

Social Economy Space: a hub for social economy research

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Research projects that generate significant research outputs rarely see much past the lifespan of any given project. Typically, one or more journal articles may survive, acknowledging that the project did, at one time, exist, while the rest of the research fades into obscurity. To complicate this problem further, research outputs that do not fit the commercial publishing mold, commonly known as grey literature, are typically never disseminated or preserved at all. In attempts to address some of the issues surrounding the preservation, access, and dissemination of social economy research, the Social Economy space (SE space) was created as an independent component of the Mount Saint Vincent University institutional repository in order to ensure that the research outputs of the Social Economy and Sustainability Research Network (SES RN) project live on past the life of the project. In this paper, the importance of archiving both academic and non-academic research outputs will be discussed, arguing for the utilization of repositories such as SE space to ensure these continue to be available for consultation and research purposes past the life of the research project.

The Social Economy space (SE space) is a collaborative, online database that provides free access to research and resources related to the social economy, with a focus on the Atlantic Canadian provinces. The objective of the project is the creation of a portal that will make social economy resources and research easily accessible for members of the general public, practitioners in the field, and those in academia. The goal of SE space is also to create an online space that fosters a virtual community of knowledge sharing, providing easy, open access to social economy research and resources, and encourages academics and social economy practitioners to self-submit and share scholarly articles, reports, grey literature, and other learning tools that they produce via the World Wide Web.

With the help of a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), over eighty social economy practitioners, academics, collaborating institutions, government agencies, and community partners came together in 2005 to study the social economy

in Atlantic Canada. Over the past five years, research network members from 51 partner organizations, 21 universities and 17 government departments and agencies worked together on 56 research projects, as well as on assorted annotated bibliographies, fact sheets, maps, and Network and Sub-Node events. The project will draw to a close in June 2011. The network collectively employed some 50 students, and mentored 8 student theses. The network also involved several of the member institutions' libraries with the responsibility for developing the repository that would house the outputs of the research project. This responsibility resided with the libraries at the and Mount Saint Vincent University and Université de Moncton (U de M).

The Université de Moncton has been involved with the Social Economy and Sustainability Research Network project and SE Space on two different levels. In 2005, Université de Moncton professor of Environmental Studies, Omer Chouinard, was approached to coordinate an aspect of the project, known as a sub-node, entitled "Mobilization for Natural Resources and Livelihoods." In the five years of the existence of the project, a total of a dozen projects led by the U de M researchers have been completed or are in the final stages of completion, mainly on the themes of Mobilization, Mapping, and Policies. The main focus of these projects has been the natural resources of New Brunswick (water, agriculture, forests, with the exception of the mines), the rural communities that are prevalent in the province, the co-operative model in the remote areas as well as community engagement. These projects were based on the principle of Participatory Action Research (PAR) that brings together academic researchers, field workers, community organizations, co-operatives, associations, etc. for which the outcomes are designed to have a positive impact for the local community. In turn, the outputs of the research project will be made available through SE space ensuring that these groups who contributed to the research, and anyone who might be interested in learning from their experiences, would have unhindered access to this research.

The three campuses of the U de M have unique research niches, such as forestry in Edmundston and near-shore areas and fishing in Shippagan. Under the umbrella of the Research Network, the academic researchers of all campuses have been involved in its projects, together with the field practitioners, local cooperatives and associations, forming so-called co-constructed research teams. Each project involved graduate students as research assistants, as the training of future practitioners and researchers in the field of social economy was also deemed to be of crucial importance.

The second level of involvement of the U de M is that of the Champlain Library and is more directly related to the SE Space. At the end of 2009, the Champlain Library had been asked to collaborate with the newly-created SE Space in order to help enrich it with the French content from the U de M researchers. SE space being conceived as a fully bilingual tool, help with the French interface, some translation, revision etc. was also needed. Some of the work had been accomplished in the beginning of the collaboration, when the SE Space was still in its preliminary stages of development and some of its functionalities and search aspects were being decided upon. The second call for assistance came in the end of 2010: the official launch of the SE Space being planned for February 2011, some French terminology, the elements of the French interface as well as some revision and translation had to be finalized.

While the French interface, documentation etc. were being looked after, the French content of the SE Space was still rather sparse, with only 25 submissions out of 350 being in French. Being the only francophone institution in the Atlantic region (besides a small university -- Université Sainte-Anne in Nova Scotia), SE Space depended on U de M input to be able to offer the content in French. In the meantime, a very productive meeting between a professor and a librarian took place. It was confirmed that much of the documentation in French has been used and produced during the 6 years of the project, this documentation now needed to be deposited in the SE Space to be made

available and searchable. In fact, any documentation related to the social economy research would ideally be deposited in this centralized location in order to be preserved and disseminated for the benefits of the social economy community at large.

Mount Saint Vincent University (MSVU) in Halifax, Nova Scotia, or as it is commonly known – “the Mount” -- was the head of the social economy of the SESRN network, with the project’s director, Dr. Leslie Brown, and number of other affiliated researchers being based there. The Mount Library partnered with Dr. Brown and her team to create SE space as a part of its own institutional repository – the MSVU Digital Commons. The MSVU Digital Commons, and thus SE space was created using DSpace software. DSpace was the ideal environment in which to create the SE space because it provides data storage, the organization and dissemination of information resources and the ability to allow for multiple contributors (Duraspace, 2011). DSpace provides the ability to store vast amounts of data, digital preservation infrastructure, as well as self-submission capabilities, which allow multiple users to submit resources to SE space. Moreover, DSpace allows for open access to digital content and is searchable through Google, providing the added bonus of increased visibility to both the publications contained within SE space and the authors of the published materials.

