

Praising Progress, Preserving Precision

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One sign of OA momentum is that more and more publishers are jumping on the bandwagon. Some are launching OA journals. Some are converting subscription-based journals to OA. Some are offering OA content in subscription-based journals. Some are widening access short of OA. And some are using the now-popular name of “open access” regardless of how well or badly it describes their access policies.

Can we welcome every initiative to widen access without abandoning our goal of fully open access and without diluting the definition of “open access”? I hope so. These goals are perfectly compatible. However, they are sometimes seen as incompatible and that holds us back. I regret that some initiatives to widen access dilute our useful term, and I regret that some attempts to resist dilution and pursue full OA criticize useful progress.

What definition?

More than ever before I'm hearing the complaint that the term “open access” doesn't have a firm, common definition. This is not true, but it could become true if dilution and misuse of the term continue.

The three major public definitions of “open access” are contained in the Budapest, Bethesda, and Berlin public statements. Even though these three definitions differ from one another in small ways (which I explored in SOAN for 8/4/03), they agree on the essentials. Let me refer to them collectively, or to their common ground, as the Budapest-Bethesda-Berlin or BBB definition of open access.

Nearly all OA proponents agree on the BBB definition. When I defend the concept of open access against dilution, I'm defending the communal consensus embodied in

the BBB definition, not my own private preferences. The three contributing public statements have unparalleled stature and influence within the OA movement. Only outsiders and newcomers might mistake this. And that, I believe, is part of the problem. Our growing success means that our message in one form or another, clear or garbled, is reaching new people who almost certainly do not know the BBB definition or its centrality for our work.

The best-known part of the BBB definition is that OA content must be free of charge for all users with an internet connection. However, the BBB definition doesn't stop at free online access. It adds an extra dimension that isn't as easy to describe, and consequently is often dropped or obscured. This extra dimension gives users permission for all legitimate scholarly uses. It removes what I've called permission barriers, as opposed to price barriers. The Budapest statement puts the extra dimension this way:

By "open access" to this literature, we mean its free availability on the public Internet, permitting any users to read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to the full texts of these articles, crawl them for indexing, pass them as data to software, or use them for any other lawful purpose, without financial, legal, or technical barriers other than those inseparable from gaining access to the Internet itself. The only constraint on reproduction and distribution, and the only role for copyright in this domain, should be to give authors control over the integrity of their work and the right to be properly acknowledged and cited.

The Bethesda and Berlin statements put it this way: For a work to be OA, the copyright holder must consent in advance to let users "copy, use, distribute, transmit and display the work publicly and to make and distribute derivative works, in any digital medium for any responsible purpose, subject to proper attribution of authorship."

All three tributaries of the mainstream BBB definition agree that OA removes both price and permission barriers. Free online access isn't enough. "Fair use" ("fair dealing" in the UK) isn't enough.

Note that the three component statements of the BBB definition do not agree on exactly which permission barriers must be removed. There's room for variety here. BBB requires removing barriers to copying and redistribution. It doesn't require removing barriers to commercial re-use; authors can go either way on this. Two of the three BBB component definitions require removing barriers to derivative works.

One danger is the dilution of our term. That's why I'm reminding us of the BBB definition and its place in our history. But another danger is the false sharpening of our term. If we thought that the BBB definition settled matters that it doesn't settle, then we could prematurely close avenues of useful exploration, needlessly shrink the big tent of OA, and divisively instigate quarreling about who is providing "true OA" and who isn't.

The BBB definition functions as a usefully firm definition of "open access" even if it leaves room for variation. We should agree that OA removes some permission barriers

(e.g., on copying, redistribution, and printing) even if it leaves different OA providers free to adopt different policies on others (e.g., on derivative works and commercial re-use). My personal preference, for example, is to permit derivative works and commercial re-use. But (as I wrote in FOSN for 1/30/02) I want to make this preference genial, or compatible with the opposite preference, so that we can recruit and retain authors on both sides of this question.

Praising progress

One reason to praise forward steps is that they really do constitute progress, whether or not they reach full OA. If we had to choose between calling them “open access” and criticizing them, that would be a hard choice. But we face no such choice. Let’s do both: praise the widening of access and stick to the BBB definition of the term “open access.”

There’s no contradiction here and no implication that the progress we are praising is all that could be desired. We praise students for improving without implying that they’ve improved enough. We praise good moves in politics, sports, and science without implying that further progress is unnecessary or impossible. We can speak clearly. If we want to say that widening access is good and open access is better, we can say that.

Time to get specific. [...] [Here omitting six examples.]

You get the idea. In evaluating new access policies, we needn’t confuse the widening of access with open access. And we needn’t confuse policies that stop short of open access with policies that make no progress. We can praise progress and criticize dilution of our term at the same time. We can praise policies for some progressive elements and criticize them for some regressive elements. If we take the trouble to do these things, then we preserve clarity about our standard, avoid undermining our useful term, and head off quarrels about what counts as open access.

I once wrote to a journal to make this kind of two-sided point, praising it for its steps toward widening access and protesting its use of the term “open access” as a synonym for “free” or “no-fee” access. In defense the editor replied, “I’m afraid that the term ‘open access’ has so many meanings it has almost no meaning anymore.” Of course, if this were really true, then the journal would never want to use the term to describe its new policy. However, the editor’s pessimistic assessment can become true by a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy. If enough journals use the term loosely, then the term will become loose.

