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Hacking the Academy

Cohen, Dan , Scheinfeldt, Joseph T

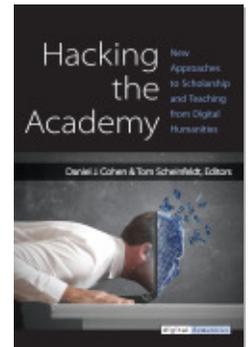
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Open Access and Scholarly Values

A CONVERSATION

Daniel J. Cohen, Stephen Ramsay,
Kathleen Fitzpatrick

Open-Access Publishing and Scholarly Values (Part 1)

—*Daniel J. Cohen*

There is a supply side and a demand side to scholarly communication. The supply side is the creation of scholarly works, including writing, peer review, editing, and the form of publication. The demand side is much more elusive—the mental state of the audience that leads them to “buy” what the supply side has produced. In order for the social contract to work, for engaged reading to happen, and for credit to be given to the author—or editor of a scholarly collection—both sides need to be aligned properly.

How can we increase the supply of open-access scholarship and prod scholars to be more receptive to scholarship that takes place outside of the traditional publishing system? One way is to appeal to four core scholarly values and emotions.

1. Impartiality

In my second year in college I had one of those late-night discussions where half-baked thoughts are exchanged, and everyone tries to impress each other with how smart and hip they are—a sophomoric gabfest, literally and figuratively. The conversation inevitably turned to music. I reeled off the names of bands I thought would get me the most respect. Another, far more mature student then said something that caught everyone off guard, paraphrasing Duke Ellington: “Well, to be honest, I just like *good* music.” We all laughed—and then realized how true that statement was.

And secretly, we all did like a wide variety of music—from rock, to bluegrass, to big-band jazz.

Upon reflection, many of the best things we discover in scholarship—and life—are found in this way: by disregarding popularity and packaging and approaching creative works without prejudice. We wouldn't think much of *Moby-Dick* if Carl Van Doren hadn't looked past decades of mixed reviews to find the genius in Melville's writing. Art historians have similarly unearthed talented artists who did their work outside of the royal academies or art schools. As the unpretentious wine writer Alexis Lichine shrewdly said in the face of fancy labels and appeals to mythical "terroir": "There is no substitute for pulling corks."

Writing is writing and good is good, no matter the venue of publication or what the crowd thinks. Scholars surely understand that on a deep level, yet many persist in valuing venue and medium over the content itself. This is especially true at crucial moments, such as promotion and tenure. Surely we can reorient ourselves to our true core value—to honor creativity and quality—which will still guide us to many traditionally published works, but will also allow us to consider works in some nontraditional venues such as new open-access journals, blogs, articles written and posted on a personal website or institutional repository, or nonnarrative digital projects.

2. Passion

Do you get up in the morning wondering what journal you're going to publish in next, or how you're going to spend your ten-dollar royalty check? No. We wake up with ideas swirling around inside our head about the topic we're currently thinking about, and the act of writing is a way to satisfy our obsession and communicate our ideas to others. Being a scholar is an affliction of which scholarship is a symptom. If you're publishing primarily for careerist reasons and don't deeply care about your subject matter, I recommend you find another career.

The entire commercial apparatus of the existing publishing system takes advantage of our scholarly passion and the writing that passion inevitably creates. The system is far from perfect for maximizing the spread of our ideas, not to mention the economic bind it has put upon our institutions. If you were designing a system of scholarly communication today, in the age of the web, would it look like the one we have today? Disparage bloggers all

you like, but they control their communication platform and the outlet for their passion, and most scholars and academic institutions don't.

3. Shame

In the spring of 2010, ITHAKA—the nonprofit that runs JSTOR and that has a research wing to study the transition of academia into the digital age—put out a report, “Key Insights for Libraries, Publishers, and Societies,” based on a survey of faculty in 2009.¹ The report has two major conclusions. First, scholars are increasingly using online resources like Google Books as a starting point for their research rather than the physical library; that is, they have become comfortable with certain aspects of “going digital.”

