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Author

Crispin, Jennifer J

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Understanding Knowledge as a Commons: From Theory to Practice
edited by Charlotte Hess and Elinor Ostrom. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT
Press, 2006. 381 pp. ISBN-10: 0-262-08357-4; ISBN-13: 978-0-262-
08357-7.

The availability of knowledge in digital form is changing the way some scholars view knowledge. Charlotte Hess and Elinor Ostrom, both of Indiana University, join forces to produce this collection of essays about the concept of knowledge as a commons. The scholars who contribute to this book examine knowledge as a shared resource, much like an environmental commons. The book originated in a working session on scholarly communication as a commons in 2004, but the authors note that the idea of an information commons began to emerge in the mid-1990s. Although the editors have attempted to broaden the scope of the book beyond the workshop's focus on scholarly communication, nearly all of the chapters deal with this topic. This is understandable, as all of the authors have connections with colleges or universities. This volume focuses on knowledge commons issues in the United States. A few international organizations and universities are mentioned, but the international issues related to the idea of a knowledge commons are not addressed here; specific legal and political concepts, such as copyright, are discussed from a U.S. perspective.

The book is divided into three sections: "Studying the Knowledge Commons," "Protecting the Knowledge Commons," and "Building the Knowledge Commons." The first three chapters explain and justify the application of the commons metaphor to knowledge. They also discuss problems the knowledge commons might face, such as free-riding or disappearing assets. The early chapters are all interrelated, with references to other chapters in the book. They discuss ideas for encouraging scholars to contribute to archives or depositories of knowledge products, but fail to fully consider why there might be resistance to contributing scholarly articles. The second section focuses on protecting the knowledge commons, largely by resisting enclosure, questioning copyright, and preserving electronic journals. The chapters in the final section of book focus on building the knowledge commons. Some of these chapters are theoretical "thought experiments," while the last chapter is a case study of a digital library for economics. Although the editors note the differences between the knowledge commons and the idea of open access several times in earlier chapters, the two concepts become blurry in some later chapters. The concept of public domain is also mixed in, especially in discussions of copyright and open access.

The book's essays flow logically from one to the next, with a couple of exceptions. James Boyle's provocative chapter, "Mertonianism Unbound? Imagining Free, Decentralized Access to Most Cultural and Scientific Material,"

which focuses on copyright and argues for more free and open access to cultural and scientific materials, comes between Nancy Kranich's chapter on information enclosure and Donald Waters' chapter on preserving the knowledge commons. Boyle is reimagining knowledge and information, broadening the authority to create or reproduce knowledge, and asking readers to rethink the concepts of "peer-review" and editing. He challenges conventional thinking on copyright and intellectual property. While this essay loosely fits the category of "Protecting the Knowledge Commons," it might have made more sense in the category of "Building the Knowledge Commons."

Several essays raise the idea of the author/producer absorbing the cost of sharing the knowledge/intellectual content. Troublingly, in "Creating an Intellectual Commons through Open Access," Peter Suber compares this model favorably to commercial television, where viewers can see the content for free, and where the content is paid for by the provider and sponsors. However, it can be argued that "content" is not the focus of commercial television—the focus is on getting people to watch commercials. The value in commercial broadcasting is not in the show itself, but in the number of people who are watching the show, and being exposed to advertising messages. In an open access journal, the author is providing the content, which one would assume adds value to the journal, but if the author is also expected to pay so that others can freely access this content, then in a sense the author is being asked to pay twice, first in the "donation" of the content and second in the costs associated with donating that content.

The authors discuss various dilemmas connected with commons, including the question of the "tragedy of the commons," or the idea that people might not limit their use of a scarce resource unless limiting use is in their self-interest, thus damaging the environment in question. Hess and Ostrom argue that in environmental situations, groups can sustain their resources. However, common metaphors such as the "tragedy of the commons" are not always adequate to explain or solve commons dilemmas.

The specter of free-riding appears frequently throughout the book. In a few words, free-riding is described as a person benefiting from a shared resource without contributing. While the damage from free-riding in an environmental commons is obvious (such as over-grazing land), the damage of "free-riding" in a knowledge commons is not made obvious. The term remains somewhat vague and elastic throughout the book.

Few chapters mention the digital divide or marginalized users. In fact, marginalized users are the focus only in Peter Levine's chapter on involving adolescents in creating public knowledge, "Collective Action, Civic Engagement, and the Knowledge Commons." Many times, researchers concerned about a digital divide focus on whether marginalized or underserved users can access

information, without considering issues stopping marginalized users from producing and sharing knowledge.

Most chapters have detailed end notes, many of which connect the reader to open access resources. The book includes an index and a useful glossary of terms used by Hess and Ostrom in chapter 3, “A Framework for Analyzing the Knowledge Commons.” The book need not be read straight through from beginning to end, but reading the first three chapters will help the reader make sense of the chapters that follow. Overall, this book provides a solid overview of the idea of knowledge as a commons as theorized, understood, and practiced in the United States.

Reviewer

Jennifer Crispin is a doctoral student in the School of Information Science and Learning Technologies at the University of Missouri.