Researching the Information Commons (RIC)

Kerry Smith
Associate Professor
Department of Information Studies
Curtin University of Technology
Perth, WA, Australia
Email: k.smith@curtin.edu.au

Abstract:

There was a time when working in the information industry as known to libraries was relatively predictable as far as information policy issues were concerned. We espoused the public good philosophies of our professional bodies with regard to issues including freedom of information, information access and delivery, information ownership, copyright and user privacy. Then came the Internet. There is no doubt that the Internet has provided new information issues and challenges that are being encountered, and these need to be addressed, and not only in the law courts. One all embracing issue is that of the new place of information in a commons environment. The pragmatic members of the library profession have grasped the commons concept and made their libraries an "information commons" but who has really challenged and thought through in a research sense, the issues that surround the commons provision of information; a concept dear to the hearts of many of the world's librarians?

This question lead to the development of a researcher networking initiative, represented on the Web as Researching the Information Commons (RIC) http://infocommons.curtin.edu.au   The website has a growing number of participants, not all working together, but who are interested in information commons matters from a research points of view. The vision for the RIC Group is to nurture and mentor a community of researchers interested in matters relating to the information commons, by being in itself an information commons. It will operate through:

- *openness and feedback;*
- *shared decision making;*
- *diversity within the commons*
- *honouring social and legal equity amongst its members; and*
- *fostering sociability within the commons (from Bollier, 2004, p.275).*

The paper will outline the thinking behind RIC, the work of its members and some hopes for the future.

Introduction

Matters which come under the rubric of the information commons are deserving of much closer research attention than has been given them to date. These include the advent of changes of direction in many public policy and market forces which "have enclosed rather than expanded the commons" (Kranich, 2003, p. 2).

These matters surfaced for this author when as a special librarian working for small petroleum and mining companies in Western Australian in the 1980s and early 1990s, indelible experiences in geoscientific data acquisition occurred. This was at a time when the Australian government had differing policies on access to and charging, or not charging, for basic geoscientific data, in an environment in Australia of Crown Copyright and what might and might not be done with it.

Since joining Curtin University of Technology (Curtin University) in 1991, the issues have manifested themselves in lectures on subjects like: the information/knowledge society, information policy, information and professional ethics, information policy and government, and legal issues including: intellectual property, copyright, legal deposit, freedom of information, privacy, censorship, and public lending right. A Masters thesis completed in 1995 titled *The impact of computer technology on the geological map: some information policy implications* revisited information commons issues in a geoscientific information context.

With this gestation, a proposal to establish a federated network of colleagues researching in this many faceted arena slowly gathered momentum. It is now operating as a network under the name: *Researching the Information Commons* (RIC). Expressions of interest have been sought from academics in the Curtin University and wider communities as it is not envisaged that the network operate as a Curtin-only entity.   A website has been developed.

Defining the information commons

It would seem from the recent library literature, that many librarians are defining the information commons as a "place" or "space" within a library building. This is often represented by banks of computers where patrons can gather in a "commons" environment. However, the "commons" approach was probably first introduced into the research lexicon by Hardin in 1968. It is unlikely that when he presented his thesis "The Tragedy of the Commons" in 1968, that Garret Hardin (1971) thought that not only would the ecological community seize upon it as mantra, but that the information community would find parallel identification with a number of the ideas he expressed. His work has been acknowledged as a helpful tool for the analysis of ecological and other issues (Stillman in O'Riordan & Turner, 1983, p 295). It is not so much Hardin's analysis of the "tragedy" of the commons that is of interest in the context of this present paper, but his use of the word "commons".

On commons

A common is normally thought of as a venue, usually a parkland, which is used "in common" by all - what we might call a public open space. The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary offers: "3. a common land or estate; the undivided land held in joint occupation by a community. Now often applied to unenclosed or waste land" (p. 378).

