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Hacking the Academy

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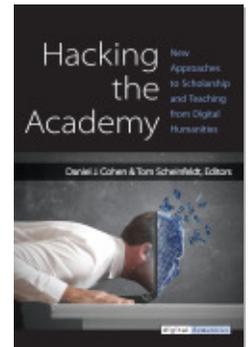
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The Crisis of Audience and the Open-Access Solution

John Unsworth

When my daughter Eleanor, now twenty-one, was about three years old, she had an imaginary friend. One day I asked her friend's name. "Audience," she said. Today, Eleanor has real friends; it's the humanities scholar who has an imaginary audience.

We hear often, these days, of a crisis in scholarly publishing, usually attributed to the rise in the cost of science, technical, and medical serials, the decline in library budgets, and the resulting squeeze on standing orders for university-press monographs. But there is another, more direct, explanation for the difficulty that university presses are having in publishing humanities monographs. The simplest analysis of the "crisis in scholarly publishing" is that it's a problem of audience: nobody's reading these books—not even colleagues in the disciplines, much less students, or the general public.

There are a number of possible readings of this crisis of audience: I'd like to consider them one by one, and consider how open access might make a difference—or not—in each case. I realize that open access is usually discussed in connection with journal literature, and I will return to the question of journals later on, but for now, I'll be looking at monographs—single-author, book-length works of scholarship—in the humanities.

Reading 1. The problem is that humanities scholarship is too full of jargon—it is intentionally obscure.

This is a plausible analysis, on its face, and it's one you will often hear from humanities scholars themselves, when they are speaking of the work of others. Speaking as the editor emeritus of a humanities journal that, in one issue, published "The Feathery Rilke Mustaches and Porky Pig Tattoos on Stomach: High and Low Pressures in Gravity's Rainbow," and "Mais ce

n'est surtout pas vrai': On Some Recent Re-Citings of Jacques Derrida," and "Currency Exchanges: The Postmodern, Vattimo, Et Cetera, Among Other Things (Et Cetera)," I believe there is some basis for the charge of obscurantism.

If this is the whole story, then open access won't make a bit of difference: nobody will be interested, and the material won't be any more accessible, just because the scholarship is available for free. On the other hand, it won't do any harm, because the market for the books is not one that will evaporate if the same content is available for free: individuals aren't buying these books, and a library that collects them does so in order to build a collection, for use in the future as well as the present. The availability of the content online is a present convenience, but its future is, at best, uncertain.

The counterargument to the obscurantism analysis, though, is that it sells both the scholarship and the audience short. Granted, the United States has never been kind to highbrow cultural production, in any era or medium, and while we sometimes lament the low level of mass media, as a nation we definitely—sometimes defiantly—prefer Porky Pig to Rilke. And yet, during the period—about fourteen years ago—when this issue of *Postmodern Culture* came out, the journal—freely available on the web—was receiving upward of a million hits a year, and during that same period, I received this email from a reader:

Dear Mr. Unsworth: I'm a union teamster living in rural Vermont so I don't have a lot of access to the sort of stuff you have in your journal and you provide access to from your Web site. Our local library is swell, computerized too, but a computer search under postmodernism or poststructuralism or Derrida or Baudrillard or Jameson produces zero hits. Thank you.

I'll come back to this point, but for now, I'll just say that the world is full of surprises, and one of them may be that there's an audience for scholarship outside the academy, and if that audience isn't imaginary, then open-access publishing would be the best way to reach them. Of course, adding open-access publishing to print publishing has a cost, so if the print enterprise is already not viable, and the open-access audience doesn't exist, gambling on open access and losing may hasten the slow, but apparently inevitable, decline of the humanities monograph. I'd say there's still nothing to lose: if this mode of scholarly communication is really not viable, it would be better for it to die off and be replaced with

something new than to drag on, on life support, and stifle the potential emergence of new modes and genres of communication—possibly less obscure, more intellectually open-access ones, at that.

Reading 2. Esoteric publishing is just fine—but we don't need publishers to do it.

