

Open Access and the Humanities

Contexts, Controversies and the Future



Martin Paul Eve

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If you work in a university, you are almost certain to have heard the term ‘open access’ in the past couple of years. You may also have heard either that it is the utopian answer to all the problems of research dissemination or perhaps that it marks the beginning of an apocalyptic new era of ‘pay-to-say’ publishing. In this book, Martin Paul Eve sets out the histories, contexts and controversies for open access, specifically in the humanities. Broaching practical elements alongside economic histories, open licensing, monographs and funder policies, this book is a must-read for both those new to ideas about open-access scholarly communications and those with an already keen interest in the latest developments for the humanities. This title is available as open access via Cambridge Books Online.

MARTIN PAUL EVE is a lecturer in English at the University of Lincoln and is the author of *Pynchon and Philosophy* (2014) and editor of the open-access journal of Pynchon scholarship, *Orbit*. Eve is well known for his work on open access, which includes appearing as an expert witness before the UK House of Commons Select Committee BIS Inquiry into Open Access, being a steering-group member of the OAPEN-UK project and a member of the HEFCE Open Access Monographs Expert Reference Panel, and founding the *Open Library of Humanities*.

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For Helen

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To begin with such a practical self-criticism would make a
real difference in the way we do our work.

Jerome McGann, 'Information Technology and the Troubled Humanities', p. 110

Preface

Open access benefits the sciences and humanities about equally, but has been growing faster in the sciences. That may seem odd until we realise that benefits aren't the only factors affecting growth. Sunlight benefits all plants about equally, but some plants live in dry climates, some at high altitudes, some in rocky soil.

Open access (OA) helps readers find, retrieve, read and use the research they need. At the same time, it helps authors enlarge their audience and amplify their impact. Those are the main benefits. But these benefits lead to others. If OA helps readers and authors of research, then it helps advance research itself and all the benefits that depend on research. In the case of the sciences, that can mean new medicines and useful technologies, and in the case of the humanities it can mean enriched education, politics, compassion, imagination and understanding.

One of the most compelling arguments for legislated OA policies is that governments should assure public access to the results of publicly funded research. This argument is widely effective because it aims to accelerate the research we've already decided to fund with public money, increase the return on the public's large investment in research, and improve fairness to taxpayers. There's no downside for the public interest, only an incomplete upside. There is more public funding for scientific research than for humanities research. Far more. Call this a dry climate for the humanities.

Journals in the humanities have higher rejection rates than journals in the sciences. This is not because they are more rigorous, but because they cover wider topics and receive correspondingly more submissions per published paper. In any case, their higher rejection rates affect their ability to charge fees to cover the costs of production. (Charging

these fees is the best-known but not the most common business model for OA journals.) If someone on the author side of the transaction, such as the author's employer or funder, pays an article processing charge, then no one needs to pay on the reader side, and the work may become OA. But the fee for an article must cover the costs of vetting all the articles rejected for every one accepted. Hence, fee-based OA journals with high rejection rates must charge higher fees than other journals. The fee-based model works best in well-funded fields with relatively low rejection rates, and worst in fields like the humanities. This is a dry climate combined with the difficulty of transplanting a misty-climate crop to a dry climate.

Journal articles tend to be primary literature in the sciences and secondary literature in the humanities. In the sciences, books tend to synthesise research published in articles, while in the humanities articles tend to report on the history and interpretation of books. Tenure in the sciences depends more on published articles than on books, while tenure in the humanities depends more on published books than on articles. This would just be an observation about disciplinary differences if it weren't for the inconvenient fact that OA for books is objectively harder than OA for articles. The production costs of a book are significantly higher than the production costs of an article. Hence, it's significantly harder to find the business models or subsidies to pay for OA books than those to pay for OA journals. To top it off, academic monographs can pay royalties, in theory, even if they seldom do so in practice. By contrast, scholarly articles never pay royalties, which is the main reason why the worldwide OA movement has focused on articles. Hence, author consent for OA is easier to win for articles than for books.

Despite these obstacles, OA for books is feasible and growing, thanks to many innovative start-ups including the Open Library of Humanities, founded by Martin Eve and Caroline Edwards. However, even progress for OA books doesn't change the fact that scholars in the humanities have reasons to publish in genres where OA is more difficult, like farmers with reasons to plant higher up the mountainside.

I'll add one more difference between the disciplines and then stop. Certain myths and misunderstandings about OA are more tenacious and widespread in the humanities than in the sciences. This adds

needless obstacles to the growth of OA. For example, by percentages more humanists than scientists believe that publishing in a high-prestige non-OA journal rules out making the same work OA through an online repository, that even well-implemented OA risks copyright infringement, that most OA journals charge author-side fees, that most fees at fee-based OA journals are paid by authors out of pocket, that most non-profit society publishers fear and shun OA, and that most OA publishers are lax with quality control.

