Open Access: From Opening Access to Justifying Business

A Critique

Revised text of a speech given on 11th November 2017, at SYP Conference, Oxford

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The following text is a revised[1] version of the speech I gave on 11th November 2017 in Oxford. I was invited by the Society of Young Publishers to give insights into my work regarding Open Access.

Consider the Perspective Authors

Change takes time. But when a revolution happens, change is usually quickly visible due to its radical nature. What we have with Open Access is not a revolution; though, it was supposed to be one.

I'm researching the role of publishers in today's research communication cycle(s). Thus, I'm looking closely at how Open Access changes research communication and publishers respectively—I'm safe to say, Open Access is a big thing. It happens almost everywhere, and nearly everybody talks about it, at least in journal publishing. But who leads the discussion, and does Open Access reach its promised goal, making scholarly communication more affordable?

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[1] The original speech had more introductory background information on Open Access and focussed on the application of the discussed topic; this written version comprises more theory.

As noble as the idea of Open Access sounds, it's worth to take on a critical perspective and scrutinize the impact and power-struggle around Open Access, especially while considering the perspective of researchers as authors.

More than a few critical voices have risen, who express their concerns regarding Open Access as we currently see it. One of the earliest advocates of the larger Open Access movement, Leslie Chan, stated in an interview this year that Open Access hadn't quite developed in the direction he had hoped. One of his key concerns is that 'the discussion on Open Access has, to some extent, lost a lot of its critical focus on power' (2017). Why is a critical focus on power important?

Monopolistic competition combined with a diverse set of needs and restrictions on two sets of demand and supply (in the end, academic publishing is a two-sided market) led to an accumulation of power of those who provide the key services that enable the smooth running of the scholarly communication cycle: academic publishers. Open Access was an opportunity to break this power, rectify the market failure; instead, what we hear most when people talk about Open Access nowadays is its economic feasibility. Open Access is no longer a community-driven revolution (Schöpfel, 2015; Poynder, 2017; Herb, 2017), but a top down commercial diversification of scholarly communication. This creates new barriers to knowledge and knowledge production, instead of tearing the existing ones down.

Open Access as a Business Approach

Originally, Open Access was imagined to make scholarly literature accessible. Thus, in accordance with the CC-BY licence, scholarly literature was supposed to be free to read, to share, or to re-use for everyone. However, the broadly agreed-upon definition of Open Access is quite vague; it's more of a boundary object with community-specific definitions (Moore, 2017). Today's dominating theme is that Open Access refers to either a new business approach or the justification of this new approach.

From a critical standpoint, the original logic of Open Access—requiring CC-BY—is disputable. Going from harsh Intellectual Property habits to CC-BY can—in a free market—create problems in itself (see for instance Morrison, 2012). However, a more urgent threat is the tendency of today's discussions on Open Access as a business approach which provides a justification for the expansion of the market. It undermines a constructive discussion on revolutionising scholarly communication, and it exacerbates the neoliberal paradigm in knowledge production (Ward, 2014): not only has knowledge been commodified, Open Access has provided a justification for the commodification of publishing as a service.

Open Access in the Research Communication Cycle

One of the problems is that today's approach to Open Access often means just swopping the paywall within the two-sided market. While 20 years ago, the reader had to pay to access literature (or the library as an agent for the reader); nowadays, Open Access typically requires the author to pay (or the funder as an agent for the author). This created an abundance of new requirements for researchers who must adhere to often confusing mandates. Thus, instead of revolutionising scholarly communication from the bottom up, Open Access was built 'on top' of the already existing publishing infrastructure.

This 'on top'-approach made the whole industry assumedly more capital intensive as it created opportunities for monetisation that wasn't there before (only perhaps in terms of upfront contributions to printing costs). Open Access proponents often claim a moral argument on Open Access, saying that more openness provides the author with higher citation rates and more downloads, which is beneficial for research in general. The 'on top'-approach is then justified with the claim that existing journals cannot just be flipped; therefore, new journals need to be established to provide Gold Open Access options, while the existing journals get the hybrid option. Yet, such an 'on top'-approach only provides a potential for the benefits of openness through an added layer of journals, instead of leveraging the benefits for all scholarly communication. That, though, would diminish the power of the IP rights holders and undermine the established business model. Surely, the inertia of research communication wouldn't even want such a radical change, but we'll get to 'publish or perish' later.

