

25 Not All Networks: Toward Open, Sustainable Research Communities

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The May 2016 purchase of the Social Science Research Network (SSRN) by the Anglo-Dutch publishing megacompany Elsevier created a firestorm among researchers and others interested in open-access scholarly communication, who worried about what would become of the network and its data—and not without reason. The acquisition of such a well-established research-sharing network by a major commercial publisher not only presented the possibility that the company would seek to close down access to the network's store of research papers or that it would mine them for other forms of saleable data, but also, alongside their prior acquisition of Mendeley, seemed to indicate that Elsevier sought to vertically integrate the entirety of the research workflow (an indication intensified by the patent the company recently obtained for an online peer review process).¹ The publisher, unsurprisingly, argued that such integration would bring benefits to authors, enabling them to move fluidly from research to drafting to journal submission, but many researchers expressed concern about what such all-encompassing lock-in might do to their community, and not least to the values that the community espoused.² This concern was borne out two months later, when SSRN users began reporting that shared materials perceived not to be in compliance with a newly imposed copyright transfer policy were being removed.³ The Authors Alliance responded by asking whether it might be time for authors to leave SSRN, and other groups, including the Association of Research Libraries, picked up the charge.⁴

This is only one among many recent calls imploring researchers to abandon the apparently free and open networks on which they have come to rely. Earlier in 2016, the Twitter hashtag #DeleteAcademiaEdu urged scholars to close down their accounts on the popular scholarly social network

in response to the network's suggestion that it might charge scholars for recommendations, a move that felt to many uncomfortably like a type of academic payola.⁵ In each of these cases, many researchers were prompted to seek alternatives to their accustomed community spaces when the specter of monetization appeared, revealing a discomfort with the intrusion of commercial enterprises into academic workflows. As Paolo Mangiafico has pointed out, however, this focus on the role that capitalism should or shouldn't play in scholarly communication runs the risk of obscuring a larger, more important point: that companies providing the platforms supporting these research communities did not share the researchers' values, and that it might be a fruitful moment for scholars to consider switching over to services provided by organizations whose interests more closely mapped to their own.⁶

Mangiafico pointed toward institutional repositories and other services provided by academic libraries as key examples, but even there value-alignment remains a potentially slippery matter. That slipperiness became all too clear in August 2017, when Elsevier purchased bepress, a company that contracted with many academic libraries to provide institutional repository and open-access publishing services.⁷ Though bepress had been founded by academics eighteen years earlier, and though it continues to describe its mission as serving academia, the company's amenability to being acquired by a mega-corporation that many hold responsible for the dire state of library budgets sent shockwaves through the sector.⁸ These concerns resulted later in the year in a concerted effort by many libraries to seek or develop bepress alternatives, including a session at the December membership meeting of the Coalition for Networked Information entitled "beprexit: Rethinking Repository Services in a Changing Scholarly Communication Landscape."⁹ Academic institutions are thus similarly being called upon to consider the importance of value alignment with their vendors; only through such value alignment can scholars and their institutions become reasonably confident that the platforms supporting their research communities will develop and evolve appropriately with them.

All of this is to say that these crises of conscience that have visited online research communities have at long last highlighted for the scholarly communication landscape a situation that's been visible in other sectors of social media for a while: when it comes to networks, openness is a virtue, but other determinants matter as much or more. Put another way: there is

open, and then there is open, and while the difference may seem semantic, it is anything but. SSRN and Academia.edu have long been open, in the sense that any interested user can create a free account, connect with other users, share work, and so forth; bepress's products remain open, in the sense that they support libraries in openly disseminating the scholarship produced on their campuses. None of these services are open, however, in the deeper sense of providing user understanding of and input into their business and sustainability models; none are focused on interoperability with other systems in the research infrastructure or in sharing research data with other entities, except as it might provide a source of revenue; none are in any sufficient sense in dialogue with or connected to the research community. SSRN and Academia.edu may permit any scholar to contribute their work to the platform, and bepress may help libraries create spaces for open sharing of scholarly work, but scholars and libraries in the end have precious little control over the platforms on which they rely.