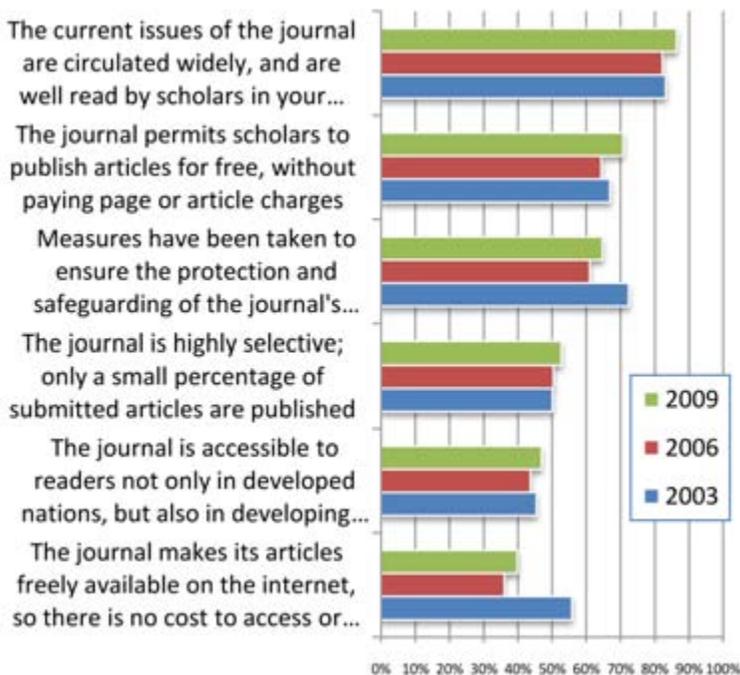


Figure 23 from ITHAKA: “Faculty Survey 2009: Key Strategic Insights for Libraries, Publishers, and Societies.” Roger C. Schonfeld (manager of research) and Ross Housewright (analyst). <http://www.ithaka.org/ithaka-s-r/research/faculty-surveys-2000-2009/faculty-survey-2009>.

At the same time, though, the ITHAKA report notes that they remain stubbornly wedded to their old ways when it comes to using the digital realm for the composition and communication of their research. In other words, somehow it has become acceptable to use digital media and technology for parts of our work, but to resist it in others.

This divide is striking. The professoriate may be more liberal politically than the most latte-filled ZIP code in San Francisco, but we are an extraordinarily conservative bunch when it comes to scholarly communication. Look carefully at figure 23, above, a damning chart from the ITHAKA report.

Any faculty member who looks at this chart should feel ashamed. We professors care less about sharing our work—even with underprivileged nations that cannot afford access to gated resources—than with making sure we impress our colleagues; indeed, there was actually a sharp drop in professors who cared about open access between 2003 and 2009.

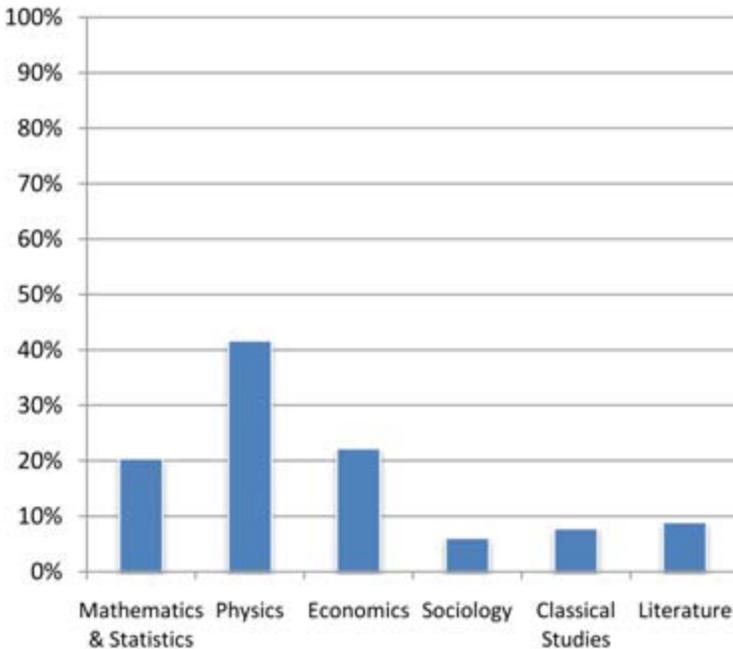


Figure 25 from ITHAKA: “Faculty Survey 2009: Key Strategic Insights for Libraries, Publishers, and Societies.” Roger C. Schonfeld (manager of research) and Ross Housewright (analyst). <http://www.ithaka.org/ithaka-s-r/research/faculty-surveys-2000-2009/faculty-survey-2009>.