Hardin writes of the overuse of such commons when they are made freely available: by overgrazing by zealous flocks, over used by zealous sports people and children and the like. Hardin cites the following example:

> A simple incident occurred ... in Leominister, Massachusetts ... During the Christmas shopping season the parking meters downtown were covered with plastic bags that bore tags reading: "Do not open until after Christmas. Free parking courtesy of the mayor and city council." In other words, facing the prospect of an increased demand for already scarce space, the city fathers reinstituted the system of the commons. [Hardin continues]: (Cynically, we suspect that they gained more votes than they lost by this retrogressive act). (Hardin in O'Riordan & Turner, 1983, p 292).

In the above example, the city fathers had restricted the use of a scarce commons by imposing parking meters and had lifted this imposition - to gain votes? It appears that in Hardin's opinion, the original placement of the parking meters in this scarce commons, thus giving all the ability to use it while restricting its use, was a fair thing to do. Just how closely this analogy has been followed in the library world is worth considering.

The information commons

The commons in the library field has been variously defined as:

1. An imaginary "place" where works in the public domain and works affirmatively made under conditions less restrictive than full copyright "reside" (Campbell, 2005).
2. A commons, simply understood, is a resource, or a facility, "that is shared by a community of producers or consumers" (Oakerson, 1992 as quoted in Kranich 2004). The resources within a commons may be either "public goods" or "common pool resources". Some examples of public goods are streets, parks,

beaches, common transit routes, stores of knowledge, and national defense. Examples of common-pool resources include fisheries, grazing areas, mainframe computers, and, most recently, information and ideas that are shared in a plethora of online communities (Kranich, 2004, np).

3. information commons…are collaborative. They offer shared spaces, real and virtual, where communities with common interests and concerns gather. They take advantage of the networked environment to build information communities, and they benefit from network externalities, meaning the greater the participation, the more valuable the resource. They are interactive, encouraging discourse and exchange among their members. Many are free or low cost. Their participants often contribute new creations after they gain and benefit from access. These commons enhance both human and social capital. Their governance is shared, with rules and norms that are defined and accepted by their constituents. They incorporate democratic values. Free expression and intellectual freedom prevail Kranich (2004, np).

Representations of the commons in librarianship and information studies (LIS)

If we return to Hardin's (1971) thinking, then fair use of the information commons, to prevent overuse, would entail some form of preventative measure. But as we can see from Hardin's example of the parking meters, there are fair and not so fair repercussions from such actions.

The library community has taken on a meaning of the information commons to be a shared physical space. Examples of this use can be seen at:

- National Institute of Standards and Technology Library – see http://libres.curtin.edu.au/libres15n1/Allmang_Liu_2005_01_31.htm
- *Information Commons and beyond:* a directory of innovative services in academic libraries: http://infocommonsandbeyond.blogspot.com
- University of Toronto Scotiabank Information Commons: http://www.utoronto.ca/ic/
- Hardin Library for the Health Sciences, Information Commons: http://www.lib.uiowa.edu/commons/ (see also Duncan, 1998).
- Indiana University Bloomington Information Commons: http://ic.indiana.edu/
- University of Calgary Information Commons: http://www.ucalgary.ca/informationcommons/

Other examples of use of the term or its general meaning include:

- Rhiza labs (a MAYA company): http://www.rhizalabs.com
- Info-commons.org: http://www.ndparking.com/info-commons.org
- Asia Commons.Net: http://www.asia-commons.net/participate

Topics on the information commons can be represented in many ways, some of which are listed below. Each of these topics is a paper in itself and no attempt is made in this paper to describe them in great detail. All of these characterizations have research

possibilities, which is why the RIC concept is seen as an attractive facility for research networking and research development.

- Information in the public domain
    - Open access movement
    - Scholarly publishing in electronic repositories
    - Information rights in the digital age
    - Fair use under copyright legislation
    - Freedom of expression
    - Equitable access to information
    - Government information
    - Community radio, television, journalism
    - Information as property
        - The challenges of copyright
        - Publisher control
- Information re-use

- Enabling access to public information using
    - Finding tools
        - Data management –e.g. http://www.ecai.org
        - Records management
        - Archival practices
    - The Internet
        - Using the Internet - The treatment of cyberspace as a public space or 'new commons' (Mosco, 1998, p. 19); and Brin (1995).
        - Open source and free software licencing
        - Freedom of expression on the Internet
        - The role of the library as an information commons
            - Public libraries
            - Academic libraries
                - Collection management
                - Journal licencing
- Social informatics. A serviceable working conception of "social informatics" is that it identifies a body of research that examines the social aspects of computerization. A more formal definition is "the interdisciplinary study of the design, uses and consequences of information technologies that takes into account their interaction with institutional and cultural contexts" (Kling, 1999, p. 1)