Unlike websites, which change on a frequent basis resulting in a loss of access to certain resources, repositories such as SE space provide a long-term commitment to the preservation and access of the material that it holds. The initial set-up of the SE space required a significant amount of resources to be submitted to it prior to the launch, in order to showcase its functionality and organizational structure. Resources were taken from the SESRN website, the social economy LibGuide, another resource compiled by the Mount Library, which provides a list of a number of resources on the social economy, but does not provide full-text access to these sources like SE space does. All of the content on the SE space is publicly available, but a username and password are

required to submit new resources to the site. The project ends in June, 2011, but it is hoped that SE space will continue to grow as researchers continue to make submissions.

DSpace is commonly used to create institutional repositories for academic institutions, storing and disseminating their intellectual output, but we recognized its potential to be used as a research tool that promotes partnership and collaboration beyond the borders of individual institutions. An institutional repository (IR) is “a set of services that a university offers to the members of its community for the management and dissemination of digital materials created by the institution and its community members” (Lynch, 2003). An effective institutional repository results from collaborative efforts of librarians, IT staff, archivists/ record managers, faculty and university administrators and policymakers. Institutional repositories are quickly gaining recognition in academic and other circles as a main way in which research can be disseminated and made accessible.

Currently, SE space contains a mix of literature written by academic and non-academic authors on a variety of topics pertaining to the social economy in Atlantic Canada. Some of the academic authors featured as part of SE space are among the foremost experts on the issue of social economy in Atlantic Canada and beyond. Also, some of the non-academic works are written by organizations and individuals actively practicing within social economy organizations. SE space features a number of other works, equally as important, that are authored by non-academic organizations such as credit unions, cooperatives, social policy institutes, and other organizations. A number of these organizations may not necessarily have a venue for people to access the research that they produce -- SE space attempts to bridge this gap. The result is a growing body of academic and grey literature made freely available to anyone wishing to access it.

The amalgamation of academic and grey literature in one central repository is a contentious issue for some. The traditionally accepted definition for grey literature, formally adopted at the 3rd

international conference on grey literature in 1997, is “that which is produced on all levels of government, academics, business and industry, in print and electronic formats, but which is not controlled by commercial publishers” (Luzi, 2000). While non-profits and other social economy sector organizations are not explicitly mentioned in this definition, the research (and much of the material contained in SE space) originates from all the aforementioned sectors, and most of it is not published through commercial venues. Grey literature traces its roots back to the early twentieth century with the scientific and technical reports that were disseminated amongst select groups of users (Luzi 2000). Since that time, grey literature has come to refer to the mass of often uncontrolled manuscripts and documents produced by government bodies, academic institutions, and business and industry (Farace, 1997).

Subject-based (or disciplinary) repositories, such as SE space, usually have been set up by the community members with intention of having them adopted by the wider community, or discipline. These repositories are thematically well-defined; they have high quality standards and offer services, such as alerts, and statistics (usage, citations) that are meaningful to its users. The method of self-archiving, which is a term used to describe the act of depositing in a repository (institutional or otherwise), is generally adopted by the scholars as the repository is of intrinsic value to them and helps them in navigating large amounts of published knowledge. Some classic examples of subject-based repositories are arXiv (Physics, Mathematics, Computer Science, etc.), RePec (Research Papers in Economics), PubMed Central (PMC US, UK, Canada - Biomedical and life sciences). These repositories “have successfully mastered the challenge of becoming large-scale providers of dedicated services that are relevant and important to scholarly communities” (Armbruster & Romary, 2010). SE space constitutes somewhat of a hybrid of subject-based repository and an institutional repository, as it collects material from one field/discipline while also acting as a repository for an organization/research project.

Although grey literature has in the past been considered too ephemeral and marginal to spend time collecting, it is part of a communications process that, although separate from mainstream publishing, is just as important. (Lafleur, 2004). Often times, the outputs of a major research project constitute more than just key dissemination products, but may often include reports, theses and dissertations, datasets, presentations, and other material that is of value to a variety of audience, including both academic and practitioners – but no effort is made to preserve and make available such outputs past the life of any given research project. Moreover, making this type of literature available is much easier and possible now than ever, with the proliferation of institutional and subject-based repositories. Making research, in its various forms, openly accessible and available to practitioners, academics, and the general public is a value-added service that complements Community-University research partnerships very well. Not only does it preserve the research that has been done as a result of the research project by ensuring its availability for further research, it also makes it available to the entire community – not just those in the university environment.

On a national level, there has been a growing recognition of the fact that the public has the fundamental right to access the results of the research funded with the taxpayers' money. Such bodies as Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR), the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council (NSERC) and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), among others, have been developing policies that require the researchers to make their peer-reviewed publications freely accessible within six months of publication (Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources Coalition, 2010). Repositories such as SE space provide a way for researchers to adhere to this requirement and make their research more accessible, and visible than ever before.

In closing, the primary function of SE space is to archive all of the work that is done within the SESRN, related to the social economy, and to provide full-text versions of the publications and research outputs of the project. While it is not doing this on the institutional level, in the same manner that institutional repositories do, SE space leverages the power of institutional repositories to store, preserve, and facilitate access to social economy resources. The challenges of accessing information on the social economy are considerable given the multi-disciplinary background of those doing the research and the fact that much of the work takes place outside academic institutions, in government departments, independent think tanks and social economy sector organizations. The advantage of bringing together both academic and grey literature that co-exist within SE space is clear: both are valuable sources for research and serve a multitude of user groups that might wish to access information on the social economy in Atlantic Canada.

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