



Offline Internet Consortium
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JAMES O'DONNELL JOINS THE COOL KIDS OF OFFLINE INTERNET SERVICES

James O'Donnell didn't *truly* expect to see his colleague from Malaysia a year after co-founding the Offline Internet Consortium at a group summit in Arizona. The man was halfway around the world, in a region where travel logistics were rarely straightforward, and on the day before the event, he was still hesitant about his ability to make an appearance. O'Donnell had his doubts.

Then, there he was. The Malaysian partner walked off an airplane wearing a jacket with a

shoulder emblem that O'Donnell did not anticipate: a State Department badge.

The story behind that patch still amazes O'Donnell. The partner tapped into services from the U.S. Information Agency provided through libraries around the world. He borrowed a phone, called a familiar contact at his local U.S. Consulate, and got a visa in a single night.



James O'Donnell poses for a headshot at his university library in Tempe, Arizona.

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That one moment became a turning point not just in the story of the Offline Internet Consortium but in O'Donnell's relationship with it. O'Donnell said, "It began to feel like a chance to hang out with the cool kids," his voice equal parts amused and inspired. The encounter sparked his realization that, "This is a world in which connections can happen," which is exactly what the Offline Internet Consortium is about. He knew then that he would be a lifelong advocate of the organization.

O'Donnell is best known in academic circles for his work on the late Roman Empire and Augustine of Hippo, but what he is doing now looks far into the future rather than the past. Currently serving as a university librarian at Arizona State University, his background covers elite institutions and digital accomplishments. From earning degrees at Princeton University and Yale University to co-founding the second online scholarly journal in the humanities ever created, his career is rooted in knowledge.

Yet, titles and credentials don't drive him. People do – especially the ones most likely to be left out of the systems he has worked to improve. O'Donnell said the consortium is "a real treasure house of very different kinds of people and organizations" and that its partners are so diverse that "it's never going to be a top-down managed organization." That diversity, he said, is what makes the consortium's mission so exciting.

The Offline Internet Consortium, founded in 2018 by O'Donnell and fellow library visionary Ann Okerson, unites a global network of nonprofits working in the offline internet space. These organizations build things like solar-powered digital libraries, learning platforms

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space. These organizations build things like solar-powered digital libraries, learning platforms that do not require Wi-Fi, and USB content distribution hubs that deliver education and information tools to people in prisons, refugee camps, rural villages and underserved schools. Despite what the organization's name suggests, the problem it is trying to solve is not just about being offline – it is about inequity.

“It’s a spectrum of connectivity,” O’Donnell said. “From those of us privileged enough to live on hundreds of megabytes a second of Wi-Fi to those who are at the margins, and sometimes even in principle have something, but in practice don’t.”

O’Donnell drew this analogy: “You would think that the spread of civilization has brought by now reliable electricity and clean drinking water to the whole planet. Well ... not quite, as a matter of fact. There are episodes of progress and episodes of regress.” He said progress is made by “figuring out how to get around the edges,” which is exactly the space where the Offline Internet Consortium nests.

Back in Arizona, O’Donnell continues to think about the man from Malaysia, about the Offline Internet Consortium partner helping girls under Taliban rule in Afghanistan get the education they thought they wouldn’t receive and about the “cool kids” he never imagined he would get the chance to hang out with. O’Donnell said the need for offline internet tools is “always going to be there,” and he intends to unite efforts to address the problem as long as he can.

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