

Database Activism: New Ways to Do Science (And Maybe Change the World)

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New scientific database ventures seldom succeed without broad community acceptance and cooperation. Politically, this forces most private/public partnerships to pursue ideals that extend beyond simple revenue generation. To date, most ventures have dedicated themselves to creating and disseminating research tools - i.e., open science. Other goals could be even more appealing. I will discuss how a database initiative could promote drug discovery for Third World diseases. The proposal builds on earlier work showing that no single method of organizing research is "best" in all circumstances. In particular, I argue that patents are - despite recent suggestions - likely to be an ineffective tool given the economic realities of Third World drug discovery. One competing (and scientifically feasible) alternative is to organize drug discovery along "open source" lines. Well-known economic criticisms of open source in the software arena turn out to be strengths in the context of Third World drug research.