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The Politics, Practices and Poetics of Openness
Open Access and I: The story of a long-term relationship

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A note of caution for the reader: This paper is a translated and edited version of an opening lecture, held in 2014 at the annual conference Meeting place Open Access (MOA). The MOA conference is organized by the Swedish National Library and is attended primarily by librarians and, increasingly, also professionals working in supporting roles at research councils and in university administrations.

It is important to know that librarians have been drivers of much of the Open Access movement, which is concerned with the free and open online availability of scholarly literature, from the very start and they are still deeply invested in it. I edited the text to be read and not listened to, but some of the quirks in the text have its roots in it being designed as a lecture.

This is a story of my relationship with Open Access. I am not telling it because I love talking about myself, but because I have been on a journey with Open Access; a journey that I think many librarians and Information Studies scholars can recognize themselves in. We spent a lot of quality time together and what follows is a rough and personal account of some of my experiences with Open Access during that time.

Open Access has grown up. This becomes obvious not only considering the amount of attention that Open Access now receives in different publications, but especially in the matter-of-fact way
in which research funders today require Open Access—that is, free online availability—to the research they fund and its almost unquestioned acceptance as a publishing strategy also by traditional publishing houses. “Growing up” also means that Open Access has become multifaceted and complicated. But it also means that Open Access is now mature enough to deal with some loving resistance. Not least, for the librarians’ and the libraries’ sake, I think, an articulation of a reflective critique is necessary. What is needed is a criticism of Open Access that is not out to discredit; a critique that takes Open Access seriously and wishes it well.

When I started my education in Information Science in England in the early 2000s, Open Access had just been given its proper name. It had been around for some time, but now it had finally received a name with which to position it: Open Access. The little word “open” established links to all sorts of open movements that existed and that provided glimmers of hope in an internet that was being commercialized all around.

Into this came Open Access: free scientific information, non-commercial—or so I thought—on the internet; a little activist of a concept and an expression of resistance. This was something that those of my colleagues who specialized in public libraries got for free, as it was incorporated into the very mission of public libraries: fostering democratic values and facilitating access to knowledge and information. Open Access filled this void for research libraries. It was needed. It was aimed—or so it was framed—against the big, commercial, profit-driven publishers, who waste taxpayers’ money, who harm libraries, which in turn harms free speech and also scientific progress and development.

I fell in love immediately.

What happened was this: I wrote my master’s thesis about Open Access. And not just that, I wanted to excel even more and added the developing world into the mix, as if Open Access needed some additional back-up to justify why it was good and what was so good about it. I really wanted to make sure that my research, my job, would be of use. I had a hellish (long and very hot) summer with Open Access, involving bibliometric investigations and contact with libraries all over the world in places that, according to the World Bank, are considered poor and with all kinds of organizers of programs enabling access to the scientific literature around the world. To cut a long story short, it was a bit confused. I was confused by the power of the issue and this was reflected in my approach. Still, it turned out good enough. And when I was finished with the master’s thesis, I was still quite in love. Or actually,

I was ready for a relationship.

Above all, when I was done, I felt that this was a topic that I really wanted to continue with. I was sold. I was determined to remain in this area. I was lucky and a year later I started working
on my doctoral dissertation. I had received funding to continue research on just that: Open
Access and development. In the beginning, everything seemed clear to me. But then I began to
dig and explore and I got to know more. In a way, I had moved in with Open Access and I also
started to question my own trust in Open Access.

To start doing research meant two things. First, it meant doing research about a subject; second,
it meant becoming part of a community and adapting a certain practice. Both, in my case, had
very much to do with scholarly communication and thus with science and research and what they
are supposed to be. Quite early on in this process, it became apparent to me that science and
research—as these concepts were described in the literature on Open Access—were not at all
what I saw and experienced in my work as a researcher; it was an entirely different breed of
activity. The arts and humanities, although mentioned, were either curiously shapeless or
carelessly included into a broad understanding of science in how Open Access was framed in the
early days. Altogether the notion of science seemed streamlined and simplified.

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**Open Access has to do with** scholarly communication and publishing. Through this, it is
intimately connected with science and academic research, however broadly or narrowly
understood these may be. There exist different views of what science is and should be. How it is
done and why, how it developed, who should be doing it and under which conditions, who
should pay, what should be the topics of research, and, what is the role of the arts and humanities
and the social sciences in all this? There are different views on how the history of science should
be written, but, above all, the main question is what kind of knowledge is produced and what is
the status of this knowledge.

