

Long-Form Publications in the Open Environment: The National Academies Press

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In 1994, the National Academies Press (NAP, www.nap.edu) began making every page of every recent publication open to the world. We were the first book publisher to be so open online.

The press is the publisher for the National Academy of Sciences, National Academy of Engineering, Institute of Medicine, and National Research Council, collectively known as the National Academies. We have a paradoxical dual mission: financial self-sustainability and maximal dissemination of the Academies' works. The dual mission has driven us to experiment with openness, audiences, and the digital environment more than most publishers. All that makes us unusual, but it also makes us an interesting case study.

In 1994, many other publishers—including me—thought that the NAP was signing its own death warrant: Who would buy a book if they could read it for nothing online?

As it turns out, lots of people. Books are a different enterprise from journal articles or encyclopedia entries. Books and other long-form documents require a level of reader immersion that online reading doesn't effectively support. Physical books are still the preferred mode for immersive reading, the preferred coin of the realm for status and significance, the preferred container for long-form content.

Today, we have more than 3700 books available online for free page-by-page browsing, online reading, and even page printing. The online form has become a means of promotion, a way for people to browse our content. Yes, a means for some people to *not* buy the book (those with more time than money), but also a means of acquiring readers, and buyers, of our long-form publications.

In 1994, the interface was an awkward, slow, and exclusively linear process—a reader started on page i, moved to ii, then to iii. . . . Page images were rendered on the fly, and the interface was no threat to the experience of reading a book. By 1999, a year after I joined the press, our

Web site was something akin to today's Google Book Search and Amazon's "Look Inside the Book", with hypertext tables of contents, search inside any book, and prerendered page images.

In the following years, we improved readability, added research tools and chapter-skimming tools, and provided more and more public-access options throughout the site. We now receive more than 18 million visitors a year, and the site generates one-third of our overall publication sales.

In our continuing publishing experiment, we've tested plenty of boundaries regarding how open "too open" might be, at least for the kind of content we publish. Our publications are predominantly book-length publications: long-form perspective, consensus recommendations, and expert advice. Some publications are broad, general-interest reports (such as *Rising Above the Gathering Storm*, on the need for the United States to reinvigorate science education), and others are small-market, even abstruse reports (such as *Zinc Calcium Sulfide Dispersion Tests: A Toxicity Review*). Our reports are of interest to policy makers, experts, and specialists and to more general-interest audiences.

That broad diversity has been a challenge to the NAP and to its marketing department (promoting to tiny markets can be prohibitively expensive). The challenge became one of the earliest reasons for our marketing department to accept the experiment with openness: We might be able to find new readers (and purchasers) for our small-market publications. Overall, the results have been favorable.

The 1.5 million visitors per month to our Web site are as varied as humankind, but we've seen some interesting patterns that pertain to sustainability of open-access models, at least for long-form publications.

In general, on our site about 17% of our income falls into the "long tail"¹: Of the more than 5000 items sold at least once (print books, PDF books, bundles of PDF + print, and PDF chapters), more than 1100 items were purchased only once, and more than 3600 were purchased 10 or fewer

times a year.

For us, part of the importance of our openness in business terms is that an incredibly huge audience simply finds us online. The NAP site gets more than 1.5 million visitors per month *because search engines love our open content*. Remarkably, the percentage of Web-site visitors who actually purchase anything is only around 0.2%—two in 1000. That vanishingly small conversion rate seems pitiful. But with that tiny fraction of a percentage, because the raw audience is so huge, we are still able to get around one-third of our income via online sales of print books, PDFs, and bundles of PDF and print. Online revenues break down to around two-thirds in print form and one-third in PDF form.

We have much to learn from that tiny conversion rate of 0.2% about the breadth of the new audiences, about specialized interests, and about how publishers might take advantage of what I have referred to elsewhere as the “deep niche”²—the percentage of humanity that on any given day because of a passing fancy, or a new career, or a new experience is newly interested in (and potentially willing to pay for)

affordable, high-quality content in their preferred format.

But our site also has achieved something even more important to our parent organizations: an algorithmic authority that matches our institutional authority.³ That is, because our content is so well indexed and so easy to link to, we generally come up very high in search-engine results for topics on which we have reports. If we were behind firewalls, barriers, or interruptions, we would not have such high algorithmic authority. The reports of the four organizations that make up the National Academies *are* highly authoritative, and we are able to have Google and other search engines recognize that authority in our consistently high “page rank”.

The authority is a result of more than a decade of work, through active promotion of our content, letting others promote it for us (with easy linkage, cover widgets, and so on), our own marketing and outreach, and letting the content promote itself in full text. By holding that algorithmic authority, we maintain a high visitor rate, which allows us to balance the paradoxical mission of self-sustainability and maximal

dissemination.

For the National Academies Press, for our kind of organization, and for the publishing mission we strive to achieve, the open model has worked well and has helped us to create a foundation on which to build our adaptations to the changing publishing environment.

References

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