

This PDF includes a chapter from the following book:

Reassembling Scholarly Communications

Histories, Infrastructures, and Global Politics of Open Access

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Conclusion

Martin Paul Eve and Jonathan Gray

Open access does not exist in technological isolation from the political and social contexts in which it was conceived and under which it is being implemented. Across the spans of colonial legacies and globalization, knowledge frameworks, ideas of publics and audience, notions of archives and (digital) preservation, infrastructures and platforms, and communities, the contributors to this volume have demonstrated that there are complex political, philosophical, and pragmatic implications for opening research work and other forms through digital technologies. Hence, while those seeking to implement the ever-growing number of funder- and institution-driven OA mandates hope for easily transmissible messaging of communicable truths, the reality—in both theory and practice—is very different.

A good example of this can be seen in Stuart Lawson's chapter. This is because a traditional rationale for the transformation of academic libraries in the twenty-first century has been to argue that open access is aligned with the long-standing goal of libraries to provide information to anyone who desires it. Clearly, such an argument has persuasive rhetorical force. However, if one pierces the historical veneer, as does Lawson, then this argument falters somewhat. For the idealized prehistory of libraries to which we often gesture turns out to be less than solid. Conversely, though, as Aileen Fyfe has demonstrated, anyone who argues that learned society publishing has always been a source of revenue for such entities and that this sits at odds with broader public dissemination have a different challenge now to answer. Many truths about open access are more inconvenient than we might like.

Furthermore, while arguments for open access have often been premised, in the Global North, on equitable worldwide access to research, this conversation has too often been unidirectional. As Packer and others have

demonstrated, the Global South is (or developing countries are¹) rich with long-standing and successful open-access initiatives from which the Global North consistently refuses to learn. Instead, openness is mischaracterized as a silver bullet for all the ills and iniquities of the unequal global academic publishing landscape. Until we dismantle the prestige-economy scaffold on which the edifice of academic publishing is hung, the North-to-South export of elite open access and its associated cost-concentrating business models will continue to have dire consequences, as Thomas Hervé Mboa Nkoudou has ably demonstrated.

It is also clear that the underlying digital infrastructures on which open access is based come with both opportunities and threats to conventional notions of scholarship. Radical experiments in format (Robin de Mourat, Donato Ricci, and Bruno Latour's chapter as well as that by Pamela H. Smith, Tianna Helena Uchacz, Naomi Rosenkranz, and Claire Conklin Sabel) lead to changes in the underlying assumptions around, for instance, digital preservation (Dorothea Salo and April Hathcock), as just one example. Of course, as Salo points out, the difficulties are not primarily technological; they are economic. However, the imbalances of scarcity introduced twofold by the digitization of scholarship and the mass expansion of higher education and concomitant research output create socioeconomic problems. These are introduced, partially, by digital technologies, infrastructures, and platforms, as Penny Andrews and Jonathan Gray, in particular, point out.

These changes to the economics of research production extend well beyond publishers. As the last section of this book demonstrated—in the work of Eileen A. Joy, Jane Winters, and Kathleen Fitzpatrick, among others—the interconnectedness of learned societies with publishing practices (and revenue streams) poses fundamental questions about the way our disciplinary communities construct themselves. There is a cascading “domino effect” from changes to the (political) economics of research publishing that some would deem catastrophic, while others see it as an opportunity to rethink our practices.

Of course, there is also scope to rethink publishing practices based on the successful initiatives that have paved the way. Be that in SciELO (Abel Packer), in linked open data (Arianna Becerril-García and Eduardo Aguado-López), from organizational structures such as CLACSO (Dominique Babini), and from text-mining initiatives (Martin Paul Eve), there is far too much of a tendency—perhaps particularly among those in the Global North—to

reinvent the wheel when it comes to the design of fresh infrastructures. Even as we know that there is nothing new under the sun, a greater culture of adaptation and dialogue might de-duplicate efforts and foster greater international communication in the dissemination of research work. There are often commensurately old(er) technologies to go alongside our university traditions than might be believed.

Ultimately, though, in a world of shifting certainties for scholarly communications, the drive toward open access looks set only to continue. As we write, we are, for instance, on the cusp of the implementation of the major, if contentious, pan-global open-access initiative, “Plan S.” However, critics have railed that such a declaration, coming from within Europe, has insufficiently contextualized its own creation and implementation, say in the light of South American initiatives.² In other words, understandings drawn from a diverse set of geographic locations and histories are *important* for policymakers, for publishers, for academics, and for funders. Without such understandings, we become trapped in repetitive loops, reinventing wheels, and lacking that most fundamental of activities for scholarly communication: communication itself. The chapters in this volume indicate how scholarly communication is both a substantive object of study, deserving of critical reflection and exploration from a wide variety of disciplinary perspectives, as well as an important area of intervention and experimentation to shape that which in turn shapes who and what we are, what we do, what is recognized and valued, and who is involved. Thereby we might make space to challenge, to recompose, and to participate in how research and inquiry unfolds and is given life in the world.

Notes

1. As ever, please see the terminological note at the start of this book. The SciELO project does not favor the term “Global South,” and we have had to negotiate such language with care.
2. Humberto Debat and Dominique Babini, “Plan S: Take Latin America’s Long Experience on Board,” *Nature* 573 (2019): 495, <https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-019-02857-1>.