Bernd Frohmann (2004) distinguishes between two discourses related to scholarly
communication: an epistemic discourse and a practice discourse. The *epistemic discourse*
focuses on the content of research in research publications. Here research publications are seen
as instruments for disseminating research results. The *practice discourse* concerns what you do
and how you do it. In this view scholarly communication is part of a system of merit, which
communicates status and belonging. Both discourses are part of academic research and both are
intimately connected with scholarly publications and specifically communication.

It can be said that libraries are traditionally situated in an epistemic discourse. Although, this is
currently being challenged by the fact that libraries today also employ bibliometricians, whose
job it is to make metrics-based assessment of research publications, typically without considering
a text’s epistemic content. Scientists or researchers are acting to a large degree within a practice
discourse. In between, we find journals, repositories, publishers, and even funding agencies or
universities. As is often the case, what is perhaps most interesting and also most difficult is the
in-between position.

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**One’s view of science**, however narrow or broad, is central for how one relates to scholarly
publishing and communication, and thus to Open Access and its role and significance.
Very roughly, in one view, science is considered to be linear and evolutionary, where development progresses and knowledge improves and gets more accurate all the time. This is often captured in Isaac Newton’s famous saying, “If I have seen further, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants.” Not least since it became the motto of Google Scholar, Google’s search engine for scholarly papers, this saying sets the tone for a popular understanding of the role of scholarly literature.

In another view, science emerges as a field that is socially structured and where different practices, ways of doing things, and different views of knowledge oscillate back and forth and are blended with other interests that may be important in how we consider what is worth knowing in the first place. Predictably, I find the latter version more interesting and not least more rewarding to engage with.

Such an understanding brings with it that we accept that there are many who do science; that science and research is not only done by scientists and researchers. There is a number of other actors who also create science, its significance and meaning. These are, not least, librarians, students, professionals, school teachers, funders, science journalists, university administrations, politicians, bibliometricians and evaluation units. This list could be continued for a very long time. Where you stand in relation to this messy area called science is crucial for what shape it takes.

To a large extent, Frohman’s framing of scholarly communication along two discourses—the epistemic and the practice discourse—is tied to how we talk about science (and, in a way, also other forms of producing academic knowledge). We have already established that science is malleable and multiple. Different subjects with different traditions and epistemic cultures, as sociologist of science Karin Knorr Cetina (1999) calls it, meet and this has implications. Yet it is also different for different groups and individuals, not only for different research subjects or disciplines. ‘Multiple’ means here not just that it is the same entity seen from different angles, but that there are literally different sciences, although they are of course mutually dependent. The librarian who deals with documents, and who addresses researchers as users of an institution, deals with an entirely different science than does the professor in biomedicine who is in charge of large research funds or the lecturer in media and communication studies. For the science journalist, science is not the same as for an undergraduate student; not to talk about representatives of industry or research funders, teachers or university administrations.

Science is so many different things to so many different groups and it is constantly being re-imagined and invested with different interests. Yet still, and this is what is strange, there exists an idealized view of a unified, universal science where results and knowledge can be encapsulated in publications, which also can be measured, counted and distributed. This idealized view narrows down science and scientific or scholarly communication in a way that makes it difficult to believe in it.

**The Open Access movement** has often subscribed to this idealized view of science; one science, for the entire world, which produces truth and where progress happens through communication.
in scientific publications, where the results are published and then built upon. This way, progress is indefinite. Admittedly this is a bit simplified, but it can be seen in the Open Access movement’s central documents. For instance, in the now often-quoted Berlin Declaration of 2003, one of the most important founding documents of Open Access, it reads as follows:

“We define open access as a comprehensive source of human knowledge and cultural heritage that has been approved by the scientific community.” (Berlin 2003)

This is an all-encompassing understanding of what science is and what Open Access should do. Open Access turns into an umbrella concept that somehow equates science, knowledge and cultural heritage. Something else stands out in this and other similar descriptions, namely a faith in technology as a driving force to solve problems, to advance science and diffuse it to all. Somewhat polemically formulated, the view encapsulated seems to be that if only scientific knowledge reaches everyone, all will be good.

I would like you to compare these following three paragraphs. The first two are from influential Open Access declarations from the early 2000s, the third is from a speech held by U.S. President Truman in 1949.

