



PROJECT MUSE®

Open Access

Peter Suber

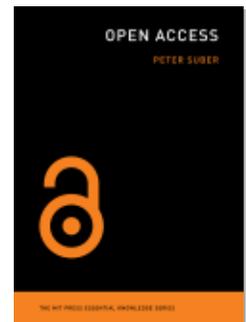
Published by The MIT Press

Suber, Peter.

Open Access.

The MIT Press, 2012.

Project MUSE.muse.jhu.edu/book/46989.



➔ For additional information about this book

<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/46989>

FUTURE

The basic idea of OA is simple.¹ But it has acquired crucial refinements over the years to answer objections and make implementation fast, easy, inexpensive, and lawful. This creates a tension. Because the basic idea is simple, it's continually being rediscovered. However, people fresh to the concept haven't yet absorbed the refinements that answer objections and make implementation fast, easy, inexpensive, and lawful.

Hence, one transition complexity is the fresh convert who supports OA in theory but doesn't understand how to pay for it, how to support peer review, how to avoid copyright infringement, how to avoid violating academic freedom, or how to answer many other long-answered objections and misunderstandings. A kindred complexity is the fresh convert who thinks the whole point is to bypass peer review and convert scholarly communication to

blogging and Wikipedia entries, or who thinks the whole point is to disregard copyright in the name of a higher good.

In short, one obstacle is an ironic side-effect of success. This simple idea is spreading faster than its refined elaboration, and it's recruiting allies who repeat old misunderstandings or overlook the strongest answers to frequently asked questions. Fortunately, the net benefits of persuaded newcomers far outweigh the ironic costs.

Scholars who grew up with the internet are steadily replacing those who grew up without it. Scholars who expect to put everything they write online, who expect to find everything they need online, and who expect unlocked content that they may read, search, link, copy, cut/paste, crawl, print, and redistribute, are replacing those who never expected these boons and got used to them, if at all, looking over their shoulder for the copyright police. Scholars who expect to find the very best literature online, harmlessly cohabiting with crap, are inexorably replacing scholars who, despite themselves perhaps, still associate everything online with crap.

Some lazy scholars believe that if something is not free online, then it's not worth reading. This has never been true. However, it's gradually becoming true, and those who want it to become true can accelerate the process. Those who want to live in a world where all peer-reviewed journal literature is free online are themselves growing in numbers and will soon hold power in universities, libraries, learned

societies, publishers, funding agencies, and governments. Generational change is on the side of OA.²

Even the passage of time without generational change is on the side of OA. Time itself has reduced panic-induced misunderstandings of OA. Everyone is getting used to the ideas that OA literature can be copyrighted, that rights-holders can waive rights and choose open licenses, that OA literature can be peer-reviewed, that the expenses for producing OA literature can be recovered, and that OA and toll-access can coexist even for the same work. Surprisingly many of the early obstacles to OA can be traced to a failure of imagination. Many seasoned academics just couldn't see these possibilities. The problem was not incoherent ideas or stupid people—though both hypotheses circulated widely—but panic, unfamiliarity, and the violation of unquestioned assumptions. For some stakeholders, clear explanations, repetition, or experience with working examples solved the problem. But for others it just took time.³

When newcomers misunderstood OA in the past, sometimes they had been misled by an explicit error published somewhere, perhaps by another newcomer. Most of the time, though, they just made unconscious assumptions based on incomplete information and old models. This is the shock of the new at work. If OA uses the internet, then it must bypass peer review. (Right?) If OA articles can be copied ad lib, then there must be copyright

problems. (Right?) If OA is free of charge for end-users, then its proponents must be claiming that it costs nothing to produce. (Right?) If it has costs, then recovering those costs must be impossible. (Right?) These conclusions, of course, were uninformed leaps. Many who understood the conventional model (priced, printed, peer-reviewed, copyrighted) saw a proposal for something different and didn't know how many parameters of the old paradigm the new proposal wanted to tweak. The very common, hasty, and incorrect surmise: all of them. It was a classic case of seeing black and white before seeing shades of gray.

Suddenly, everything good about the present system had to be defended, as if it were under attack. A lot of energy was wasted defending peer review, when it was never under attack. Much energy was also wasted defending copyright—or celebrating its demise—when it was never under attack. (More precisely, copyright and copyright excesses were under attack from other directions, but OA itself was always compatible with unrevised, unbalanced, unreconstructed copyright.) The debate about OA often drifted toward the larger debate about what was functional and dysfunctional in the present system of scholarly communication. This was valuable, but mixing narrow OA issues with broader ones created false impressions about what OA really was, how compatible it was with good features of the present system, and how easy it was to implement.

As time passes, we see a steady rise in the proportion of correct to incorrect formulations of OA in high-profile discussions. When people encounter a fragmentary version of the idea for the first time today, their guesswork to flesh it out is guided by a much more reliable range of clues than just a few years ago. If they take the time to run an online search, the chance that they'll find reliable information before someone else's guesswork is approaching 100 percent.

It's tempting to focus on the elegance of OA as a solution to serious problems and overlook the need for the sheer passage of time to overcome the shock of the new. Even if we acknowledge the need for cultural change in the transition to OA—far more critical than technological change—it's easy to underestimate the cultural barriers and the time required to work through them. OA may be compatible with copyright, peer review, profit, print, prestige, and preservation. But that doesn't quiet resistance when those facts about it are precisely the ones hidden by confident false assumptions.

Not all resistance to OA is, or was, based on a misunderstanding of the idea itself. But the largest single portion of it was. That portion is in decline, and that decline has many causes, including the hard work of thousands of people in every discipline and country. But a large and unquestionable part of that decline is due to the passage of time and the rise in mere familiarity with a once-new idea.

The first irony of our still-short history is that OA has been impeded by the turbulence of its own success. The changes wrought by the mere passage of time point up a sad second irony. Nobody is surprised when cultural inertia slows the adoption of radical ideas. But cultural inertia slowed the adoption of OA by leading many people to mistake it for a more radical idea than it actually is.