Let’s avoid the self-fulfilling prophecy. “Open access” still means something. We encourage journals to misuse the term if we’re only willing to praise the ones that use the term. Let’s use the term according to the BBB definition and encourage others to do so as well. But then let’s praise access policies that make progress, even if they fall short of the BBB definition.

Educating newcomers, a burden of success

I was at a conference recently where someone seriously contended that “open access” has never been adequately defined, and as evidence cited a professional association that was having trouble defining it.

As a teacher, I was reminded of the many times that I watched students struggling to define a term or concept without consulting the book where it was clearly presented. The difference is that the students know or should know that the concept is well-defined in the book. But the professional association, and the person I heard at the conference, may have no idea that “open access” has a written definition in public documents that reflect, inspire, and shape the open-access movement. We shouldn’t blame those who think that “open access” has never been adequately defined; we should blame ourselves for not making the definition better known.

One lesson is that success is not enough if it encourages newcomers and bystanders who, through compound interest on initial misunderstanding, make our clear term fuzzy. Too many newcomers are trying to define “open access” contextually from contemporary discussion. Some by good luck start from informed discussions, but some by bad luck start from uninformed discussions.

It gets worse. Not only is there ignorance and misunderstanding about what “open access” means. This very ignorance and misunderstanding are taken as evidence that the term is only loosely defined. The self-fulfilling prophecy about the term’s loose meaning is being fulfilled as we watch.

Not all the news is bad, of course. True understanding is growing alongside this ignorance and misunderstanding. New OA journals and OA archives prove it. A very large number of journal articles and newspaper stories prove it. The US and UK open-access proposals prove it.

The problem is that the meme of OA is spreading faster than accurate information about OA. Too many messages that introduce OA to newcomers, and recruit new allies and critics, define the term loosely or incorrectly. Very few point to the BBB definition.

The term “open source” has the same history of careful definition threatened by loose usage. For that matter, so do “evolution,” “self-defense” and “Christmas.” We’re not unique and we’re not doomed. We just have to appreciate that our term is not self-explanatory and that dilution causes and justifies further dilution.

I wrote my Open Access Overview (first posted June 21, 2004) precisely because our successes were bringing in newcomers who couldn’t put their hands on a brief, accurate introduction. They could easily find lists of links or essay-length analyses that didn’t start at the beginning, but not a primer that defined the basic concept and its major issues.

<http://www.earlham.edu/~peters/fos/overview.htm>

Let me close with two appeals:

- (1) To friends of OA: Praise progress wherever you see it. If it doesn't amount to OA, then don't call it OA, but don't let that stop you from recognizing it as progress. Unless you speak unclearly, no one will mistake your praise for the claim that full OA is not possible or not desirable.
- (2) To publishers experimenting with wider access: Keep up the good work, but please don't use the term "open access" for policies that don't meet the BBB definition. If you mislabel a policy as OA, then please don't mistake criticism of the label for criticism of the policy.

The BBB definition of "open access"

Budapest Open Access Initiative (February 14, 2002)

<http://www.soros.org/openaccess/>

Bethesda Statement on Open Access Publishing (June 20, 2003)

<http://www.earlham.edu/~peters/fos/bethesda.htm>

Berlin Declaration on Open Access to Knowledge in the Sciences and Humanities, (October 22, 2003)

<http://www.zim.mpg.de/openaccess-berlin/berlindeclaration.html>

How should we define "open access"? From SOAN for 8/4/03

<http://www.earlham.edu/~peters/fos/newsletter/08-04-03.htm>

Thoughts on commercial use of FOS. From FOSN for 1/30/02

<http://www.earlham.edu/~peters/fos/newsletter/01-30-02.htm>

Postscript

We're clearly entering an era of wider and easier access to research literature. This includes full OA in the BBB sense, but it also includes lots of kindred forms of access for which we don't have names. On the one hand, the absence of names will lead many people to call these kindred forms "open access," diluting our term. On the other hand, concocting a family of new names may be at least as confusing and harmful. The names would have to discriminate among fine and constantly changing variations on the theme. We could quarrel about which was the right name for a given policy, especially as the discriminations became finer and finer. Policy innovations could always develop faster than our vocabulary and there could always be more policy variations than names. We would feel pressure to invent ever new names to prevent the dilution of

older ones. And as the access vocabulary grew, journals with evolving access policies would have to rename them every quarter.

I don't like that scenario and am certainly not advocating distinct terms for every distinct access policy. There are several alternatives to this ugly scenario. We can use descriptive phrases ("free after six months," "postprint archiving but only in institutional repositories") without trying to compress them into names. We can use a small number of terms (green, gold, OA, delayed OA, partial OA, free access) without trying to name every shade or wrinkle. When definitions differ, and the differences matter, we could use discriminating adjectives ("Budapest OA," "Valparaiso OA," "IFLA OA").

I only mention these alternatives to show that they exist. [...] I don't delude myself into thinking that I could direct the evolution of language. I only want to argue that our central term has a usefully firm definition codified in public documents, that we should appeal to that definition in resisting attempts to stretch or dilute the term, and that we can do this without advocating a host of coinages to describe every different flavor of access.

The many kindred forms of access

<http://www.earlham.edu/~peters/fos/lists.htm#incomplete>

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By: Peter Suber

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