Boiling the SSRN/Academia.edu situation down to “if you’re not paying, you’re the product being sold” gets at something important for scholars to consider—a crucial caveat emptor about the business models we inadvertently support and their potential ramifications for our research workflows—but it’s nonetheless a vast oversimplification. There have long been more possible models available for research services than user-pays or user-gets-datamined-and/or-sold-to-advertisers. Perhaps most significant among them is the collective funding model provided by membership organizations such as learned and professional societies. These societies, since the Royal Society of London, have been founded for the express purpose of fostering and facilitating communication amongst their members, and between those members and the broader intellectual world.¹⁰ Early in their histories, that communication took the form of letters circulated to the membership and meetings at which member work was presented and discussed. Over time, these practices formalized into the journals and conferences with which we are familiar today. While different societies have maintained different membership policies and requirements, and thus are not “open” in the sense espoused by many web-based social platforms—in which anyone can participate without cost—they are ideally open in our other sense: governed by their members, as collectives working in the interest of their members.

While I strongly believe that the latter sense of openness is far more important than the former, the challenge presented by the current moment

both in internet-based scholarly communication and in the increasingly precarious academic economic environment is nonetheless finding a way to support and sustain both kinds of openness. How can we create research communities online that invite everyone to participate, that are transparent about their governance and community-oriented in their values, and that remain both technologically and fiscally sustainable?

This is, I would argue, one of the places in which the progress that scholarly communication has made toward open access has gotten tangled up in priorities that do not reflect the actual goals of the scholarly community. The Budapest Open Access Initiative defined its goals in a frequently cited statement:

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.¹¹

This is an expansive definition, and a profoundly idealistic one, and yet one that presents a couple of problems: first, it made it possible for many to read “free availability on the public internet” and go no further; the real impact of open access’s openness lies further down in the definition, in the ways that the products of scholarly research can be built upon and reused, and yet that goal winds up a bit easy to overlook. The second issue follows from this, and represents a problem at the very heart of much of what has happened since: by focusing our attention on “access,” and in particular on the elimination of “financial, legal, or technical barriers” to the consumption of the products of scholarly research, we wind up restricting ourselves to affecting the ability of end users to see the stuff we create. It’s crucial that such consumer access be made as open and seamless as possible, but in focusing on that end of things we don’t address concerns about what we’re creating, or how we’re creating it. And this is how we end up with an increasingly pervasive system of ostensibly open-access publishing that relies on the simple substitution of article-processing charges—which is to say, author-side fees—for the revenue previously produced through sales and subscriptions. Nothing about the system itself changes—and in fact, the existing formats,

venues, and publishers further entrench themselves as the only viable, trustworthy options. The sole substantive shift that this model of “open” brings about is that the inequities move from the consumer side of the equation to the producer side, raising the possibility that only researchers in grant-rich fields, or at institutions with substantial research support, will be able to afford to disseminate the work they produce.

If our goals are not just to make the work being produced by well-funded researchers, in well-supported fields, or at well-heeled institutions, openly available on the internet, but rather to facilitate open communication among all researchers, within all fields, across all institutions, in ways that promote not just the free consumption of the work that’s already being done but that support and facilitate the production of more new kinds of exciting work, from more areas of the research environment, than ever before—if we genuinely espouse these more expansive goals, then what we need is not just ways to make existing publications available without charge, but instead an entirely new, open, community-oriented, sustainable research infrastructure. What we need is a model of collective, cooperative, sustainable support for open platforms; an architecture that makes those platforms’ data not just available but interoperable, shareable, reusable; and an ethic that makes commitment to those platforms and the organizations that provide them an important element of professional belonging.

These are the goals that the Modern Language Association had in mind as the organization set about building *Humanities Commons*, a developing network that is sponsored by a group of scholarly societies but that is both open to participation from any researcher or practitioner who wants to create a profile and share work with the community, and mission-driven, committed to the needs and interests of that community. *Humanities Commons* is our effort, first and foremost, to leverage the collectives represented by scholarly societies on behalf of the common good.¹²

The MLA launched a social network called *MLA Commons* in 2013 to provide its more than 25,000 members worldwide with a platform for communication and collaboration, both to extend year-round the kinds of conversations that take place at the organization’s annual meetings and to provide means for members to share their scholarly work with one another.¹³ *MLA Commons* supports a wide range of member interactions, including public and private group discussions, web-based publishing, collaborative document authoring, and more. Members can create CV-like

profiles linking to their work on the *Commons* and across the web. And they can deposit their work—preprints, datasets, presentations, syllabi, you name it—to *CORE*, the repository integrated into the *Commons*, and share that work with the *Commons* groups to which they belong.¹⁴ *MLA Commons* helped foster new kinds of online scholarly interaction amongst MLA members, but it quickly became apparent that those members, who work in increasingly interdisciplinary ways, want a space for active collaboration that allows for connections across fields.

