

Draft of Willinsky, J. (2000, July 3). Virtual intellectuals. *New Statesman*, <http://www.newstatesman.com>.

On April 3, 2000, the new dot-com start-up Fathom was launched with a press release promising it would “redefine the scope of online learning.” Turn the page? No. For once the hype understates it. Fathom changes the scope not only of online learning but of this information economy’s public sector.

This super-brand “knowledge and education” outfit lays claim to no less than the intellectual assets of Columbia University, the London School of Economics and Political Science, Cambridge University Press, the British Library, Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Natural History, and the New York Public Library. Amid banner ads, shopping opportunities, and a 10,000-course roster, Fathom plans to offer free access to multimedia lectures, seminars, databases, publications, and performances, as well as a chance for people to “interact and collaborate” with experts.

It’s another step in the blend of the public and commercial, presented in a way that makes it seem necessary, inevitable, and a public good. As George E. Rupp, Columbia's president explained to the New York Times, “we want to make sure that our core intellectual capital is not picked off by outside for-profit vendors. But for that, we have to be able to say to our faculty that we will devise ways they can communicate with a wider audience, which many of them would like.”

I can forgive Rupp for thinking of his faculty as intellectual capital – they’ve done it to themselves – but his assumption that universities, even private ones, needs a for-profit e-biz to “communicate with a wider audience” is dismaying. What happened to the Internet’s promise of recreating a public space for the exchange of ideas, of fostering a global community and a democratization of knowledge and learning? Who will defend and enrich the public sphere within this global space if not the leading public institutions? At first blush, at least, Fathom seems to be all about getting in on the action, cashing in on the old New York/London cachet.

“It is important that we seize this space,” Neil Gregory, head of research and project development at the London School of Economics and Political Science, told the Financial Times, “This could be the category killer.” Indeed, the LSE (started by Fabians, Beatrice and Sydney Webb, as part of the University of London) could prove a killer, in this venture, especially for the category we might name the public interest.

Ann Kirschner, CEO of Fathom, has warned that the company could well go public. The Financial Times estimates a first-year investment of some £40 million, with venture-capital participation. Fathom’s requisite start-up board of directors includes business leaders from Goldman Sachs, Shell International, and the National Basketball Association. Someone is expecting a considerable return somewhere down the line, even allowing for the wonky bottom-line expectations of e-bizzes. And then there’s the specter of corporate takeovers. Think of AOL acquiring the intellectual assets of Fathom to fill in those content areas (art and literary criticism, philosophy, paleontology, etc.) that Time Warner reluctantly concedes it cannot provide.

It’s not so absurd when you consider that two weeks after the Fathom launch, the New York’s Museum of Modern Art in and the Tate Gallery in London announced their own for-profit start-up. In this case, Glenn D. Lowry, director of the MoMA, assures us that “we have built in all the appropriate firewalls” which means that “no trustee or their

family and no staff member of either museum can invest in this company should it go public.” Oh, that public institutions to throw up firewalls to prevent a conflict of interest with going public. Successful start-ups may reduce the tax-payers’ burden, but only as it reduces the institution’s public accountability and contribution.

I raise these concerns as but a caution at this point. I may be too hasty in judging what Fathom means for the public sector of this knowledge economy. If it offers “a more complete and accessible context for knowledge,” as CEO Kirschner claims, while sticking to the principle that “generally what’s free in the real world will be free in the virtual world,” then it could well prove a source of hope for perhaps even an expanded public sector of ready access to all that these public and non-profit institutions hold.

If, instead, the public sector is further diminished by the likes of Fathom, then it falls to public-spirited readers, scholars, librarians, and curators to find other ways of going public with what we collectively know and hold in trust. Inspiration for such initiative is readily found online in mission statement of the New York Public Library which currently speaks of the library as “one of the cornerstones of the American tradition of equal opportunity. It provides free and open access to the accumulated wisdom of the world... It helps ensure the free trade in ideas and the right of dissent.”