassing mistakes.
- Open notebook science – revealing the process, the methods, the data might help realize the principles of Michael Polanyi's Republic of Science, a process sharing that helps build through mutual respect and a common interest in the pursuit of truth.
- Open source software – that is posited on the belief that sharing source code and pooling innovations will make software better.
- Openness in academic libraries – of course, we need safe spaces for our students to study and we need to preserve our collections. But really, why does Harvard charge other libraries so much for the loan of a book? Why can't unaffiliated scholars use our collections without paying exorbitant fees?
- Open workplaces – libraries need to ensure that the conditions we espouse for intellectual freedom are practiced in our own libraries, which tend to have organization charts that look like they were copied from 19<sup>th</sup> century manufacturing facilities. Why is supervision so much more rewarded in libraries than innovation? We need to make sure that people are free to take initiative, free to fail, and free to change their job descriptions as their jobs change. Librarians, unite! We have nothing to lose but our chains of authority.

- Open culture – the debates over copyright matter beyond our ivied walls. We should be activists in preserving the conditions for ideas and creativity to flourish in culture generally, and not declare the fight over if we reduce the burdensome cost of scholarly journals. In a world where the NFL can order a take-down notice against a scholar who posted their “copyright notice” (that goes far beyond copyright law in its claims – you are forbidden from describing any part of a game without their permission) in a very short clip on YouTube in order to critique their interpretation of a law is kind of scary, as is the take down of a woman’s funny film of her child dancing because in the almost inaudible background, a song by Prince happened to be playing. If we don’t take on this challenge, culture will be crippled.

Recently I recognized that the library values—such as those articulated in the optimistic Darien Statements—are too often lost in the day-to-day practice of our profession. Searching for some way to connect this theoretical belief system with practice, I hit on liberation theology, a kind of theology that applies Christian principles to problems of social injustice. So I found [a short article](#) (unfortunately behind a paywall) written by a colleague of mine at Gustavus on why she feels liberation theology should be taught in her classes as a way of relating core beliefs to choices that we make daily. That inspired a name for a new movement—[liberation bibliography](#)—and a remixed manifesto.

- Liberation bibliography would arise out of “outrage and protest against injustice,” not out of a desire to get more for less or a sense that things just aren’t organized as efficiently as they might be. It’s not about saving money, it’s about the empowering nature of knowledge and the belief that it shouldn’t be a luxury good for the few.
- It would emerge through the struggles of communities that are seeking and deserve liberation, not just from the perspective of a few academics and librarians tinkering under the hood of the scholarly communication system to improve conditions for scholars.
- It would recognize that the world can’t be divided cleanly between the scholarly and the ordinary. If knowledge matters, it must matter beyond the boundaries of our campuses. If it doesn’t, there’s a good chance it actually *doesn’t* matter and we could do something else with our time and resources.
- It would acknowledge that we are implicated in systems that often benefit us, even if we think they are unjust. (What other excuse is there for librarians to publish in journals that are not open access, or accede to nondisclosure agreements with vendors that are contrary to the transparency we supposedly espouse?)
- It would take seriously the slogan, so often inscribed on academic buildings of a certain age, that the truth shall set us free—and that should mean freedom for all of us, not just a select class of academics and currently-enrolled tuition-paying students.
- It would recognize that the liberal learning we promote must be beneficial to all people; that our libraries don’t merely serve our institutions’ immediate needs, but their higher ideals.

We need to take steps to align our daily practices with our ideals. No more duct tape and string! Let’s take action. In the name of service, we’ve allowed ourselves to build

libraries that preserve business models instead of knowledge. We've accommodated self-advancement over the advancement of knowledge. But we can propose a different way.

I want to close by pointing out that we aren't alone. At times, the fight for open access seems doomed to chronic apathy and intransigent habits, but other people are beginning to notice that copyright law in its current form is . . . how to put this? Stupid.

A couple of weeks ago, *The Economist* published an editorial on "[why the rules on copyright need to return to their roots](#)" in order to encourage creativity and innovation.

Largely thanks to the entertainment industry's lawyers and lobbyists, copyright's scope and duration have vastly increased. In America, copyright holders get 95 years' protection as a result of an extension granted in 1998, derided by critics as the "Mickey Mouse Protection Act". They are now calling for even greater protection, and there have been efforts to introduce similar terms in Europe. Such arguments should be resisted: it is time to tip the balance back.

While I was somewhat surprised that a staunchly pro-business publication would be so ... how to put this? not stupid—I was equally astonished at the comments, which were by and large sensible, not the usual extremes of "you can pry my property from my cold, dead hands" and "everything digital should be free." It gave me hope.

And a few weeks earlier, *The New Republic* ran [a rousing opinion piece](#) titled "The New Library of Alexandria" by a historian of science, Lisbet Rausing, who managed to talk the magazine into releasing her article into the public domain. She writes:

... the question for scholars and gatekeepers is not whether change is coming. It is whether they will be among the change-makers. And if not them, then who? Who else will ensure long-term conservation and search abilities that are compatible across the bibliome and over time? Who else will ensure equality of access? Ultimately, this is not a challenge of technology, finances, or ultimately even laws, difficult though they are. It is a challenge of will and imagination.

Answering that challenge will require some soul-searching: Do we have the generosity to collaborate? Can we build legal, organizational, and financial structures that will preserve and order—but also share and disseminate the learning of the world? Scholars have traditionally gated and protected knowledge, yet also shared and distributed it in libraries, schools, and universities. We have stood for a republic of learning that is wider than the ivory tower, and now is the time to do so again.

Each one of us, in our own station, can help to open up scholarship to the public.

These signs that others are asking the same questions give me hope that libraries can provide the common ground where conversations about the future of scholarship and of culture can flourish, where all of us can rediscover our values and develop the tools to put them into practice. Figuring out how to do just that is our subject today. Let's go open some doors and minds.