

THE CHRONICLE

of Higher Education

The Chronicle Review

March 4, 2013

The Real Digital Change Agent

By Jason Mittell

Over the past few years, many of the most prominent American universities, including Harvard, MIT, Stanford, and Duke, have joined to embrace a game-changing approach in opening up their previously closed academic resources. Leveraging the revolutionary potential of digital technology to provide access to the world's best faculty members, this new method of dissemination takes what were once exclusive, limited-access, high-priced resources and puts them online for anyone to learn from, freely. Despite its somewhat goofy acronym, this new model has been embraced, sometimes in the face of faculty objections, because of its democratizing, globalizing potential, as well as its effectiveness in improving an institution's reputation for innovation and excellence.

I am, of course, talking about COAPI. (<http://www.arl.org/sparc/about/COAPI/index.shtml>)

If you haven't heard of it, the **Coalition of Open Access Policy Institutions**, which now comprises more than 40, began in 2011 as a way for colleges to coordinate and advocate for open-access policies, which typically require that all faculty journal publications be made available freely online, whether on a personal Web site, institutional repository, or discipline-specific public archive. Such reforms tend to be driven by a few faculty and staff members (usually librarians and technologists), with a ground-level commitment to open access, who manage to persuade their administrations and colleagues – and by the federal government, which just required that publications from federally supported research be made available freely online.

Odds are that you haven't read much about COAPI as a revolutionary, democratizing force within

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higher education, especially compared with its high-profile contemporary, MOOCs (massive open online courses). While it's quite rare to read about open-access policies in the popular news media, celebrations of MOOCs as the Great Revolution About to Overturn Higher Education As We Know It litter newspapers' opinion pages – for instance, Thomas Friedman's recent celebratory gloss in *The New York Times*.

I am wary of such boosterism, and I view MOOCs with the measured skepticism expressed well by the University of Virginia's Siva Vaidhyanathan, who has written that MOOCs are “like fancy

textbooks. They are all about the mass market and not the rich connectivity that established online courses offer their limited collection of students.”

But I am fascinated by the contrasting rhetoric between the rapid-boil fervor over MOOCs and the barely simmering apathy for open-access policies, especially at the institutional level. MOOCs are often touted in university news releases as being motivated by the desire to increase access to work of

faculty freely across the globe. The MOOC leader Coursera's own mission is to "empower people with education that will improve their lives, the lives of their families, and the communities they live in."

But fewer than 20 percent of the American institutions that have formed partnerships with Coursera are also members of Coapi. That seems downright hypocritical to me, as opening access to faculty research would help level hierarchies and tear down boundaries between academics and the public, between major research universities and less-wealthy institutions, and between the developed and developing worlds. Access to the average journal article might do little to change the world. But making the bulk of scholarly research freely available could transform the possibilities of educational uplift, scientific discovery, and public engagement with academic work.

Why this disconnect between the rhetoric of MOOCs and open-access policies? Bryan Alexander, a senior fellow at the National Institute for Technology in Liberal Education, explores some potential explanations, including MOOCs' relative novelty and their top-tier-university cachet. But the obvious answer is, as it nearly always is, money. For many institutions, MOOCs are viewed as a potential revenue stream, higher education's business model of the future. Of course, here in the present, MOOCs require investing expensive technological and labor resources to create experiments of questionable educational value to be given away. I'm no economist, but that plan seems to violate some basic business principles.

As Georgia Tech's Ian Bogost recently pointed out, MOOCs are a gamble suited to the elite institutions that can afford the risk, not to the public universities already stuck in a spiral of inadequate budgets and underprepared students. If MOOCs catch on, as their boosters predict, they may have major unintended consequences that undercut our core understanding of teachers, students, and courses. Middlebury College's Alison Byerly has pointed out that MOOCs could easily disrupt the tuition-revenue stream that colleges already have. MOOC instructors' "best students may e-mail them with questions, seek their advice on further study, ask for recommendations or job referrals, perhaps even travel to campus in hopes of meeting them," she writes. "To ignore such requests would go against the grain of a lifetime of membership in the academy, where 'paying it forward' requires helping your students as your professors helped you. But responding to even 1 percent of those taking a MOOC could mean interacting with 1,000 students."

In contrast, open-access policies could actually be economically beneficial in the here and now. By requiring institutions to make the output of their salaried researchers freely available, those policies undercut the exclusive rights and restrictive access of commercial publishers that notoriously charge those same institutions outrageous fees for journal articles. Open-access measures might force commercial presses to negotiate more-reasonable subscription rates or shut down journals that exist only to pad out subscription bundles (and faculty CVs), and to allow libraries to cut subscriptions to journals they subscribe to only so faculty can have access to their own writing. Open access is not the panacea for all of higher education's woes. Alas, there isn't one. But it does offer some opportunities to lower costs and to broaden the reach and impact of research.

Think about it. Universities pay their faculty to write and publish, then must pay commercial entities to sell those publications back to them. Universities also pay their faculty to teach, then charge students for access to that pedagogy (in most cases, charging only a fraction of the cost). The rhetorics of those two models tend to be reversed when discussing digital transformations. Why is it that the most business-minded people in academe, the boards of trustees and CFOs, seem to be enamored of giving away the resource that they actually charge for now, while being mostly indifferent to giving away the resource they are now paying for (twice)?

MOOC mania has gained momentum, I believe, because it entails opening up the previously noncommercial realm of teaching, at both public and nonprofit private institutions, to venture

capitalists and start-ups looking to build company value. Most MOOCs strive to transform the realm of the classroom into the realm of the textbook, shifting educational interactions into a packaged, scalable domain that can be more easily marketed and branded. Would anyone be shocked to read in the next few years a headline like "Pearson Acquires Udacity"? The noncommercial practice of teaching gets rebranded and hyped into terms easily celebrated by Thomas Friedman and his business-minded readers, and potentially capitalized upon by profiteers.

An unlikely source offers a useful way of understanding the contrast between MOOCs and open-access policies. Fifty years ago, the film critic Manny Farber drew a lasting metaphor between "white elephant art," which boldly announces itself with grand ambitions, prestige, and hype (think of many Oscar-nominated Hollywood films), and "termite art," which appears below the radar and quietly accomplishes its more modest aesthetic goals with longer-lasting impact (think of some independent award winners at the Sundance Film Festival). MOOCs are white-elephant reforms, touting their revolutionary potential through bold claims and loud (and potentially hollow) rhetoric, often coming from the top down. Open-access policies are termite reforms, creating modest but long-lasting change beneath the surface, burrowing through traditional practices without proclaiming their own grandeur.

Thomas Friedman, venture capitalists, and boards of trustees like white elephants. They're easy to describe, fit within broader logics of commerce and reform, and since everyone else notices them, it's hard not to talk about them. As an academic (and a film viewer), I'm more interested in the termites, looking at how faculty members change systems through incremental steps and measured reforms like making our publications accessible.

The industrious academic termites are persuading one another of the value of open access to combat the misconceptions and fears discussed by Dan Cohen, of George Mason University. In reviewing a survey on faculty attitudes toward publishing, he comments that "we professors care less about sharing our work—even with underprivileged nations that cannot afford access to gated resources—than with making sure we impress our colleagues." We need to change this attitude to show that sharing our research will help sustain higher education *and* impress our colleagues.

I'm skeptical of the white elephants touting the kind of openness and access backed by the profiteers. As termites, we must band together to make enough noise about that other kind of openness to be heard over the elephants' trumpeting.

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