Open Access and Piracy

Coherent in the pro-Open Access argumentation is how Open Access proves openness to be valuable. Certainly, everyone who uses the internet has experienced that open content benefits not only the ease and pace of scouring and skimming through content—openness simply allows users to access content which they couldn't afford to access in the first place. So, there are accessibility and affordability. But can we measure the two, especially accessibility? Openness alone can't be a means in itself.

While the citation advantage is proven to be true for some academic disciplines, the usage advantage is hard to measure: what conclusion can we draw from a comparison of downloads of free content with downloads of paywalled content? Most researchers don't act entirely rational: the decision of choosing what to read is complex and often doesn't stop at the abstract. Assumedly, if a resource is free, it gets downloaded more often by nature. If it's behind a paywall, a researcher thinks twice before purchasing it. In addition, what does registered usage even mean in a time when piracy and #ICanHazPDF are creating a de facto openness for readers? Openness surely provides value for readers worldwide, but the little evidence for its effectiveness doesn't quite suffice to put so much more money on top of the existing system. It's rather the other way around that the money that is already in the system should suffice for a general openness.

Slowing Down the Rate of Producing Knowledge

In addition, the moral argument doesn't stand the scrutiny of an integral analysis, especially not in terms of openness as it is mostly argued today:

> "If knowledge is (a) good, then more knowledge can only mean more good. Any agent or structure that obstructs the creation of knowledge – either by slowing down the rate of production, or by making it potentially susceptible to the whims and fancies of editors and reviewers – *cannot be but morally wrong,"* (p.10, Bacevic and Muellerleile, 2017)

Hence follows, if openness were the highest goal, exploiting brand equity by maintaining a high impact journal name through high rejection rates should be abolished. Instead, the argument of openness as a moral requirement is tweaked in a way that it fits the cascading process: this is out of scope for our top journal brand, but our other journals will take you…, or: this doesn't quite fit our programme, but you can self-publish it on our partner platform... Thus, the argumentation of publishers that by offering new Open Access options they were advancing scholarship, they are not particularly coherent. It's true, though, that Open Access serves as a justification for a diversification of the business model.

Numbers Behind a Moral Argument

This diversification is even quantifiable. For instance, after a growth rate of APCs of about 34%, they reached an average of about $1,700 in 2014 for full OA journals, and $2,700 for hybrid journals (Shamash, 2016). Moreover, the APCs for hybrid journals reach up to $5,600 (in comparison to which a BPC average of about $13,000-15,000 doesn't seem quite so high). If the average APC for hybrid journals is combined with the number of articles in hybrid journals published until 2016, about 44,000 (Björk, 2017)—without detailed cash value estimation for the sake of the argument—the 'on top'-approach to Open Access generated about $120 million extra income, for double dipping alone. Certainly, some of the subscription fees were reduced—but only for those institutions whose researchers published in the journal. The institutions who couldn't afford to subscribe to the journal in the past can't do so now either. In addition, if a researcher of such an institution is required to publish OA, she may arguably not be able to publish in the hybrid journal anymore; hybrid is expensive, and funding is still scarce.

Another example where the cost of Open Access gets visible is at Cambridge University. Danny Kingsley, the Head of Scholarly Communication at Cambridge, wrote about the struggle to implement Open Access policies (2016): in addition to the £4.8 million annual expenditure on subscriptions, Cambridge allocated £2.57 million for paying APCs. Add to that the staffing costs to manage infrastructure, implementation, and processing of Open Access articles and repositories. This may be considerably higher at the moment as it is a phase of transition. But will the industry become less expensive in the future if it follows the current development? When and where will those costs be cut? And most of all, is this situation fairer than scholarly communication was 20 years ago? Surely, some percentage of literature is being handled as a public good, but only as far as the established infrastructure allows. And imagine a less prestigious institution as Cambridge—will they have the resources to allocate such a budget for APCs in a situation where they are still struggling to subscribe even to a minimum of closed journals?

