

CPR RESPONSE FORUM

The Information Commons: From Metaphor to Reality

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David Bollier illuminates how the battles over control of creativity and knowledge have limited our ability to see new realities and paradigms in the digital age. At the same time, though, we are witnessing exciting new initiatives that bypass the controls of the information marketplace and foster free expression and democratic engagement. The emergence of the digital age brought the promise of open access to an infinite array of information -- information that would enrich the way we live, learn, work and govern. Observers of this technological revolution imagined an information world that would migrate from a state of scarcity to a state of abundance, transcending geographic, legal, and political boundaries. This dream envisioned a utopia where people could connect with myriad ideas and individuals just by clicking a mouse, no longer constrained by location, format, cost, time of day, on-site rules and regulations, or other barriers. In essence, anyone, anytime, anyplace could receive, interpret and exchange ideas outside the limit of government controls or the marketplace. Many enthusiasts assumed that this new information infrastructure would reserve public spaces for educational and nonprofits institutions charged with promoting and fulfilling the public interest, and would constitute a sphere of free speech and open intellectual discourse that enhances democracy.

Over the past 20 years, a national policy of deregulation prompted the industries that create, transport, and disseminate information to transform from independent operators mostly involved with infrastructure into highly integrated, multinational conglomerates eager to increase market share and dominate access to both home and business. The convergence of new technologies empowered these industries to expand their reach while controlling the terms and conditions of access. This evolution has resulted in what many describe as an “enclosure” that creates a highly inequitable information marketplace.

Today, many Americans have no access or ability to use the new technologies. Others cannot afford the high prices or are forced to comply with rules that control and limit their usage and rights. Meanwhile, with Congress continually extending the duration of copyright, the chance of many works ever entering the public domain keeps diminishing. And for those items that are freely available for public use, no plan for permanent public access has yet emerged.

Given the array of new restrictions limiting public access, the promise of a free and open 21st century information society remains beyond the horizon. The technology that enables unfettered access is just as capable of restricting personal information choices and the free flow of ideas. The utopia of a high-tech society is now threatened by the dystopia of a highly controlled society. To protect our most precious right in a democratic society the right of free speech and inquiry we must develop alternatives. The information commons presents a viable alternative to this quest to preserve free expression in the digital age. The metaphor of the commons offers a fresh approach, emphasizing fundamental issues essential to our future as a democracy. It provides a useful framework for envisioning the public interest. It gives an opportunity to stake a claim in the future of the public sphere—to give a language from which we can explain how the extraordinary public assets invested in our information infrastructure can deliver opportunities for the

participation of all citizens.

For these reasons, we need to applaud and encourage exciting new initiatives that transform the metaphor of the commons into reality. Some of these initiatives are simply digital library collections, others digital repositories, and still others digital communities. Several employ the Internet itself as a commons, utilizing open source software, peer-to-peer file sharing, and collaborative Web sites. These projects share the characteristics of free and open access, self-governance, archiving and preservation, and limited of any copyright restrictions. Often, they offer electronic versions of the traditional library an enduring model for new information commons. All represent a new genre of creativity and information artifacts, best understood within the framework of the commons. Such groundbreaking initiatives as the Creative Commons, Project VoteSmart, and the Digital Library of the Commons demonstrate the benefits of new paradigms for content creation and use.

The emergence of the information commons as both metaphor and reality fills a critical need in the digital age. The commons elevates individuals to a role above mere consumers in the marketplace, shifting the focus to their rights, needs and responsibilities as citizens. Reviving a language of the commons along with adopting new paradigms for access allow us to advance knowledge and creativity while realizing a democracy that guarantees full participation in the free and open exchange of ideas The author is currently working on a report on the Information Commons.

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