The notion of an “economics” of esoteric publishing, and indeed the phrase “esoteric publishing,” belongs, so far as I know, to Stevan Harnad, the editor of *Psychology*, and an electronic publisher who has been at it as long as I have. In Stevan's original proposition, called a “Subversive Proposal,” he defined esoteric publishing as nontrade, no-market scientific and scholarly publication—the lion's share of the academic corpus and a body of work for which the author does not and never has expected to sell his words. He wants only to publish them; that is, to reach the eyes and minds of his peers, his fellow esoteric scientists and scholars the world over, so that they can build on one another's contributions in that cumulative, collaborative enterprise called learned inquiry. Stevan's subversive proposal is to argue that since scholars who publish for a specialized audience and have no expectation of being paid for their work can now publish cheaply on the Internet, therefore the publishers who formerly served this type of writer will have to either restructure themselves so as to arrange for the much-reduced electronic-only page costs, to be paid out of advance subsidies—from authors' page charges, learned-society dues, university publication budgets and/or governmental publication subsidies—or they will have to watch as the peer community spawns a brand-new generation of electronic-only publishers who will. The subversion will be complete, because the esoteric, no-market peer-reviewed literature will have taken to the airwaves, where it always belonged, and those airwaves will be free—to the benefit of us all—because their true minimal expenses will be covered the optimal way for the unimpeded flow of esoteric knowledge to all: in advance.

For truly esoteric publishing, Harnad's reasoning still holds. If the audience is very small, give it away: it's cheaper, all the way around. There may still be real costs to this sort of publishing, but—Stevan argues, and I agree—we'd be better off finding them from grants, subventions, or even page charges to authors, rather than playing the losing game of trying to recoup the costs of managing an editorial process on top of the costs of

designing and manufacturing books, in a tiny and static market. In this case, again, open-access publishing makes sense: there are probably not many people who will want to read the stuff, but setting up toll barriers to access will probably cost more to administer than it will bring in, and the scholars themselves are motivated by audience, so even a modest increase in readership, through free access and electronic distribution, increases the author's motivation—perhaps enough to per-page-fees, if that's necessary.

Reading 3. Get a bigger audience.

The third possible response to the crisis of audience is that humanities scholarship needs to get a bigger audience. On that subject, in a talk given at the 2003 annual meeting of the American Council of Learned Societies, I suggested that we could enlarge the audience for humanities scholarship, not by dumbing it down, but by making it more readily available. Maybe if we did that, scholars would find an audience first, and a publisher second, instead of the other way around. Maybe in that world, too, the risk to publishers would decrease, because the demand would already be demonstrated. I am constantly surprised, frankly, at how little faith humanities scholars, and their publishers, have in the audience appeal of humanities scholarship. This lack of faith is attributable in part to self-loathing, in part to lack of respect for the general public, and in part to disappointing sales figures, of course—but the net effect is stifling. If this analysis is correct, open access could make a big difference—but you have to believe that the audience is out there. Now, I recognize that the general public isn't browsing the catalogs of university presses, nor stopping in to their nearest research library—but they are on the web, and they are looking for information on a very wide range of subjects, as my rusticated unionized postmodernist demonstrates. Techniques of predicting taste, such as collaborative filtering, could also expose niche audiences difficult to find in other ways, but still large enough to be significant. If there's even a few hundred of these people out there, in any given subject area, and if they even occasionally want to buy the book version of something they've read online, then perhaps it would make sense to provide open access to everything, and then print, print on demand, or ebook those items that get heavily used. If you're worried about providing too close an equivalent for the print object, then make the content available as HTML, rather than

PDF—experiments at the National Academy Press have made it clear that free HTML does not cannibalize book sales, but actually (and markedly) increases them—and their front-page titles include things like “Damp Indoor Spaces and Health.”

For heaven’s sake: if the NAP can make this go, by providing open access to its content, how do you like the chances of a university press that publishes titles like *Hot Potato: How Washington and New York Gave Birth to Black Basketball and Changed America’s Game Forever* (University of Virginia Press)?

So, if we accept that the crisis in scholarly publishing, in the humanities, is a crisis of audience, and if we accept these three possible responses to that crisis, then I would say open-access publishing is indicated, no matter what. In the first case, it can do no harm, except possibly hastening the demise of a doomed genre; in the second case, it can do a little good, at no added cost; in the third case, it could do a great deal of good, by uncovering new audiences and reconnecting academic humanities with the reading public—and if experience in other apparently esoteric publishing enterprises like the National Academies holds true, it might reverse the fortunes of the university presses at the same time.