In order to create those interdisciplinary linkages, the *MLA Commons* team first undertook a planning process and then, in December 2016, launched a pilot project designed to connect multiple scholarly societies.¹⁵ So while *Humanities Commons* invites any interested researcher or practitioner in the humanities to create a free account, regardless of their institutional affiliation, employment status, society memberships, or any other determining factor, members of participating societies receive additional access to those societies' resources and the ability to take part in those societies' conversations. Faculty members in Slavic literature, who are members of both the MLA and ASEES, can create accounts on *Humanities Commons* that give access to *MLA Commons* and *ASEES Commons*. Their profiles on the network appear on all three sites, and the academic interests they list there connect them to others across the network with those same interests. They can deposit work in *CORE* and share it with the groups to which they belong; that work is linked from their profile, and they can track the impact that it has within the field by aggregating information about how the work is downloaded, cited, and used. They can start an individual blog, or participate in a group blog, or contribute to an experimental publication housed anywhere within the sites to which they have access.

Crucially, however, it's not just tenure-track researchers, or researchers whose societies are already part of the network, who benefit from *Humanities Commons*. Graduate students in history, for instance, can create accounts on *Humanities Commons*, despite the fact that their scholarly society isn't yet participating in the federation. They won't be able to participate in discussions on the sites where they are not members, but they can deposit and share work with the larger *Humanities Commons* community. And our hope is that their active participation, and the active participation of their colleagues, will draw their scholarly societies to join the federation—to come where their members already are, draw them into more active participation

in society business, and support the open interdisciplinary work their members want to do.

Reaching full sustainability for *Humanities Commons*, which we hope to accomplish within five years, will require the support of many scholarly organizations and institutions, as the network must gradually shift from grant-based support to a funding model based largely on annual fees paid into a common fund by participating groups. Based on the experiences of projects like *arXiv*, we expect that we'll need to be prepared to do some fundraising as well, in order not just to support the existing infrastructure but also the ongoing development, maintenance, technical support, and member facilitation that the network will require. But fundraising on its own cannot create the community buy-in that a network like *Humanities Commons* requires. For that, the community itself must feel ownership of the network, and so we are developing a governance model that will grant both participating organizations and individual members a voice in setting the network's future directions.

That is perhaps the most crucial aspect of the openness of *Humanities Commons*: not just that anyone can create an account, free of charge, and not just that the broader public can access the material shared there, but that the network is and will remain not-for-profit, that it will be sustained and governed by scholars themselves. We hope that the network's members will encourage their professional organizations to participate, and then support those organizations that do this work on their behalf. In this way, we are drawing on the strengths that membership organizations have long possessed: their mission and their values align in their focus on and support from their members. In building *Humanities Commons*, we are not just building a new infrastructure for the open distribution of new kinds of scholarly work, nor just developing a new platform for new kinds of research communities, but helping to foster a new intellectual economy, a collectivist network that scholars both support and lead. It is that alignment between economics and values that will ensure that the open research communities we develop today remain open and vibrant tomorrow.

Notes

1. See Mike Masnick, "Disappointing: Elsevier Buys Open Access Academic Pre-Publisher SSRN," *Techdirt*, May 17, 2016, <https://www.techdirt.com/articles/20160517/13513134465/disappointing-elsevier-buys-open-access-academic-pre-publisher-ssrn>

.html; Chris Kelty, "It's the Data, Stupid: What Elsevier's Purchase of SSRN Also Means," *Savage Minds* (blog), May 18, 2016, <https://sageminds.org/2016/05/18/its-the-data-stupid-what-elseviers-purchase-of-ssrn-also-means/>; Cameron Neylon, "Canaries in the Elsevier Mine: What to Watch for at SSRN," *Science in the Open* (blog), June 7, 2016, <http://cameronneylon.net/blog/canaries-in-the-elsevier-mine-what-to-watch-for-at-ssrn/>; see also Goldie Blumenstyk, "Elsevier's New Patent for Online Peer Review Throws a Scare Into Open-Source Advocates," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, September 1, 2016, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Elsevier-s-New-Patent-for/237656>.