This would be acceptable if we understood ourselves to be ruthless, bottom-line-driven careerists. But that's not the caring educators we often pretend to be. Humanities scholars in particular have taken pride in the last few decades in uncovering and championing the voices of those who are less privileged and powerful, but here we are in the ivory tower, still preferring to publish in ways that separate our words from those of the online masses.

We can't even be bothered to share our old finished articles—already published, and our reputation suitably burnished—by putting them in an open institutional repository, as ITHAKA figure 25, above, makes clear.

Is there any other way to read these charts than as shameful hypocrisy?

4. Narcissism

The irony of this situation is that in the long run it very well may be better for the narcissistic professor in search of reputation to publish in open-access venues. When scholars do the cost-benefit analysis about where to publish, they frequently think about the reputation of the journal or press. That's the reason many scholars consider open access venues to be inferior, because they do not (yet) have the same reputation as the traditional closed-access publications.

Yet in their cost-benefit calculus they often forget to factor in the hidden costs of publishing in a closed way. The largest hidden cost is the invisibility of what you publish. When you publish somewhere that is behind gates, or in paper only, you are resigning all that hard work to invisibility in the age of the open web. You may reach a few peers in your field, but you miss out on the broader dissemination of your work, including to potential admirers.

The dirty little secret about open-access publishing is that while you may give up a line in your CV (although not necessarily), your work can be discovered much more easily by other scholars and interested parties, can be fully indexed by search engines, and can be linked to from other websites and social media (rather than leading to the dreaded "Sorry, this is behind a paywall" message).

When mathematician Grigori Perelman solved one of the greatest mathematical problems in history—the Poincaré conjecture—he didn't submit his solution to a traditional journal. He simply posted it to arXiv.org—an open-access website—and let others know about it. For him,

just getting the knowledge out there was enough, and the mathematical community responded in kind by recognizing and applauding his work for what it was. Supply and demand intersected; scholarship was disseminated and credited without fuss over venue, and the results could be accessed by anyone with an Internet connection.

Is it so hard to imagine this as a more simple—and virtuous—model for the future of scholarly communication?

Open-Access Publishing and Scholarly Values (Part 2)

—*Stephen Ramsay*

“Writing is writing and good is good, no matter the venue of publication or what the crowd thinks. Scholars surely understand that on a deep level, yet many persist in valuing venue and medium over the content itself.”

This is true, Dan. But it misses a key underlying reality of academic life: Few of the people who are actually responsible for evaluating your work actually read your books and articles.

That’s probably an astounding revelation for many people who are coming up for tenure or who otherwise haven’t had the opportunity to sit on a merit-review panel, but it’s absolutely true. Your colleagues are not reading your work. Period.

How can this be? How can we make momentous decisions about promotion and tenure and conduct performance reviews that affect people’s salaries without a comprehensive and thorough review of their work?

The answer is simple: publishers do it for us.

That’s really what this is all about. We don’t have time to read everything. But more importantly, we don’t really want to evaluate our departmental colleagues’ work on its “intellectual merits,” because, well, they might in turn do that to us. And really, this could get very emotional, very quickly. And anyway, what qualifies us to judge one another? We’re colleagues, after all.

The solution to everyone’s problem has been to outsource this decision to a third party that gives it a seal of approval while at the same time anonymizing the people who actually read the book or article. That allows us to move the whole problem somewhere else. What’s more, it allows us to make fine distinctions between people that we otherwise wouldn’t want to make ourselves. The University of Chicago Press is better than Ashgate. Oxford is better than Michigan. *Critical Inquiry* is better than *Modern*

Drama. Monographs are better than edited collections. It's just so easy this way.

How does a profession that swings so solidly left hold such absurdly elitist attitudes? This apparent bit of cognitive dissonance is rooted in our mostly postmodern attitudes about value. "Who's to say what's good?" Humanities professors are mostly uncomfortable making judgments about what's good; publishers don't appear to have these deep philosophical problems (or rather, these philosophical issues are overridden by market concerns). There's also our desire to avoid confrontation ("Dude, that's so harsh"). Narcissism, sure. It's also full of contradictions. Why does Oxford University Press get to make truth claims about worth, but we don't? You could say that it's not actually the publishers; it's our "peers" on the anonymous review panels that the publishers hire.

