The Challenge of Open Access for a Subscription Database
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AustLit is a subscription bibliographical and biographical database currently housed at the University of Queensland. It contains over a million work records and over 70 discrete research projects and curated datasets, including BlackWords, a bibliography of First Nations storytelling that was launched by Uncle Sam Watson in 2006. AustLit is also unique in the world – no other country has attempted to produce a national bibliography on this scale. It is also one of Australia's oldest and most venerable pieces of national digital research infrastructure in the humanities.

AustLit is the result of the dedication and labour of a huge number of people. It started as a consortium in the late twentieth century, bringing together and incorporating various datasets from universities around the country. While the consortium is no longer operating, there is no doubt that AustLit has been a collective and multi-institutional endeavour.

AustLit is not a full-text database, though it does have a few thousand full-text records. Rather, it uses a bibliographical model called FRBR (Functional Requirements for Bibliographical Records) to produce rich records that enable advanced searches. AustLit was the first large-scale implementation of FRBR in the world and one of the early challenges AustLit faced was how to bring together a number of datasets and align them all with this model. AustLit has gone on to reshape and enable the discipline over the last couple of decades, as scholars use it to explore computational literary methods and advanced search strategies.

As I'm sure you're aware, a piece of digital research Infrastructure of this kind and complexity does not come cheap and a great deal of money has been invested in it over the last few decades from many sources. In the early years, one key source of funding was Australian Research Council grants of various types and sizes which enabled AustLit to grow, becoming the comprehensive database of Australian story-telling we now know it to be.

While grants have been crucial, and we at AustLit are extremely grateful for them, AustLit has not been awarded a significant grant in over a decade. I suspect one reason might be because it's behind a subscription paywall, and I understand why governments don't want to give taxpayers' money to infrastructure that taxpayers can't access.

Another reason might be because funding bodies are more interested in innovation than maintenance, and more willing to fund data curation and data analytics than the types of collection that make the curation and analytics possible. AustLit has continued to get small amounts of money attached to various grants but this is usually for some form of enhancement or new curated dataset. AustLit is not really a research project, however, even

if it is institutionally defined as one. It is more properly to be understood as research infrastructure, even if it is usually not recognised as such.

And grants – even large grants – are only a temporary solution to a permanent problem – the issue of who pays. It costs money to maintain and keep a database such as AustLit up to date, comprehensive and technically robust. Any solution will involve cost-shifting. The question is – onto whom should this cost be shifted?

So, AustLit faces challenges in living up to the ideals of FAIR and CARE: governments change, money dries up, the university sector undergoes another shift in priorities, etc. For these reasons, AustLit has remained a subscription database, albeit one with a sliding scale of subscriptions.

Subscriptions have a lot going for them: they ensure a steady stream of income outside of the vagaries of shifting institutional landscapes – but they have their own costs and finite potential for growth. And, of course, they are incompatible with the principles of open access. But, while one might be supportive of the principle of open access, if subscriptions pay for the considerable labour costs of maintaining the database, what does one do?

AustLit currently has three full-time staff whose salaries are covered by these subscriptions – a content manager, a software developer and an indexer, and its resources are stretched. (My recent appointment as Director is a teaching and research academic position located in the School of Communication and Arts at the University Queensland, and a strong show of commitment on the part of the university to AustLit.)

There is incredibly rich content on AustLit that enables networked knowledge creation, but at the moment, this is only available to subscribers. AustLit tries to deal with the issue of open access by walking a difficult line between openness and financial sustainability. We offer partial free views per month and put some of our research projects or curated datasets in front of the paywall, but we don't want to threaten our subscriber base and so, ultimately, users will hit the login.

I have no doubt that we would attract many more interested parties if it wasn't for the paywall; indeed, of the approximately 35,000 people that visit AustLit each month, only 5,000 are subscribers. That is a lot of people who aren't able to experience all that AustLit has to offer.

I'm here today because I want to think creatively with you all about how AustLit can be made both more accessible and more sustainable into the future and I hope to mobilise your collective knowledge, experience and commitment in doing so. Having now set the scene, I'd be interested to hear your thoughts.

AustLit, https://www.austlit.edu.au/