

Foreword

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Venture into this book, and you will be swept up in a conversation about one of the most important and least understood aspects of the digital era: access to knowledge online. You could not choose a better interlocutor. Peter Suber is the leading advocate for open access—that is, the collective effort to overcome barriers that needlessly restrict the availability of digital resources. He was the principal author of the first manifesto of the open-access movement, the Budapest Declaration of 2002. In 2003 he left a tenured position as a professor of philosophy at Earlham College in order to devote himself full time to the cause. And he has published an online newsletter about OA issues since 2001. This book brings together the most important pieces of that running argument, which covers a crucial decade in the development of the internet.

It is no ordinary book. Do not expect a chronological narrative or a logical sequence of propositions. Instead, settle back for a good chat. Suber picks up ideas wherever he finds them, inspects them from different angles, and takes them apart, exposing their fault lines and explaining their strengths. He invites you to join him in the discussion. He addresses you in a straightforward manner, without a hint of professorial *Besserwisserei*. He appeals to your reason, tickles your funny bone on occasion, and always, at least implicitly, asks for your commitment to a common cause: the democratization of access to knowledge. For we are all in this together, Suber says. The Internet belongs to us. It is a public good, and as members of the public, we should debate all the issues that it has brought before us.

Most of us have never given them adequate thought. What, for example, is the extent, in scope and usage, of the dark, fenced-off sectors of the Internet in relation to the open expanses of the World Wide Web? Do OA editions of monographs undercut or stimulate the sale of print editions? Which journals get more hits, the closed (those requiring passwords and payments) or the open (OA and free of charge)? Are processing (or “author’s”) fees more common on the closed or the open journals? Which grows faster, the size of the web or the reach of search engines? Why is it more effective to

take out a Creative Commons license for a text than simply to post it on a web site and make it freely available?

Some of these questions do not have adequate answers, but all of them deserve pondering. Suber takes you through them step by step and helps you enjoy their richness, thanks to his talent for treating complexity with clarity. Far from deprecating arguments opposed to his own, he dispatches them with respect, coolly and convincingly. You, the reader, remain at his side; and when you take leave of him at the end of the book, you feel that you have adventured into fertile, unmapped territory.

For make no mistake about it: the resolution of these questions will determine a large part of the digital future. By posing them in all their complexity, Suber cuts to the core of policy decisions. It is easy, in principle, to be in favor of free access to digitized resources, but digitization is expensive. How to resolve a case of public-domain works that a private enterprise proposes to digitize free of charge but with an exclusive right to exploit them commercially for a certain time? And what should that time limit be—one, five, or twenty years? What right, if any, does the public have to consult works that are covered by copyright but have been digitized with the use of public funds. And how should that consultation take place—one digital copy at a time to readers in a public library? Multiple copies restricted to designated locations? With or without the capacity to download and print out further copies?

Library directors, university administrators, and government officials must puzzle through problems like these every day. Suber provides guidance but few firm answers, because he takes full account of the complicating factors in the real world of learning—information overload, the escalation of journal prices, the growing importance of tools and apps, and the need for sustainability. Far from dismissing the commercial pressures on publishers of closed-access journals, he shows how self-interest and canny calculations can lead to a reversal (“flipping”) of their business model. And to help the reader grasp the line of reasoning, he pursues useful analogies: open access is a public good, which can be made equally available to everyone after funding at the production end, like roads or radio broadcasts. Processing fees can be compared to the development of postage stamps, which replaced the standard, c.o.d. method of paying for letters in the 1840s: the sender instead of the receiver carried the cost, and the new system brought down prices while scaling up the service. But every analogy has its drawbacks, which Suber also discusses, intent on reaching the most rational conclusion, not on scoring points against his opponents. He does not conceal the identities of the opposition—publishers like Elsevier, lobbyists like the agents of the Association of American Publishers, and political allies of the lobbyists such as Congressman John Conyers. But he treats them respectfully, reserving his rare sardonic remarks for “the demented world of scholarship,” where prestige tends to trump quality in dealings with academic journals.

Suber's scorn expresses repugnance at the irrationality of professors who fail to recognize their own self-interest. While indulging their vanity at being published in prestigious journals, they remain complicit in a system that exploits them and damages their universities; for they provide free labor—the research, writing, refereeing, and editing of articles—to publishers who charge exorbitant prices for access to their work. Not that the professors dig into their own pockets to pay for the journal subscriptions. They leave that to the university libraries. In fact, they often do not know who pays the bill, because they consult the journals online from their laboratories or studies without setting foot in a library.

In general, however, the tone of Suber's arguments remains cool and rational. He speaks with the voice of a philosopher. He weighs the pros and cons of every issue and reaches convincing conclusions. Along the way, he also provides plenty to ponder on the legal and technical side of the arguments, for he has acquired an extraordinary command of the esoteric aspects of the Internet. With the help of Suber, you can detect copyfraud, distinguish between "gratis" and "libre" OA (not to mention the more common "green" and "gold" varieties), appreciate the advantages of FRPAA and the drawbacks of the "Ingelfinger Rule," the "Eigenfactor," and even the element of "ullage."

All of these considerations feed into the best informed and most effectively crafted case for open access that is currently available. But do not mistake Suber's arguments for disinterested ratiocination. They have a sharp, polemical edge. Suber slices into the counterarguments in order to clear a way for a cause: open knowledge for everyone, not merely the cultural elite and corporate insiders. He accepts the legitimacy of copyright and the importance of sustainable business plans. But he provides an arsenal of arguments for anyone who wants to democratize the world of learning within the surrounding world of economic and legal realities.

The democratic thrust of Suber's arguments deserves emphasis, because they sometimes seem to be directed at fellow academics. When he says "you," he often means collaborators in the OA movement, who need to adjust their strategy and modify their polemics according to contingencies. A tone of preaching to the converted seeps into some of the essays, because they were originally written as installments in a newsletter aimed primarily at OA sympathizers. Suber did not rewrite them in order to make them more palatable to a general public. Yet they deserve to be read by the unconverted, for they cover the whole gamut of OA-related issues, and they show how those issues arose, helter-skelter, over the past ten years. Although they are loosely grouped by subject matter, they do not link up in logical succession, and they need not be read one after the other in linear fashion. In fact, the table of contents can be used like a menu on a web site, permitting readers to jump around according to their shifting interests. They should make allowances for the original form of the essays, which resemble blogs more than chapters in a book.

Paradoxically, the blog-like quality of the essays makes them especially interesting, for they offer a running commentary on the digital scene while the scenery was changing. That they are now collected in a book after a previous existence on the web is testimony to the staying power of the printed codex—not as a substitute for communication online but as a supplement to it. The digital and the analog do not occupy opposite extremes along a technological spectrum. They intersect and overlap in ways that we are only beginning to understand. To enlarge your understanding, begin with Peter Suber. He will not have the last word, but his book provides the best possible portal for anyone who wants to navigate through the issues posed by open access.