(1) “For the first time ever, the internet now offers the chance to constitute a global and interactive representation of human knowledge, including cultural heritage and the guarantee of worldwide access.” (Berlin 2003) (2) “An old tradition and a new technology have converged to make possible an unprecedented public good. The old tradition is the willingness of scientists and scholars to publish the fruits of their research in scholarly journals without payment, for the sake of inquiry and knowledge. The new technology is the internet. […] Removing access barriers to this literature will accelerate research, enrich education, share the learning of the rich with the poor and the poor with the rich, make this literature as useful as it can be, and lay the foundation for uniting humanity in a common intellectual conversation and quest for knowledge.” (Budapest 2002)

This sounds worth aspiring to, but it also sounds very familiar:

(3) “[…] we must embark on a bold new program for making the benefits of our scientific advances and industrial progress available for the improvement and growth of underdeveloped areas. More than half the people of the world are living in conditions approaching misery. […] Their poverty is a handicap and a threat bothering to them and to more prosperous areas. For the first time in history, humanity possesses the knowledge and skill to relieve the suffering of these people.” (Truman 1949)

It is the same spirit that is found in these statements. The same belief in progress and development, and in science’s and technology’s role in it. There are over fifty years between these statements. And very similar statements can be heard today. The story goes like this: A new technology will expand the reach of science—either to the countries and communities outside what is called the West, or to groups and individuals outside what is the center of science; loosely framed, the general public and the civil society. And this will lead to more just
societies. Open Access is part of a tradition, a long line of similar technological solutions. A hope is evoked, which—and this is important—is never fulfilled.

To understand the various stages of this continuity—because there are many forms, many varieties and many different actors involved—how it is articulated and the role Open Access is given in this, is what I ended up describing in my PhD thesis. What I suggest, roughly summarized, is that Open Access continues an established tradition of talking about progress, science and technology. It is part of a well-established discourse where hope for a better future is continuously evoked but which in order to work pushes everything in a future that is never reached. My research found its home in theories that had emerged from postdevelopment and postcolonial studies. In particular, an adaptation of the Deleuzian concept “Desiring Machine” (de Vries 2007) helped me catch Open Access as part of this hope for development, this desire that must be had, but which can never be fulfilled in order to be productive. I had, in the end, managed to capture something relevant.

My trust in Open Access had been harmed during the writing of the thesis, I can admit that much. Open Access was not a rebel, not an activist—it sounded like everyone else. The view of science, knowledge, the internet and publishing, and development was old-fashioned; it was more or less identical to those views advanced by the World Bank, IMF, or other major mainstream players who see economic growth and to become more like “us in the West” as the main progress humanity can make.

This is when we started to live in separate houses.

Since I had managed to focus on the productiveness of the desires created and delayed, and thus could also emphasize the hope which was still at work in the Open Access movement, my fundamental respect for Open Access remained intact and we managed to maintain a pretty relaxed long-distance relationship for a few years. We could not really live together or raise a family, but neither did we want to separate for good.

During that time, Open Access grew in importance. More and more people began to talk of it and express opinions about it. Quite often I experienced that these were based on a pretty loose understanding of what it is all about, how research is done, what author processing fees are, how scientific communication looks in various disciplines, the role of copyright, and not least the relation between Open Access and peer-review and quality control. Quite often one is confronted with a fear of Open Access because it appears to challenge something people are used to. Many librarians have great experience in addressing these fears and concerns and often they are successful. For my part, when I had to meet such fears of Open Access, I could simply say: No worries, deep down, so far, most of Open Access is “science as usual” and nothing to be afraid of even if you like the status quo.
Over the past five to six years, Open Access has really become successful. All of a sudden there were emails coming from university administrations announcing that they were adopting one of the various Open Access policies; admittedly often quite perplexing or contradictory ones, but still these were important steps. Research funders everywhere introduced requirements for Open Access, and so on. Then came the influential Finch Report (Finch 2012) in Britain and the entire UK decided to move to (the ‘author pays’ model of) Open Access. Now it had become mainstream for real. Yet it also meant that traditional publishers began to see it as their own agenda, and commercial interests began to shine through all the more clearly in how Open Access was framed. Open Access moved away from being seen as the agenda solely of researchers and librarians and came closer to the administration, evaluation, and traditional publishers.