I'd like to think that these myths and misunderstandings are more common in the humanities merely because humanists have had less time than scientists to catch up with the relatively recent advent of OA. But that's not true. They've had exactly as much time. Nor is the explanation that humanists are more careless readers of contracts, policies, statutes, or studies of OA itself. I suspect the true explanation is that humanists have had fewer working examples of OA to prove the concept and prove that the sky does not fall. They've had fewer working examples to dispel misunderstandings, generate enthusiasm and inspire commitment. If so, then the humanities labour within a vicious circle in which the slower growth of OA causes a slower growth of good understanding, and vice versa. By contrast the sciences enjoy a virtuous circle in which the faster growth of OA causes a faster growth of good understanding, and vice versa. This is rocky soil for the humanities.

But the same explanation contains a ground for hope. There was a time when the growth of OA in the sciences was also slow, and kept slow by a vicious circle. In fewer than twenty years, however – long in internet time, short in the history of scholarship – the vicious circle in the sciences became a virtuous circle. This reversal is not logically impossible. It requires steady growth in working examples, to feed understanding, and steady growth in understanding, to feed working examples.

The good news is that we see this growth today in the humanities. Martin Eve is among the leaders in making this happen. He's a leader in providing working examples, and a leader in correcting myths and misunderstandings, without underestimating genuine difficulties, through his articles, blog posts, public speaking and now through this book.

PETER SUBER

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Some portions of the writing here have appeared before in other forms, either on my personal website or elsewhere. Most notably, the meditations on peer review in [Chapter 5](#) appeared in a significantly altered form, yet clearly enough for the genesis to be seen, as 'Before the Law: Open Access, Quality Control and the Future of Peer Review', in *Debating Open Access*, edited by Nigel Vincent and Chris Wickham (London: British Academy), pp. 68–81. Some

of the remarks on collective/collaborative funding initiatives appeared within my 'All That Glisters: Investigating Collective Funding Mechanisms for Gold Open Access in Humanities Disciplines', *Journal of Librarianship and Scholarly Communication*, 2, 3 (2014).

Finally, I would like to thank my wife, Helen Eve, for her spark, patience and love and without whom I almost certainly would not have become an academic. This book is dedicated to her.

Citing this work

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CHAPTER I

Introduction, or why open access?

WHAT IS OPEN ACCESS?

In the first decade and a half of the twenty-first century, the words ‘open access’ have been uttered with increasing frequency in universities around the world.¹ Beginning as little more than a quiet murmur in niche scientific sub-disciplines but developing towards a globally mandated revolution in scholarly communication, the ascent of open access looks set to continue. Despite this rapid, worldwide rise, however, many misunderstandings about the phenomenon remain. At the most basic level, this includes the key question: what exactly is ‘open access’?² Regardless of the nuances and complexities that will be discussed in this book, ‘open access’ can be clearly and succinctly defined. The term ‘open access’ refers to the removal of price and permission barriers to scholarly research.³ Open access means peer-reviewed academic research work that is free to read online and that anybody may redistribute and reuse, with some restrictions.

For a piece of academic research to be called ‘open access’, it must be available digitally for anybody to read at no financial cost beyond those intrinsic to using the internet; the removal of price barriers. This is similar to the majority of content on the world wide web but it is not the basis on which scholarly publication has historically relied. After all, most websites do not charge readers to access their content while, by contrast, most academic publications are currently bought by libraries as either one-off purchases or ongoing subscriptions. Open access means implementing a new system that allows free access to peer-reviewed scholarly research on the world wide web. The term also means, perhaps more contentiously, that people

should be able to reuse this material beyond the provisions of fair use enshrined in copyright law, as long as the author is credited. This is the removal of permission barriers that advocates claim is necessary to facilitate activities such as assembling a course pack of lengthy extracts for teaching. The removal of these two ‘barriers’ alters the current model of scholarly communications because, at present, access to research is only allowed when content has been purchased from a publisher and because, at the moment, one may only redistribute and use works in accordance with the fair dealings provisions of copyright.

The possibility of open access to scholarly research rests on several technological and economic bases, the contexts of which are all more complex than this introduction alone can suggest. That said, there are some key prerequisites that can be identified with ease. Firstly, open access relies upon the potential of the internet to disseminate work almost indefinitely at a near-infinitesimal cost-per-copy. This is because, in the digital world, the majority of costs lie in the labour to reach the point of dissemination rather than in the transmission of each copy. Open access was not, therefore, truly feasible in times before this technology; OA requires the digital environment and the internet.⁴ The second aspect that makes open access possible, according to Stevan Harnad – one of the leading figures of the Open Access movement – is that the economic situation of the academy is different from other spheres of cultural production. Academics are, in Harnad’s view, ‘esoteric’ authors whose primary motivation is to be read by peers and the public, rather than to sell their work.⁵ While the labour of *publishing* still needs to be covered (and these costs cannot be denied), this situation potentially enables academics employed at universities to give their work to readers for free; this specific subset of researchers are paid a salary, rather than earning a living by selling their specialist outputs.

Stemming from the possibilities of these intertwined economic and technological roots, advocates of open access believe that the broadest global exposure to research outputs would be achieved through a system that did not require the reader to pay. These benefits are claimed to extend, among other groups, to academics whose libraries cannot meet the price of subscriptions and to the general public for whom much research material remains