

Two Distractions

From “Two distractions,” SPARC Open Access Newsletter, May 3, 2004.

<http://dash.harvard.edu/handle/1/4391169>

Proponents of open access should focus their energy on delivering open access. Success may not be easy, but at least we can hope that preserving this focus is easy. However, there are two related distractions nowadays that are making it difficult.

(1) Don't be distracted by the wrong problem.

The problem is to provide OA, through journals and archives, not to undermine publishers who are not providing OA. The problem is to deliver on our vision of what we think is good, not to torpedo those who aren't helping us.

[...]

TA publishers are not the enemy. They are only unpersuaded. Even when they are opposed, and not merely unpersuaded, they are only enemies if they have the power to stop OA. No publisher has this power, or at least not by virtue of publishing under a TA business model. If we have enemies, they are those who can obstruct progress to OA. The only people who fit this description are friends of OA who are distracted from providing OA by other work or other priorities.

One mistake is to aim at undermining the current model rather than constructing the alternative. Another mistake is to think that all publishers are alike. A third mistake, which follows from the first two, is to alienate publishers who might become allies, or who are already becoming allies.

If OA and TA can coexist, then it's clear that advancing OA needn't undermine TA and that undermining TA needn't advance OA. If they cannot coexist, then one day we'll find that out. But the most constructive and effective way to find out is to work for OA and observe the consequences. Even if providing OA is inseparable from undermining TA, there is still an important difference of accent. We have to be motivated by

what we love and want to build, by the good alternative we envision and its good consequences for science and scholarship. Otherwise we risk distraction and open ourselves to burnout and enervation. But of course, in the meantime it's just enlightened self-interest to preserve the option of recruiting new allies.

(2) Don't be distracted by public debate.

Even more than in the previous section, here I want to make a nuanced and two-sided point. Public debate can be very valuable but it can also lead us to forget the primary goal and waste energy.

When publishers object to OA, it's tempting to pause in what we are doing to answer them. If we have time and good answers, then this can be very helpful. Public debate helps the undecided. If we let misunderstandings go uncorrected or objections go unanswered, then we may lose a chance to persuade the unpersuaded and recruit another ally. Moreover, converting existing journals would be progress. It would be better than having to launch all OA journals from scratch.

But to pause in what we are doing to answer objections can lead us to interrupt the primary work in favor of the secondary. If you don't have time to do both [...], then stick to the primary work of delivering OA. It helps the cause at least as much.

One mistake is to let secondary work interrupt primary work. Another mistake is to let critics set the agenda. Most objections to OA, for example, come from TA publishers and most of these objections point to alleged problems with OA journals. But it doesn't follow that those alleged problems are suddenly "the front" which must be addressed in order to make progress. OA archiving is a path of equal value and greater convenience. We should pursue it regardless of how we deal with publisher objections to OA journals. Moreover, delivering OA is more important than persuading publishers to join us in delivering OA, and we should pursue it regardless of how we deal with publisher objections to OA.

The latter is the most delicate point: it's true that we could always use more allies, but it's false that we need existing publishers to deliver OA. We should conduct ourselves so that we always invite and welcome new allies, but at the same time we must give primary attention to the primary task of providing OA.

Some publishers will never be persuaded, and some are telling us through their public objections that they are not yet persuaded. That's all right. They don't need to be persuaded for us to continue our work. We can provide OA without their consent, cooperation, or assistance. One constructive response is simply to get back to work on delivering OA.

I don't want to draw a false distinction between persuading and doing. Persuading is part of doing—because the job is large and we need allies to do it. Likewise, doing is part of persuading—because the best argument that OA is feasible is to deliver it, the best argument that it is valuable is to use it, and the best argument that it is sustainable is to build it and watch it survive.

I'm perfectly willing to turn the tables here and have TA publishers take the same attitude toward objections from the side of OA. They have the same dual interest in getting their work done and recruiting new allies to share in it. Sometimes this makes public debate a good investment of energy and sometimes it doesn't.

I believe in public debate even when it doesn't recruit allies. It's a courtesy that we owe our critics. It's also an intrinsic part of intellectual honesty. If we have beliefs on which we're willing to take public action, then we should be willing to defend them in public and show how we deal with evidence and respond to criticism. If we admit that we are fallible, then we need to check our enthusiasms and commitments against other thoughtful judgments. I haven't changed my mind about any of this. For example, I often engage in public debate and make my own attempts at public persuasion. I've tried to persuade subscription-based journals to experiment with OA (most recently in my last issue, *SOAN* for 4/2/04), and I continue to make this appeal. I've answered publisher objections (for example, *SOAN* for 11/2/03, 12/2/03, 3/2/04) and, time permitting, will continue to do so in the future. I merely want to remind us of a few truths that we are tempted to forget when we are most driven to participate in public debate. Helping the undecided will help the cause but it can also interrupt primary work with secondary work and shift the focus from our agenda to a critic's agenda. Answering objections will help the cause but it can also lead us to false beliefs about whose cooperation is necessary to build OA. Persuading unpersuaded publishers is not necessary, just as it is not useless; it is only helpful. The unpersuaded are not enemies. Persuasion can fail while OA succeeds. We don't need unanimity; we need OA.

