Open Access Publishing Models and How OA Can Work in the Humanities

by Martin Paul Eve

A New Open Humanities

EDITOR'S SUMMARY

Open access (OA) has been shaping and benefitting the scientific community for years now, but this new wave of disseminating research freely has not quite taken hold in the field of humanities. Though humanities publishers could also benefit from an OA model, many have been resistant, citing possible issues with plagiarism or appropriation of an author's work for less than ideal uses. There are also challenges with the cost of publishing OA content, which for humanities could be much higher than in the scientific community due to the length of works produced. Some institutions have taken to charging authors to publish their content in an OA model, while others have opted for a membership structure or joining a consortium of other institutions, such as Knowledge Unlatched or the Open Library of Humanities. While many great strides have been taken to bring OA to humanities, there is still work to do to make the study of humanity accessible to all.

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The opening words of the 2002 Budapest Open Access Initiative declaration were "[a]n old tradition and a new technology have converged to make possible an unprecedented public good" [1]. The old tradition was the university and its peculiar systems of remuneration wherein scholars produce work in order to be read, rather than to earn a living through sales of that work. The new technologies were the internet and the World Wide Web with their capacities for near-unlimited dissemination once a first copy has been produced. The fundamental public good of open access (OA) was to use these technologies and this social situation of the university to give anybody the right to read and re-use academic research outputs, without requiring payment from readers.

Yet, some old traditions within the university have taken less well to the incursion of new technologies into their publishing spaces. Although it is not universally true, the humanities disciplines have overall been less engaged with the discussions around open access than their scientific counterparts; they have been less enthusiastic about the open dissemination of their work, online, for free than other disciplinary areas; and they have presented research objects that demonstrate considerable economic difficulties for a transition to an open model, such as research monographs. Before turning to the ways in which progress with open access in the humanities is steadily advancing, it is worth covering these challenges in a little more detail.

On the first point, many humanists were caught by surprise at national and funder -level mandates for open access. Despite the conversation having begun in the early 2000s – that is, almost two decades ago – the introduction of policies such as the UK's Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) OA mandate for journal articles in 2014 seemed to wrong-foot many humanities scholars [2]. While large initiatives in the natural sciences have been ongoing for many years to reconfigure the

publishing ecosystem to one that is openly accessible – think of the Public Library of Science or the arXiv site – the humanities have been far slower. That said, there were a limited number of humanistic voices present in the early discussions around open access. Peter Suber, a prominent voice in the OA community, was a philosophy professor before taking up his post as director of the Office of Scholarly Communication at Harvard, and Jean-Claude Guédon – a professor in the comparative literature department at Montreal – was also a signatory to the early declarations. Even so, humanists were hardly the majority of the parties discussing open access at that time.

When debate did finally emerge around open access in the humanities, it was often in a negative context. Indeed, in the UK, where a great deal of recent political OA debate has centered, there was caution and opposition urged from many sides. John Holmwood, for instance, noted on several occasions how the open licensing of research work under Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) provisions could lead to the appropriation of this work by new predatory, for-profit universities in the United Kingdom, who sought degree-awarding powers without conducting any of their own teaching. For Holmwood, the danger was that such entities would package such work as a degree and the very open circulation of research material could then undermine the research university itself [3]. Others were more strident; Peter Mandler, the former president of the Royal Historical Society, asserted that open access could encourage new plagiarism-like practices while also posing problems for quality control [4] [5]. Finally, some figures, such as David Golumbia, have linked open access to other market-based, neoliberal influences on the academy [6]. In other words, recent debate around OA in the humanities has been far from universally positive.

Finally, due to the scientific interest in OA in the early days of discussion, much of the work around business models and the economics of open access has focused on the journal article as the emblematic output. However, the humanities disciplines are not centered solely around journal articles. They have a broad spectrum of research objects, from performance-based modes through to long-form writing. Since open access does not assume that publishing is free of cost, even if we seek to make access free of charge to the reader, there have been problems with devising and implementing business models for, say, research monographs.

A simple example can illustrate this problem. As a publisher, the most obvious business model for journal publishing if one cannot sell the outputs because one is making them available under the so-called *gold* route of open access is to charge authors, institutions and funders for the work that is conducted. That is, if one cannot sell a product to readers, one sells a service to authors. A typical price for this might be $2,000-3,000 USD per article. What happens, though, when you scale the labor of publishing (copyediting, typesetting, proofreading, digital preservation, platform maintenance, legal, accounting and so forth) to cover artifacts that are 10 times longer than journal articles? Well, the costs, predictably, are much higher. For instance, a recent Mellon-Ithaka study produced a range of between $15,140 and $129,909 per book [7].