An Article as a Representation of Knowledge

Coming back to the public good argument, it's hypothetical that an article equals knowledge. It may be the representation of it, and from the pressure to publish is often derived that out of one analysis or set of data, two or more articles are being squeezed. Furthermore, with Green Open Access, a pre-version of the originally published article is being publishing on a repository (the freemium approach to OA); similar behaviour can be seen with preprints. Arguably, these are all variations of a representation of knowledge, and if a publisher is being paid for the service of refining this representation (and other such services, for instance filtering), why can't Green Open Access simply be the standard for all publications?

Open Access and 'Publish or Perish'

The more knowledge we have the better; but also the more articles we have the better? The underlying theme of 'publish or perish' surely is a problem of another kind. Yet, Open Access and 'publish or perish' may even fuel each other.

Firstly, researchers need to publish, more and more. To do so, the arguments within papers and the scope of journals become more and more niche. And such specialised demand is easy to monetise. In this instance, the career developments of researchers and requirements of funders provide the optimal environment for a free market to grow.

Secondly, the neoliberal approach of commercial publishing thrives on another market need: filtering. Brands provide some sort of filter, however subjective these may be. Thus, the above-mentioned abolition of any pre-publication filter (peer review) to result in a truly open publishing system doesn't make sense for either publishers or researchers. Brands (that is, pre-publication filtering) and added services like search or recommendation systems (post-publication filters) both provide income sources for the publishing industry that increase with either Open Access or 'publish or perish'—the first because in an Open Access publishing landscape individual articles are less visible, and the latter because ever more articles simply require a system that sorts all the content.

Thirdly, researchers need recognition. Scholarly communication does not just happen for the purpose of getting to know what others found out—reading. Arguably more important in many instances is the purpose of writing to obtain recognition. This recognition is not only required for the process of proving to be the originator of a discovery. For that, preprints would suffice as the case of the proof of the Poincaré conjecture by Grigori Perelman (2002, 2003a, 2003b) famously shows. What fuels the 'publish or perish' mentality is that authorship, foremost in high impact journals, is required for funding, career advancement, project allocations, etc. This makes APCs seem so unreasonably high, while they look just sufficient from a neoliberal perspective:

The market needs high impact brands which are based on high rejection rates which are costly which is expressed in high APCs. What seems like a justification for some (free market proponents) is an outrage for others (Marxists/leftists).

Unfortunately, researchers are in a dilemma and by setting the bar high with Open Access mandates, funders are not particularly alleviating the 'publish or perish' problem, but funding its financial exploitation. Quite sadly, some of the well-known radical Open Access proponents are even provoking an Open Access hubris. While, they urge for more openness on the side of researchers, they themselves publish with high impact brands. They might have had the funding to do so, but there are loads of researchers who have not. Should a neoliberal meritocracy decide who takes part in scholarly communication?

The Problem of Predatory Publishing

Furthermore, the problem of predatory publishing directly feeds into the exploitation of uneducated labourers; only that in academic publishing, those labourers are academics in developing countries who are exploited by the standards of and beliefs in established western publishing. With over 420,000 articles published in predatory journals and about 8,000 active predatory journals in 2014 (Shen & Björk, 2015), predatory publishing created a market of about $74 million. Not surprisingly, more than three quarters of these articles were authored in developing countries by researchers who seek access to worldwide (or western) distribution, in exchange for an APC of on average $178. Thus, nearly half a million inferior Open Access articles are flooding the internet, instead of the money being used for better purposes, for instance improved (publishing) education.

Individual Narratives of Doubtful Open Access Successes

Conclusively, Open Access is a complex topic and its current development is not taking advantage of its full potential. Surely, someone must pay. In the end, scholarly communication requires an infrastructure of services. However, the current development won't lead to a promising solution for the existing problems. It only reinforces the problematic power structure in scholarly publishing. Open Access partly solved the accessibility problem by making some literature openly accessible, but it considerably worsened the affordability problem by making scholarly communication in general more expensive.

While at each conference, individual narratives of doubtful Open Access successes are being promoted, the discussion barely focusses constructively on the original problems. May it be hubris of advocacy or entrepreneurial incentives—the system thrives even with an 'on top'-approach. In the end, many of those who couldn't afford to read now can't afford to publish. Open Access as we currently see it only worsens the situation of a few governing a whole industry (Paasi, 2015; Larivière et al., 2015). How can Open Access get back to be a community-driven model to break asymmetric power and the neoliberal paradigm in publishing?

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