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# Oxford Scholarship Online

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The bard, of course, was on to something when he posed this now proverbial line. A rose is a rose no matter what you call it ? unless of course it?s a turnip ? well, you get my drift. The principle is a sound one, but try to get that across to the men on fifth in Marketing. Branding is everything today, as if we?ve all reverted to the Wild West and are herding our cash cows to market ? or at least what we hope are cash cows. But sometimes branding is ?so everything? it works against you, as in the case of Starbucks, a company that began in Seattle, Washington and is now situated on *every* street corner in America. Over the years, wags redubbed it ?Fourbucks? because it?s impossible to get a cup of coffee for less than US $4, and even then not always a good cup. The name ?Starbucks? has become eponymous with the rich, the *nouveau riche*, and all things capitalist. So now the stores will reopen with names of local areas and serve beer, wine, and, oh yes, coffee. The idea is that Starbucks by any other name will smell much less of filthy lucre and much more of the frugal-minded, who in this global economic meltdown spend $4 on cups of coffee. But I digress.

Whatever else one can say, the name ?Oxford? still has an evocative ring to it, a panache that is hard to beat, even if it does evoke a bit of that ?jingo imperialism? that the word might also bring to mind. Certainly in the world of books and bytes, the name of Oxford gives pause for due consideration. *Oxford Scholarship Online* [2] (*OSO*), then, brings with it instant name recognition, an image of a raft of ingenious, glabrous men, all nodding with approval ? or off to sleep, as the case may be. *OSO* ?combines innovation with excellence? we are told and brings to scholars and readers the complete texts of 2,763 titles from the austere and rightly revered and respected publishing house.(1) If that sounds a bit overblown, try this: the London School of Economics called the Oxford Scholarship Online, ?the Holy Grail of online resources?.(2) *Library Journal?s netConnect* contends that *OSO* is a ?well-designed and easy-to-navigate environment. The quality features, sophisticated search functionality, and additional online content that Oxford University Press is providing are numerous, and the content speaks for itself?.(3) You can be sure that when reviewers?

praise begins by invoking God?s grail, you know it?s got to be at least a solid, if not inerrant, resource.

Oxford University Press?s intentions are obvious, but what is obvious isn?t always known and what?s known isn?t always obvious.(4) The largest university press in the world has determined to migrate some of its splendid holdings to the Web and thereby make those resources not only available online, but also to more and more users who find that access their preferred means of finding information. The infrastructure of *OSO* bears the traces of Oxford?s usual manner of excellence in bringing to scholars invaluable information.(5) Oxford University Press (OUP) is of course not new to the digital age. Not only has OUP brought to the fore some of the best works available in print, but it has also brought some of the most respected and acclaimed reference works to the Web, including the *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, the *American National Biography Online* and its award-winning *Oxford Reference Online*.(6)

Putting together a list of titles might well prove a formidable challenge for any other vendor than Oxford University Press. OUP, with many titles already in copyright, building *Oxford Scholarship Online* may well have been a challenge only because of OUP?s *embarrass de riches*. When you already own the copyrights, bringing a formidable offering of titles isn?t so difficult ? and neither is the diversity of offerings when you can choose from OUP?s formidable backlist. The *OSO* selection of titles covers the gamut in Biology, Classical Studies, Economic and Finance, Legal Studies, Linguistics, Literature, Music Publishing, Neuroscience, Science and Physics.

The range of subjects is unsurprising, and given the publisher, the breadth and depth of coverage should not be either. Still, looking at the subject areas, one is amazed at the variety. Business and Management, for example, contains texts from all areas of business and management, including the prestigious Clarendon Lectures in Management Studies. Most of the Clarendon series contains works by economic minds that are driving the subject area forward. Some of the authors included are A. B. Atkinson, John Campbell, Partha Dasgupta, Peter A. Hall, John Kay and Amartya Sen.(7)

The range in literature is, of course, enormous and covers texts from medieval studies to the 20th century, falling just shy of contemporary figures. A very strong showing in Renaissance and early modern texts is also included. Some of the authors included are Blamires, Cooper, Gaunt, O'Donoghue, Corcoran, Gillis, Eaglestone, Robinson, Hughes, Lockwood, Pollard, Rhodes, Rosenblatt, Stevenson, and Walker. Both literary and historical texts make up the selection.

Most remarkable is the list of titles and authors in the area of neuroscience. *OSO* defines neuroscience to include cellular, developmental and cognitive neuroscience, along with diseases of the nervous system, infractions of the sensory and motor systems, and the history of neuroscience. Among the more notable names in this collection are the Hippcocampus Book, authors Bliss, O?Keefe, and various other award winners. The collection is sophisticated enough for upper division undergraduates and graduates, as well as those seeking more detailed information dealing with more complex neuroscience matters.

The *OSO* History collection showcases the full range of the Oxford list, covering late antiquity through the end of the 20th century. Both regional histories and wide-raging transnational studies are included, from David d?Avray to David French?s work on the British army. The Oxford offerings in this particular subject range are among the most compelling, not only because the range is wide but also because the depth of the histories is virtually (no pun intended) nonpareil.