The Information Commons can also be challenged in many ways, including:
- Measures encouraging deregulation and privatization
- Media ownership
- Freedom of Information Acts
- Information as property
    - The challenges of copyright
        - Protection of copyright in the digital environment

- Creative Commons
- Crown Copyright
  - Publisher control

Establishing RIC

A small seeding grant was obtained from the then Faculty of Media, Society & Culture at Curtin University to develop the website http://infocommons.curtin.edu.au .   At the same time, cooperation was obtained from a few colleagues within the then Faculty to join the group as "seed partners".   Since then the membership http://infocommons.curtin.edu.au/researchers has grown slowly from seven seed members to an additional nine outside members, two of whom are, or have been, research fellows at Curtin University, with the remaining members being from other institutions.

In order to sell the concept to others a series of statements: a vision, set of objectives, functions and potential activities, has been developed to better explain the purpose of the network.

RIC's *vision* is to nurture and mentor a community of researcher interested in matters relating to the information commons, by being in itself an information commons. It will operate through:
- openness and feedback;
- shared decision making;
- diversity within the commons
- honouring social and legal equity amongst its members; and
- fostering sociability within the commons (from Bollier, 2004, p. 275).

RIC hopes to work towards this vision through the following *objectives*:
- Stimulate research and debate within scholarly and wider circles on matters. Bollier (2004) reports that there is:
  > no recognized language for discussing the importance of the commons in our [US] culture. There is no well-developed discourse that explains the value of an open information environment. We do not have a distinct public vocabulary that regards citizens, not commercial enterprises, as the primary constituency to be served by …law (2004, p. 272).

- Enhance awareness of the issues which enable and constrict the existence of an information commons;
- Facilitate research on matters pertaining to the information commons;
- Undertake reflective analysis and investigations in the best traditions of scholarship; and
- Stimulate thinking and exploration of solutions on relevant issues;

The website

The website is under constant revision with the most recent update in 2010 being the addition of a blog http://blogs.curtin.edu.au/ric   to alert RIC participants to matters that might be of interest. At the time of writing the significant blog tags are: *copyright, Google books* and *open access.*

It is interesting to consider the research interests of RIC members in light of these characterizations mentioned earlier. Some research headings, keywords, or tags, taken from them were established early to try and organize these research interests:

- Information in the public domain
- Open access movement
- Copyright
- Freedom of expression
- Information as property
- Information re-use
- Enabling access to public information
    - Finding tools
    - The Internet
    - The role of the library as an information commons.
  - Social informatics.

The website operates as a connecting device for the researchers on it. Yet as human beings we do require opportunities to better share our research ideas and activities and to establish potential collaborations. RIC has the following *functions and activities* listed in this regard:

- Research programs and collaborations;
- Research student supervision;
- Seminars and conferences – internal and external;
- Publications:
    - Research journals e.g. LIBRES: http://libres.curtin.edu.au ;
    - Books;
    - Refereed journal articles
- Contributing to finding aids: e.g. The Electronic Cultural Atlas Initiative (ECAI): http://www.ecai.org/ and
- Practicing the nexus between teaching and research.

In this regard two face to face meetings have been held so far at Curtin University.

RIC meetings

RIC'S first seminar was held on Friday 28th November 2008 and the program included the following papers:

Associate Professor Tim Dolin - *Collaboration in Humanities eResearch: The Australian Common Reader website* where delegates were introduced to the Australian Common Reader website http://www.australiancommonreader.com and the reading history project of which it is a part. The presentation focussed on the importance of the internet in fostering collaborative work in reading history and the potential of eResearch in the humanities.

