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Hacking the Academy

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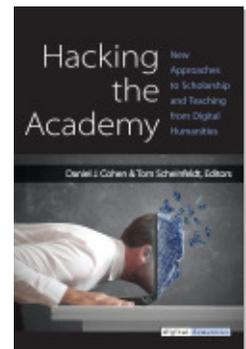
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Open-Access Publishing

Kathleen Fitzpatrick

Raising the idea of open-access publishing among contemporary scholars produces an immediate and sometimes surprising set of responses—ranging from enthusiasm, to anger, to befuddlement. The open-access movement has a wide range of proponents and an often-entrenched opposition, and the depth of feeling on both sides often leaves those scholars in between scratching their heads, wondering exactly what the deal is.

A huge part of the confusion arises from the proliferation of misinformation and mythology around the notion of open access; opponents of open access alternately argue that making all scholarship available for free will destroy the economic model of the publishing industry, making it impossible for anything to get published, and that doing so will simultaneously undermine peer review, turning all scholarship into vanity publishing, allowing anything to get published. Neither of these things is true; open-access publishing does not necessarily mean making everything available free of cost, nor does it necessarily imply the absence of peer-review processes. It doesn't mean that scholars lose control of the copyright of their publications—from a certain perspective, we've long since given that away, but that's a matter for another time—and it doesn't mean that plagiarism will become more prevalent.

The open-access movement in contemporary scholarship began in large part with the sciences, as a response to the predatory practices of certain commercial journal publishers. By the early 1990s, a small number of large commercial publishers had acquired most of the top journals in many fields and had begun developing a range of profit-oriented pricing structures, including bundling together large groups of journals to which libraries are required to subscribe in order to gain access to the key journals that they actually want. Because of these practices, many less affluent institutions in the United States—much less those institutions in developing nations—have become unable to afford to provide access to the most important research being done in the STEM fields (science, technology,

engineering, and mathematics). And, of course, scholars without official ties to a subscribing institution, including independent researchers and un- and under-employed faculty members, are often unable to access that scholarship as well.

Scholars in the humanities should of course be held to the same ethical obligations as those in the sciences; though the products of our research may not always appear to be as crucial to the health and well-being of diverse populations, our work nonetheless has potentially profound implications for popular discussions about the politics of cultural representations, about the meaning of human interactions, and so forth.

We in the humanities often resist opening our work to the broader public, fearing the consequences of such openness—and not without reason. The public at times fails to understand our work, and, because the content of the work seems as though it ought to be comprehensible (you're just writing about books, or movies, or art, after all!), isn't inclined to wrestle with the difficulties that our work presents; their dismissive responses give us the clear sense that the public doesn't take our work as seriously as, say, papers in high-energy physics, which few lay readers would assume the ability to comprehend without some background or training. As a result of this double misunderstanding, we close our work off from the public, arguing that we're only writing for a small group of specialists anyhow. In that case, why would open access matter?

The problem, of course, is that the more we close our work away from the public, and the more we refuse to engage in dialogue with them, the more we undermine that public's willingness to fund our research and our institutions. Closing our work away from the public, and keeping our scholarly conversations private, might protect us from public criticism, but it can't protect us from public apathy—a condition that is, in the current economy, far more dangerous. This is not to say that such openness doesn't bear risks, particularly for scholars working in controversial areas of research, but it is to say that only through open dialogue across the walls of the ivory tower will we have any chance of convincing the broader public, including our governmental funding bodies, of the importance of our work.

Few may know that many journals in the humanities have published in a free and open fashion since the early days of the web; the *Electronic Book Review*, for instance, was founded in 1994, and has been in continuous, open publication since. *Kairos*, likewise, has been in open, online publica-

tion since 1996. Open Humanities Press publishes a range of open-access, peer-reviewed journals online.¹ Journals such as these generally operate on very limited budgets, cobbling together a range of support, including grants from funding bodies and staff/in-kind support from the journal's host institution. But much of the support that such journals rely upon is volunteer labor—unpaid editors and reviewers, volunteer designers and coders, and so forth. This situation isn't all that different from more traditional, publisher-based models of journal production; whether the end result is distributed by commercial or university presses, the support that those entities provide to a journal's editors is generally slim at best. Economist Theodore C. Bergstrom argued this point in his 2001 paper, "Free Labor for Costly Journals?," advocating that scholars refuse to publish in overpriced commercial journals.²

A more radical reason for espousing open-access publishing, however, is to reclaim the value of our labor for the profession itself. It isn't just ethically incumbent on us as scholars to *publish* in open-access venues, but in fact to *create* more open-access publications, and more systems for their support. These systems might include new public or foundation-based granting agency programs specifically designed to support open-access publications. They might include more consortial agreements among universities to create and support open-access publications.³ They might include the development of new tools to assist in the labor that goes into journal production, such as the Public Knowledge Project's open-source project, Open Journal Systems, which helps to create a workflow that reduces a journal editor's reliance on technical personnel and expensive web production.

The key point, though, is that we need to take back our publications from the market-based economy, and to reorient scholarly communication within the gift economy that best enables our work to thrive. We are, after all, already doing the labor for free—the labor of research, the labor of writing, the labor of editing—as a means of contributing to the advancement of the collective knowledge in our fields. We should value our labor sufficiently to ensure that we, our institutions, our colleagues, and our students have full and perpetual access to the results of our work—and promoting the development of open-access publishing venues, and contributing all of our work to them, are the best ways to meet that ethical imperative toward the widest possible distribution of the knowledge that we produce.

Notes

1. "Electronic Book Review," <http://www.electronicbookreview.com/>. "Kairos: A Journal of Rhetoric, Technology, and Pedagogy," <http://kairos.technorhetoric.net/>. "Open Humanities Press," <http://openhumanitiespress.org/>.
2. Theodore Bergstrom, "Free Labor for Costly Journals?," March 20, 2001, <http://www.econ.ucsb.edu/%7Etedb/jep.pdf>.
3. "Compact for OA Publishing Equity," <http://www.oacompact.org/>.