But we pay a devastating price for that bit of bait and switch. First, it means that we have to sell our copyrights to compensate the publishers for their role in coordinating all of this. Since they're trying to stay afloat financially, they have to sell that content back to us—which usually results in highly restrictive forms of dissemination. Open access—which is an ethically superior form of dissemination on its face, and a moral obligation for public institutions—is effectively shut down by our own behavior. Second, it means that any form of scholarship not immediately susceptible to this treatment (e.g., the majority of digital work) can't participate equally in this system. Truth is, no one really has a problem anymore with digital work. It just has to be, you know, about article length. And single authored. And peer reviewed. And disseminated under the banner of a third party. And that's because this isn't about the medium at all. This is about the structures that allow us to make difficult decisions as painlessly as possible. I think most academics regard this as the best we can do.

This is not the best we can do. The idea of recording impact—page hits, links, etc.—is often ridiculed as a popularity contest, but it's not at all clear to me how such a system would be inferior to the one we have. In fact, it would almost certainly be a more honest system—you'll notice that "good publisher" is very often tied to the social class represented by the sponsoring institution. But in the end, the clear moral good of having open access—and the probable dissolution of the university-press system—may mean that we have to read and evaluate each other's work. That may mean that the mechanics of our entire review system has to change. It may actually mean that peer review, in its present form, disappears.

Those of us in the digital humanities have often wondered why our

disciplines are so resistant to electronic publication, and digital projects in general. The standard answer “We don’t know how to evaluate that kind of work,” just doesn’t make sense. Really?

Here’s an idea: How about you look at it and decide whether it’s good or not. But that’s precisely the responsibility that no one wants to have. This is the root of every bit of sanctimonious nonsense you’ve ever heard about digital work not being peer-reviewed. Translation: We don’t have a certifying authority to whom we can offload this.

Honestly, I think our goal as a community should be to present our colleagues with as many inscrutable objects as possible. We should be making lots of videos, podcasts, maps, “books” with a hundred authors, blog posts, software, and websites without any clear authorial control. And yes, we should put open-content licenses on all of it, and give it away to everyone we meet. We avoid efforts to create certifying authorities for digital work, which is simply capitulating to an already-broken system. Instead, we should dare our colleagues to engage our work and tell us that it isn’t of sufficient intellectual quality.

Open-Access Publishing and Scholarly Values (Part 3)

—*Kathleen Fitzpatrick*

“The idea of recording impact—page hits, links, etc.—is often ridiculed as a popularity contest, but it’s not at all clear to me how such a system would be inferior to the one we have. In fact, it would almost certainly be a more honest system—you’ll notice that ‘good publisher’ is very often tied to the social class represented by the sponsoring institution.”

Amen, Steve. At many institutions, the criteria for assessing a scholar’s research for tenure and promotion include some statement about that scholar’s “impact” on the field at a national or international level, and we treat the peer-review process as though it can give us information about such impact. But the fact of an article or a monograph’s having been published by a reputable journal/press that employed the mechanisms of peer review as we currently know it—this can only ever give us binary information, and binary information based on an extraordinarily small sample size. Why should the two to three readers selected by a journal/press, plus that entity’s editor/editorial board, be the arbiter of the authority of scholarly work—particularly in the digital realm, when we have so many more

complex means of assessing the effect of/response to scholarly work via network analysis?

Going quantitative isn't the whole answer to our current problems with assessment in promotion and tenure reviews—our colleagues in the sciences would no doubt present us with all kinds of cautions about relying too exclusively on metrics like citation indexes and impact factor—but given that we in the digital humanities excel at both uncovering the networked relationships among texts, and at interpreting and articulating what those relationships mean, couldn't we bring those skills to bear on creating a more productive form of post-publication review that serves to richly and carefully describe the ongoing impact that a scholar's work is having, regardless of the venue and type of its publication? If so, some of the roadblocks to a broader acceptance of open-access publication might be broken down, or at least rendered breakdown-able.

There seem to me two key imperatives in the implementation of such a system, however, which get at the personnel-review issues that Steve is pointing to—one of them is that senior, tenured scholars have got to lead the way not just in demanding the development and acceptance of such a system, but in making use of it, in committing ourselves to publishing openly because we can; worrying about the authority or the prestige of such publishing models later. Second, we have got to present compelling arguments to our colleagues about why these models must be taken seriously—not just once, but over and over again, making sure that we've got the backs of the more junior scholars who are similarly trying to do this work.

It comes back to scholarly values. But the ethical obligation doesn't stop with publishing in open-access venues. It must extend to working to develop and establish the validity of new means of assessment appropriate to those venues.

Note

1. "ITHAKA: Faculty Survey 2009," <http://www.ithaka.org/ithaka-s-r/research/faculty-surveys-2000-2009/faculty-survey-2009>.