It should come as no surprise to readers familiar with the Oxford University Press that its listing in philosophy is of the highest caliber. *OSO* does not disappoint in this regard, either. Contemporary Philosophy and the history of philosophy are included, and the list of scholars proffered reads like a Who?s Who only because the individuals named are those who make up entries in that esteemed reference work. Names like J. L. Austin, Donald Davidson, the inimitable Philippa Foot, Thomas Nagel, and Christopher Peacock headline what really is an all-star cast.

Finally, equally arresting are the titles included in the classical studies listings. Oxford may well be new to

some areas, but the pedigree it holds when it comes to classical studies is unparalleled. *OSO* now provides instant access to the first line of texts in Greek and Latin literature, ancient history and culture. Among the titles included are those in the American Philological Association?s Monograph Series. If this listing alone were offered, it would be enough for most libraries to consider. But when the additional substantial offerings are also included, *OSO* makes its case to be considered one of the premier online sources.

Searchability is also a main ingredient of the *OSO* database. Keyword searching is available, and abstracts at the book and chapter level are also available. A very nice feature about the abstracts is that most of them are written by the authors themselves. Users of *OSO* can therefore rest assured that the abstracts are indeed about what the authors wrote, rather than a quick condensation by a reader who may have only seen the text for the first time, and that for only five minutes. Search terms are highlighted throughout the texts, and links to sources like Ingenta are included.(8) UK users can access most works through Athens Authentication Point and can be linked to referenced articles where subscriptions allow. But even where there is no link, additional citations are found.

Also available are hotlinks from bibliographies and footnotes to other online content, including a wide range of journals from an even wider range of publishers. Of interest to librarians will be the ?counter? statistics. The inclusion of an enumerator of users or sessions provides evidence to *soi-distant* bean counters who may want to know if the ?bang for the buck? (or pound as the case may be) is indeed sufficient for the cost. While cost efficiencies have never been absent in the rationale of librarians in purchasing academic materials, current economic conditions now dictate that the calculus of user statistics be reduced to sheer numbers. Of interest to librarians, too, are the free MARC records available for purchased titles. *OSO* can be purchased with a one-time fee or with a subscription fee. Titles are added on an annual basis.

Undergraduate and graduate users of these texts will be delighted to discover automatic export citations from trademark facilitators such as ProCite, Endnote, Reference Manager and RefWorks. For those new to this sort of thing, gone are the days when students are required to learn various citation styles (e.g., MLA, Turabin, APA). Now students can simply click a link (providing their libraries subscribe to such services) and choose either endnote, footnote, or bibliographer and ? presto-chango ? the bibliography is created without all the blood, sweat, toil and tears. Now graduates will not only be unable to make change without a cash register, they also won?t be able to write a paper without citation makers. A word to the wise, however, is required. While these sources are right about 90% of the time, that 10% failure rate can be bothersome. Free versions of this kind of software (e.g., EasyBib) are also useful, but have similar failure rates.

Digital Object Identifiers (DOIs) at the book and chapter levels make *OSO* perfect for those creating online course packs and reading lists. What has heretofore made such lists difficult was the inability of professors to select materials from them, without having students page through endlessly online entries for specific readings (while potentially violating copyright if teaching in the US). DOIs now take the guesswork out of this task and make online reading much more user-friendly. DOIs also provide easy access to the sources from Google or other search engines. Users must have subscription access, but they can at least be identified. *OSO* also participates in OpenURL, a technical term for providing a link to texts at one?s institution. For example, if a scholar using the resource from outside the *OSO* site finds a needed text, he wouldn?t want to click on that link and be taken to the *OSO* homepage only to be told a subscription or pass was required for further access. Rather, that scholar would want to be taken to the link that allowed access to those sources accessible to the scholar?s own institution. OpenURL compliance, without going too deeply into the geeky details, essentially allows for the level of resolvability necessary to accomplish that.(9) While the digital object may change over time, or rather will likely change over time, its DOI will not.

*OSO* also participates in full W3C and WCAG accessibility guidelines and is AAA compliant. Essentially this is geek-speak for attempting to provide some earnest attempt at standards on the world wild [sic] web. W3C is an international consortium that works with its members to develop the woefully lacking and urgently needed Web standards. W3C?s mission is to enable the Web to reach its full potential by ?developing protocols and guidelines that will ensure long-term web growth?.(10) Frankly, unless these standards or something like them are adopted soon by all Web users, long term web stability is very unlikely.

WCAG (Web Content Accessibility Guidelines) focuses on a wide range of issues that attempt to make the Web more permanently accessible to individuals with disabilities. The targeted disabilities include blindness or weak vision, deafness or hearing loss, learning or cognitive limitations, motor or speech limitations, photosensitivities, or a combination of these. WCAG is not technology specific.(11) The idea is to make web-content more usable. For those who may question whether such offerings are superfluous, Amazon?s Kindle experience should be more than enough to dissuade them from holding to this misapprehension.(12)

Recently, *OSO* offerings are now available through netLibrary. Lyrasis (formerly SOLINET) is also making 13 area offerings available to its members for a subscription fee.(13) Lyrasis offers only 700 of the ?best? of the *OSO* offerings, along with more than 250,000 page views. The further outreach of *OSO* is likely to make the site much more familiar to American users, especially those in the East coast regions, where Lyrasis resides. Not only will this provide greater exposure for *OSO* but is likely to make it more affordable to smaller libraries. Typically, when databases are offered through a consortia such as Lyrasis, most members are able to take advantage of the product at reduced consortium rates. It?s a win-win proposition for everyone.