Associate Professor Maggie Exon's presentation was on *Twelve years and many incarnations: How an innovative international research initiative has changed with the tides of IT.* The Electronic Cultural Atlas Initiative (ECAI) http://www.ecai.org has always consisted of a large, and somewhat indeterminate, group of scholars with an interest in the application of mapping to social sciences, humanities and cultural data. It was formed in the days of white-hot interest in the possibilities of electronic publication and multimedia, which seem now to belong to ancient history. This presentation outlined how ECAI has changed over the years but also how it has remained committed to one ideal, the free sharing of scholarly data and its re-use for many different purposes.

Glenn Pass's paper: *The French Connection? A Local History of the Internet at the Curtin University's Library and Information Service* outlined doctoral research on the social history of the Internet in Western Australia, focusing on the argument that a new approach is needed to interpret the history of a new technology, such as the Internet, within a local context. It illustrated how the integration of *Annales* style historiography within a postmodern context provides a useful model to explore a local history of the Internet.

Dr Paul Genoni spoke on *Collecting, protecting and detecting the print commons* and described and discussed his current research work undertaken in collaboration with CAVAL Collaborative Solutions, a corporate entity that provides shared services to the information and library sectors throughout Australasia. The research is investigating a range of issues related to the long term storage options for legacy print collections, with a focus on assessing the benefits (or otherwise) of federated print repositories in Australia.

Peta Wellstead's paper *Open access and scholarly communication: Emerging issues.* reported on a recent investigation on emerging trends in open access and scholarly communication particularly as they relate to the Curtin University library and the way that the development of open access impacts on training and professional development needs of library and information professionals.

Dr Edmund Balnaves presented a paper on *The desktop commons: Web services and the local digital archive and considered* a common conundrum facing small libraries and individuals: the management of digital subscriptions. The Web 2.0 has pointed the way to delivering to the local desktop a rich blend of web services blended using local application mash-ups. The presentation reported research on the application of this technology toward a smart client approach that draws on a combination of web services for subscription metadata and web crawling/spidering in order to deliver local archives of subscription content, developed around an open source framework.

Dr Gaby Haddow spoke on *Assessing the Impact of Australian Journals in the Social Sciences and Humanities.* Journal ranking has attracted increased attention as governments introduce quantitative methods to assess research outputs. In many cases, citation numbers and measures based on citations, particularly the Journal Impact Factor, are relied upon to provide this data. However, Impact Factors are not always an appropriate measure in the social sciences and humanities, but alternative ranking

methods are available and should be considered if research assessment exercises are to make equitable comparisons across disciplines.

And Associate Professor Bjoern Jarger gave a *brief resume of his research and engagement with Web 2.0 –* see http://www.himolde.no/index.cfm/pageID/2113

The second RIC seminar took advantage of a visit to Curtin University on 3rd April 2009 by Professor Graham Murdock from Loughborough University in the UK and it was also at this time that Professor Murdock joined the RIC research network. Professor Murdock spoke on *Contested Connections: Media and Mutuality in Turbulent Times*. His paper explored the emerging political economy of the Net looking at three key developments - accelerating commercialisation, the rise of new gift economies, and the on-line revivification of public cultural institutions - and to ask whether and how, we might build a new digital cultural commons rooted in Immanuel Kant's dream of a global order based on mutuality and respect to set against the countervailing forces of both consumerism and fundamentalisms.

Future face to face meetings are planned as opportunities present themselves.

Conclusion

In today's global environment of economic rationalism and privatization the space called the information commons offers an attractive harbour for those who wish to pursue their interests in it. Significant interest in the space has been around for some time with scholarly debate around copyright, public access and public domain information being just three research avenues. The Department of Information Studies @ Curtin University has decided to establish an information commons of researchers: colleagues who wish to network with each other, share thoughts, undertake research projects on issues of like interest and write papers together. If your interests intersect with those of RIC, we hope you will join us.

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Some related websites

ALA The Office of Information Technology Policy:
http://www.ala.org/ala/aboutala/offices/oitp/index.cfm   Retrieved May 28, 2010

The Free expression policy project
http://www.fepproject.org/policyreports/infocommons.contentsexsum.html Retrieved May 28, 2010

Rob Kling Center for Social Informatics: http://rkcsi.indiana.edu/ Retrieved May 28, 2010