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LPC Blog

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What do we value in academic ownership?

By Ian Harmon

Editor's note: This is part of a series of reflections by community members on the recent Library Publishing Forum and Owned by the Academy: A Preconference on Open Source Publishing Software. See the whole series.

When I learned that this year's Library Publishing Forum preconference was called "Owned by the Academy," I knew right away that I had to attend. I was just beginning my new job as Scholarly Communications Librarian at West Virginia University, and our Dean had recently mentioned to me the idea of academically-owned publishing. So the preconference presented a perfect opportunity to learn more about an area of interest at my new institution.

I anticipated that I would learn about lots of different open source publishing platforms, and leave the conference better informed to make recommendations as to which of these would be a good fit for my library, and this certainly happened. But since returning from Minneapolis, I've also been spending a lot of time reflecting on *owned by the academy* as a concept, and so I'm going to dedicate this post to sharing some of my thoughts on this issue.

Prior to the preconference, the phrase *owned by the academy* brought to my mind open source publishing software built and supported by a community of academic librarians, IT and development staff, and academically-oriented non-profits. I imagined that under an "academically-owned" setup, the software and infrastructure would be hosted at the institutional or consortial level and that commercial entities would have a role to play.

But in light of my experience at the Owned by the Academy Preconference (and the Library Publishing Forum as a whole), I've been reconsidering what *owned by the academy* really means. At the preconference, there were representatives from colleges, universities, and non-profits, but some for-profit businesses were represented as well. So I've been thinking a lot about whether for-profit involvement is compatible with academic ownership.

I don't think it's too presumptuous to suggest that, among most members of the LPC community, the phrase *owned by the academy* carries positive connotations. For some, myself included, it represents an ideal. But I've realized that I need to achieve a better understanding of why I see it as an ideal. I need to have solid answers to questions like, "What qualifies as *the academy*?", "Why is ownership important?", and "What is it that the academy needs to own?"

Lurking behind all of these questions (and the belief that *owned by the academy* is an ideal) is an assumption that academic ownership is preferable to commercial ownership. If this assumption is correct, then we need to be able to explain why. At this point in time, few institutions have the capacity to build or own everything. But if we understand what's preferable about academic ownership, we'll be better positioned to uphold our ideals when we enter into partnerships with commercial entities.

Perhaps the obvious answer is that ownership is important because with it comes control, and control enables us to more effectively act in ways that accord with our values. While some commercial entities may share some of our values, we lack the certainty that their values will always coincide with our own. For instance, many have interpreted bepress's acquisition by Elsevier as an indication that bepress' values have moved away from those of libraries. And it's understandable that some have felt betrayed by this course of events.

At the center of all of these issues is the question of trust. As academics, we're more inclined to trust other academics because we believe their values more or less coincide with our own. In the case of commercial interests, it's harder to feel sure of this. But we can demand that our trust be earned and maintained. And we can make it clear that if our trust is broken, we will take our business elsewhere.

One of the best ways we can do this is by making it clear what our values are through our work and practice. This is a challenge when we feel compelled, by practical necessity, to do business with entities that don't share them. It can feel like a balancing act, but my experience at Owned by the Academy and the Library Publishing Forum left me confident that we're moving the balance in the right direction.

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