For many researchers, Open Access had now turned into a part of the administrative system that one is forced to relate to. It became something else to deal with, yet another system you have to relate to and one more instrument for evaluating, measuring and increasing productivity and efficiency. Open Access became another requirement to consider when you are done with all your other administrative duties, which are a large part of many researchers’ daily life; a life that for many today is synonymous with writing research grant applications, getting together a competitive résumé and acting as a research entrepreneur drawing in external funding and managing it effectively.

In this association of Open Access with yet another administrative burden lays a danger that libraries must take seriously. Moreover, the way in which an idealized notion of a linear science provided much of the blueprint for how the role of scholarly communication is inscribed into the concept of Open Access has to do—I suggest—with some of the difficulties encountered by the arts and humanities, as some dominant Open Access options do not gel well with humanities traditions of publishing and communicating. More specifically, questions concerning monographs, local languages, and author processing charges are issues with entirely different implications for the humanities than for the medical sciences or the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) disciplines. Yet, in recent years, the arts and humanities have begun to claim and reshape Open Access and many innovative publishing projects and cooperative approaches have emerged.

For my part, I also began to see that while Open Access had grown in significance, it had finally also become more diverse. Now there were no well-defined black and white roles anymore; for example, publishers on one side and Open Access on the other, or progressive researchers on one side and conservative universities on the other. Now things had become blurry. Open Access belonged to everyone and no one was “right”. There were many Open Access. The criticism addressed against the so-called Finch Report and of the way in which it had been interpreted in the United Kingdom was often well-articulated. This criticism was also successful in putting Open Access in a larger context of how science is done and what it means, not least in relation to society’s increasing dependence on digital networks.
Personally, my interest in Open Access was sparked again in late 2013. The news section of the well-known *Science Magazine* published an article called “Who is Afraid of Peer Review?”, a piece of investigative journalism written by science journalist John Bohannon (2013). He had sent a paper with a number of significant and easy-to-spot flaws to hundreds of Open Access journals in biomedicine and more than half had accepted it. Just as Open Access had gained traction, along came *Science Magazine*, part of the Science family, one of the epitomes of excellence in research, and insisted—or so it seemed—that Open Access was not to be trusted after all. A claim that was made on quite shaky grounds, as many highlighted.

A debate ensued and what happened was so interesting that I decided to engage with Open Access again. My colleague Fredrik Åström and I started to study the reactions that Bohannon’s article attracted, mostly in the blogosphere but also in legacy media. And what we saw was very interesting: Clearly, many of the reactions were critical of Bohannon’s method and quite rightly point out that he did not compare with non–Open Access journals or even with Open Access journals without author processing fees. Yet, what was really interesting is that in addition to defending the Open Access principle, a lot of emphasis was put on discussing the conditions for doing science and research and the mechanisms used for quality control. Central questions that emerged were: How is trust in science built? How do today’s conditions for research and for succeeding as a researcher in a system which demands constant acceleration, evaluation and competition shape how we actually do science and how we control the quality of it? What we could see were stories about a system in distress (Haider & Åström, in press). An “acceleration of research”, as the Budapest Open Access Initiative had suggested Open Access should lead to, did not emerge as the solution.

Still, Open Access comes in as an opening, as an opportunity to discuss conditions for research, for scholarly communication, and of review mechanisms and what they actually evaluate. Open Access can act as an opportunity for asking questions, and through this, perhaps, be an opportunity for change.

Open Access has grown up. Simple positioning for or against Open Access is not what is needed. And this can be frustrating. Sometimes Open Access at any price might not be the best solution. Sometimes Open Access hinders research rather than promotes it by being part of the administrative everyday life and the systems of constant evaluation. Yet, it is a great opportunity that involves many critically thinking people.

Frankly, from a personal relationship point of view, it is intellectually much more rewarding to converse with a complex adult with different sides to its personality than with a two-year-old. Now that Open Data has joined the debate, this conversation promises to be even more rewarding.

I think that Open Access and I will stick together for a little longer.
About the author

Jutta Haider is an Associate Professor in Information Studies at the Department of Arts and Cultural Sciences, Lund University, Sweden. Her research interests concern digital cultures’ emerging conditions for production, use and distribution of knowledge and information. This includes research on various knowledge institutions, including encyclopedias, search engines, academic libraries and the scholarly communication system.

References