Oxford gathered considerable user input before taking the plunge, so to speak, into the digital waters. They were wise to do so. As pointed out in other reviews of aggregate monographs, too many vendors/publishers look at what?s easily and readily available and begin the digitization process there rather than looking at user needs. *OSO* examined user needs via various focus groups both in the UK and the United States. Both scholars and librarians and members of learned societies comprised the focus groups.(14) The effort has not disappointed. *OSO* could not have presented less than top quality materials given its history, but had every chance to present them in a less than scholarly-friendly format. All of those fears may now be set aside.

It?s hard to place a jaundiced eye on any facet of *OSO*. The content is excellent, the platform first-rate, and the points of entry as usefully numerous as any user would want to find. Yet two areas remain as points of concern for the future, one which *OSO* could control and remediate, the other over which it has little, if any, control.

The controllable future for *OSO* is to make these texts available on various platforms, for example, accessible by iPhones and other handheld formats. As much as it pains me to say this, future students are not likely to take a second look *unless* they can access these resources via their tool of use (at least for now): smart phones, PDAs and the like. If they can access these materials in this manner, it?s *possible* they will also take a second look in a more conventional medium. While some readers may be musing (or grumbling) that ?they?ll look at it if they want a degree,? it?s just this sort of damn-the-torpedoes-full-speed-ahead attitude that may well bring an end to the whole education enterprise by sending students to for-profit entities that deliver access as desired (but while delivering less than desirable education). I do not mean young people will not be educated; I mean that they will be educated at places that will accommodate their current caprices. I use the phase ? current caprices ? advisedly as I do not for a minute believe that current technology is where such technologies will end. A year from now, or five, something different will be the ?latest,? and students will flock there. European students strike me as a bit more earnest about their education, but I fear that all will eventually go the way of all e-flesh. Making these collections accessible by the latest means will assure them of some continued future use. Students who must always resort to a desktop or a conventional library building will likely look elsewhere for their scholarly support. This means some added expense for vendors but an expense that seems to me to be a must.

Furthermore, making these texts downloadable to various eBook readers (the Kindle comes to mind) will also be very important. This will be much more difficult as all sorts of royalties and copyright issues loom large (at least in the US). As important as *OSO* is, and as valuable as it appears to me to be, it?s highly unlikely that it will be a source at the top of the list for eBook content providers. Oxford University Press must make the first move. The wrong move would be to create its own eBook reader for just its material. There are currently about a dozen and a half eBook readers now for sale, each one able to manage only a small fraction of the two dozen or more digital formats. Moreover, each one is generally able to deliver only its content or the content its outsourced associate provides. This is a critical problem for the future of eBook reading but one that will surely be resolved before long. By choosing one of the most popular eBook readers (Amazon?s Kindle or Sony?s 700-PRS) as the platform, *OSO* will assure itself of that market of readers now and in the future.

What *OSO* cannot control, however, is the fragmentation of so many monograph collections. It?s clearly understandable why Oxford chose to ?do its own thing,? but that sort of enterprising only further fragments the market into scores of various vendors offering a few thousands works each. Sooner or later (and probably sooner than later) these various small markets will either fall out or fold entirely. It?s not clear to me ? or to anyone else that I can find ? what that means for the larger online picture. Possibly it means a coming colossal failure of all but the largest of publishers, or, worse, the failure of all of them but in a slow burn. What happens to the content, what happens to buyers of those materials (will they disappear like the Orwell fiasco or a similar fiasco?) is anyone guess.(15)

*OSO*, meanwhile, will continue to thrive for the foreseeable future. Scholars looking for anything better will be very hard-pressed to find even a close second.

September 2009

# Notes

1. The phrase is from the web site <Back to (1)
2. Repeated here, <Back to (2)
3. Gail Golderman and Bruce Connolly, ?Bundles of books, Part 2?, 15 January 2009 <Back to (3)
4. The allusion is an obvious one to Johnson?s famous remark.Back to (4)
5. <Back to (5)
6. Ibid.Back to (6)
7. <Back to (7)
8. <Back to (8)
9. For more on OpenURLs see <Back to (9)
10. For more on this see <Back to (10)
11. For more, see <Back to (11)
12. Online sources are in abundance about this case, and I mentioned several in an earlier review. See Doug Lederman, ?A challenge to Kindle?, *Inside Higher Ed*., 6 July 2009 <Back to (12)
13. <Back to (13)
14. <Back to (14)
15. Amazon placed Orwell?s works on its Kindle for purchase but without the requisite digital rights as touching copyright. Orwell?s works ? in what is an ironic twist ? have now been erased from all Kindle holders of his works. See Brad Stone, ?Amazon erases Orwell?, *New York Times*, 17 July 2009 <Back to (15)

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