2. Gregg Gordon, "SSRN—the Leading Social Science and Humanities Repository and Online Community—Joins Elsevier," Elsevier Connect, May 17, 2016, <https://www.elsevier.com/connect/ssrn-the-leading-social-science-and-humanities-repository-and-online-community-joins-elsevier>.

3. Howard Wasserman, "SSRN Postings and Copyright," *PrawfsBlawg* (blog), July 15, 2016, <https://prawfsblawg.blogs.com/prawfsblawg/2016/07/ssrn-postings-and-copyright.html>.

4. Authors Alliance, "Is It Time for Authors to Leave SSRN?," *Authors Alliance* (blog), July 17, 2016, <https://www.authorsalliance.org/2016/07/17/is-it-time-for-authors-to-leave-ssrn/>; Krista Cox, "Moving from SSRN to SocArXiv," ARL Policy Notes, July 22, 2016, <http://policynotes.arl.org/?p=1403>.

5. See <https://twitter.com/hashtag/DeleteAcademiaEdu>, but also Corinne Ruff, "Scholars Criticize Academia.Edu Proposal to Charge Authors for Recommendations," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 29, 2016, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Scholars-Criticize/235102>.

6. Paolo Mangiafico, "Should You #DeleteAcademiaEdu?," *Scholarly Communications @ Duke* (blog), January 29, 2016, <https://blogs.library.duke.edu/scholcomm/2016/01/29/should-you-deleteacademiaedu/>.

7. Elsevier, "Elsevier Acquires Bepress, a Leading Service Provider Used by Academic Institutions to Showcase Their Research," Elsevier, August 2, 2017, <https://www.elsevier.com/about/press-releases/corporate/elsevier-acquires-bepress-a-leading-service-provider-used-by-academic-institutions-to-showcase-their-research>.

8. On the bepress mission, see bepress, "About," *Bepress* (blog), accessed May 23, 2019, <https://www.bepress.com/about/>; on library responses, see Lindsay McKenzie, "Elsevier Makes Move into Institutional Repositories with Acquisition of Bepress," *Inside Higher Ed*, August 3, 2017, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/08/03/elsevier-makes-move-institutional-repositories-acquisition-bepress>; as well as Roger C. Schonfeld, "Reflections on 'Elsevier Acquires Bepress,'" *Ithaka S+R* (blog), August 7, 2017, <https://sr.ithaka.org/blog/reflections-on-elsevier-acquires-bepress/>.

9. See Coalition for Networked Information, "CNI Fall 2017 Membership Meeting Schedule," CNI: Coalition for Networked Information, August 30, 2017, <https://www>

.cni.org/events/membership-meetings/past-meetings/fall-2017/schedule-f17; see also “Operation Beprexit,” Operation beprexit, accessed May 23, 2019, <https://beprexit.wordpress.com/>.

10. On the history of the Royal Society and its role in scholarly communication, see Aileen Fyfe’s chapter in this volume.

11. Leslie Chan et al., “Budapest Open Access Initiative,” February 14, 2002, <http://www.soros.org/openaccess/read.shtml>.

12. A note on the use of “our” here, and the second-person plural in what follows: I was director of scholarly communication at the MLA during the planning and launch of *MLA Commons* and *Humanities Commons*, and though I am no longer employed by the organization, I remain project director of *Humanities Commons*. “We” and “us” should thus be understood to refer to the *Commons* team rather than to the MLA.

13. *MLA Commons* was developed with support from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and is built on the CUNY Graduate Center’s open-source Commons In A Box platform.

14. *CORE* was developed with support from the National Endowment for the Humanities and in partnership with the Center for Digital Research and Scholarship at the Columbia University libraries. *CORE* is a Fedora/Solr repository for which we developed a WordPress-based front end for deposit, markup, discovery, and sharing. *CORE* thus brings together a library-quality repository (adhering to commonly accepted metadata standards, employing digital object identifiers, and so on) with a social network, with the result that work is not simply put into the repository and forgotten, but actively shared and used. In the next phase of development, we will focus on making *CORE* interoperable with institutional repositories and other key research services.

15. Both the planning and the pilot stages of this project have been generously supported by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. Our partners in this project are the Association for Jewish Studies; the Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies; and the College Art Association.

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