

RESPONSE

Openness in academic publication: the question of trust, authority and reliability

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Introduction

John Houghton and Charles Oppenheim have rebuffed many of the claims made around the prevalent economic model(s) of academic publishing. They support the contention that there is much to be gained from a shift to open access dissemination of scholarly research. While the economic case seems clear, unfortunately this is not the whole picture; there are other costs and benefits related to the publication of research that are not economic. Therefore, it is worth complementing their useful analysis by raising some questions about the manner in which the academy in general has used traditional methods of publishing to maintain and develop certain community benefits.

Let me be clear at the outset: I make these points not to defend traditional models of academic publication, but to suggest that there are some non-economic issues that must play a role in decisions about the manner in which open access can be achieved. Here I will suggest three matters that we should consider in addition to those set out by Houghton and Oppenheim: first, the authority and reliability of publically available research; secondly, the role publishers have played as an external back-stop on issues of trust for academic communities; and thirdly that openness itself may have a social cost to the academy. We need to think about these matters.

Authority and reliability: towards bounded openness

As we know, one of the key problems with the avalanche of information that is now available to us is assessing its reliability and authority. We all spend time with our students exploring online research skills, and often concentrate on markers of credibility as a way of establishing authority and/or reliability. A key example of information anxiety for scholars is the question of how much weight one should accord entries on Wikipedia. However, while often presented as the great open access story of our times, Wikipedia is overseen by a group of editors led by the project's founder, Jimmy Wales. Its openness does not indicate an absence of a controlling authority; rather, the editorial intent is to *maintain* an open resource, which sometimes (often because of ideologically-driven 'vandalism' of contentious pages) requires absolute openness to be (often only temporarily) constrained. This has become more common with

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Wikipedia's growth to become one of the most used sites on the Internet (Benkler, 2006, pp. 70–74; Waters, 2010).

Here the advantage of openness is compromised by the disadvantage of assuming that collective contributions will be in good faith. Certainly, multiple and continuing peer scrutiny may strip out many invasive and ill-meant contributions, but the logic of openness, at its limits, sits uneasily with the need for a hierarchy of editorial control, with some more able to control content than others. Thus, openness may not be the same as leaderlessness, or lack of control; rather it is more about the philosophical intent of those involved, especially when openness itself cannot be taken to its logical conclusion if access benefits are to be retained. There can be little social benefit from unencumbered access to information when it is impossible to assess easily its validity or veracity.

The idea of bounded openness recognises that openness often has clear social benefits which need to be accorded social weight in the face of the logic of intellectual property rights (IPRs). Bounded openness implies that, as Sandra Braman (2006) has forcefully argued, the erosion of ownership of knowledge may also bring with it the parallel erosion of confidence in the information that is accessed. Other forms of authority will need to be established within the open realm to substitute for the authority that flows from defined ownership, and which the academy has relied on in the past. To some extent, this will continue to be the role of peer review for academic publication, but without a formal mechanism of externally-owned publication can we be sure that such practices are being properly conducted?

Trust in the academic community

We often fail to recognise that in proprietary (copyright) driven academic publication, the academy has outsourced the auditing of the practices of dissemination of academic research and knowledge. A clearly recognised hierarchy of journals has been established in most disciplines, with publication in specific journals accorded clear reputational benefits. The difficulty of getting published in these leading journals reassures us that the process of peer review has been particularly strenuous and has tested knowledge claims most thoroughly; quality control has been neutral and disinterested, uncontaminated by personal or academic rivalries. This is not to suggest peer review is impossible under open access, but for decades the control of the process by the publisher has allowed a cushion of comfort to those who might suspect that peer review could be politicised (despite the practice of double blind reviews).

Certainly we (the academics) have staffed the system of peer review and editorial function, and thus there is a certain game-playing aspect to our outsourcing of trust to the publishers. However, the publisher has always played the role of external judge: they are clearly interested (for economic reasons) in maintaining and expanding the reputation of their journal and as such have, in theory, acted as a backstop behind academics to ensure good behaviour. While most of the time this may not have been required, the availability of an external agency to adjudicate on academic practice has offered an implicit reassurance to the academy. If this is removed, unless we are more willing to trust our colleagues than we have been in the past, then something needs to take its place.

There are clearly alternative methods for the deliberation of quality: for instance, the strategy of peer production of relevance and accreditation information (exemplified by Amazon's customers' rankings, and Google's more mechanical PageRank

algorithm that identifies how many other pages link to relevant pages thrown up by searches to establish a rank) may offer other paths (Benkler, 2006, pp. 76–77). Here the rise of the citation index as a metric of quality can already be seen to be an alternative measure of quality assessment for academic work, although there are disciplinary differences in citation practices, as well as technical difficulties with some citation indices and a problem with time lag. In other words, one of the key challenges for openness is to find ways of delivering the quality-related quick and ready assessments that previously were delivered via proprietary modes of establishing the origins of information and knowledge through their location of publication. This is by no means impossible, as some high profile open access publications in medicine have already established, but neither is it an issue that can be left to take care of itself.

Star researchers: winner takes all?

Finally, I want to explore briefly an issue that has emerged in other markets for knowledge-based goods: one popular analysis of the impact of the Internet on markets for informational goods has suggested that this will produce a long tail of consumption with much more variegated patterns of use/purchase (Anderson, 2006). However, what seems to have happened is a divergence between blockbusters (in books, music and film) and those products that have a relatively small audience. One way consumers are dealing with a widened availability of informational goods is to respond with herd behaviour focussed on well known ‘brands’ or superstars. This development can be seen in the open source software movement where the names of developers are already jealously guarded because kudos accrues to the named developer, and thus a mode of authority (or perhaps better, authenticity) is maintained.

This may also happen in a realm of open publication of scholarly research. Well known and often cited researchers will be regarded as more reliable (and thus more cited, in a self-reinforcing pattern), while new researchers will struggle to gain such entry to the key debates without the support of ‘stars’. While the proprietary system of a hierarchy of journals allowed excellent work an outlet in top journals through peer review (however imprecise such a system might be), without the marker of established location, information users are left looking for other indicators, perhaps known names, or academic location, leading to a tendency towards concentration of cited (and widely used) research, and fewer academics and fewer institutions receiving the bulk of citations, or seeing their work picked up for use by others. While this might be to the benefit of funders of research (allowing them to concentrate their support, as is already starting to happen in the UK), it would be a retrograde step for the wider academic community. Again, proprietary publication is not the only answer to this issue, but open access needs to develop a response.

These three issues, which are to some extent dealt with in the proprietary model, will need to be addressed if the open access model is to gain widespread support and start to deliver the economic benefits Houghton and Oppenheim set out. Certainly, openness can act as a countervailing force in information society, balancing excessive claims to property rights in knowledge and information, and constraining the more pernicious aspects of a rampant information capitalism. However, this may not mean there can be total openness; rather new forms of ownership or control need to be established that can deliver the benefits of previous proprietary models, but within the different economic logic that Houghton and Oppenheim have explored.

This (re)balancing is a process that has continued for most of the half-millennia history of IPRs (May and Sell, 2005) and is not so much a rejection of intellectual property, but rather a renewed account of the costs and benefits that are at the centre of its balance between private rights to rewards and the public benefit arising from the dissemination of knowledge and innovation. Thus, the move to openness is not so much a revolution as a further development of our struggle to balance the private and public interests in the development of, and access to, knowledge.

References

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