In the article processing charge (APC) world of the sciences, a price-per-article of $2000 might work. But it still concentrates costs. Subscriptions do one thing extremely well: they spread costs among many institutions. An APC concentrates the entire cost on a single entity. That is not to say that the situation is rosy in the humanities under a subscription model. The humanities have been subject to the same 300% rise above inflation in journal subscription costs since 1986 as the sciences, which has led to a substantial access gap even at the wealthiest universities. However, when speaking of publishing in the humanities, the APC model is particularly difficult. For consider a world where, in the first place, budgets are far harder to come by and the most important types of research output cost closer to $20,000. That world is the world of the humanities and open access.

Progress, Nonetheless

Despite the aforementioned challenges, open access in the humanities continues to grow. Sometimes, this growth is due to work by subject bodies, such as the Modern Language Association. Indeed, under the stewardship of Kathleen Fitzpatrick and Nicky Agate, this organization's new Humanities Commons platform encourages humanities researchers to share their work legally and openly under the green model. Of course, the MLA still derives

substantial revenues from its subscription publications and must also wonder whether, were the *PMLA* (their flagship journal) to go open access, members might begin to cancel their membership payments as well. The Royal Historical Society, in the UK, has also recently partnered with a digital press at the School of Advanced Study in London to produce an open-access monograph series. In this way, we do see creeping progress from subject associations in the humanities.

Speaking more broadly, there is also a range of funder and institution-driven initiatives. As of March 2017, the Association of American Universities (AAU), the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) and the Association of American University Presses (AAUP) are building an open-access publishing scheme for monographs that is funded by institutional subvention. As they put it in their press release, "The universities and colleges directly participating in this initiative will incorporate three components into their digital monograph publishing projects: provide a baseline university publishing grant of $15,000 to support the publication of an open access, digital monograph of 90,000 words or less (with additional funding for works of greater length or complexity to be negotiated by the author, institution and publisher); set a target of awarding at least three publishing grants per year; and commit to participating in this initiative for five years" [8].

Perhaps the strongest drivers of new open-access monograph initiatives for the humanities have come from funders, though. The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, based in New York City, has awarded a substantial number of grants over the past decade in order to understand and advance the open scholarship agenda in the humanities. Likewise, in the UK, HEFCE has signaled that it intends to apply an open-access mandate for books to the Research Excellence Framework (REF) that it will hold in the mid-2020s, giving approximately a decade to figure out how to achieve a switch. Finally, although strangely placed to be funding humanities scholarship, the Wellcome Trust has also been a strong driver of open-access books. Wellcome funds medical humanities research, such as the histories of medicine, but also other interdisciplinary intersections with medicine and the humanities. Wellcome is one of the few funders in the world to insist that all of its research outputs are entirely open access and will pay the book processing charges when needed for research that it funds.

Not all progress has been top-down, though. Indeed, there are a number of scholar-led enterprises that strike me as being efficacious in moving the open agenda forward. In the UK, Open Book Publishers and Open Humanities Press have, for many years, published open access monographs. (I have, myself, published a peer-reviewed, open-access book with the former.) Running on mixed business models that combine freemium OA with a print-sales strategy, these entities are relatively small in scale, but become increasingly attractive since they do not demand an unaffordable charge from authors. The same is true of Eileen Joy's Punctum Books, a U.S.-based publisher of often-radical humanities research that has recently opened up a subscription-like service to which individuals can contribute to help with the sustainability of the press. It is also true that various open educational resource (OER) projects are making headway in the textbook and open syllabus arena.

The emergence of membership models for open-access humanities book publishing – evident in Punctum Books and Open Book Publishers – points toward the challenges of economic distribution that I gestured toward above. Indeed, to fully understand this difficulty is to realize that the entirety of the United Kingdom's current yearly book purchasing budget in libraries – across *all* types of book, not just academic research monographs – would barely stretch to cover the books published by just the four biggest academic presses in the UK. This problem of redistribution can be solved through membership models or through consortial pooling, both of which achieve the same end. The most well-known initiative in the latter space is Knowledge Unlatched. Founded by Frances Pinter, who had previously launched an open-access pilot at Bloomsbury Academic during her tenure there, this project asks libraries around the world to band together to fund the unlatching of monographs. That is, for example, if 300 libraries all pledge an amount, say $80 each, that will total the fee required by the publisher, say $20,000, then the book can be made openly accessible. Knowledge Unlatched, which is not a publisher but a funder of publishers who submit their titles, is by far the largest initiative so far in the humanities and social scientific open-access space for monographs, with 343 books

made open in its 2016 round and a host of others being already available on the Directory of Open Access Books and OAPEN platforms.

Such problems of scale and distribution, though, have also been seen in the humanities journal-publishing arena. The initiative that I co-founded, the Open Library of Humanities (OLH) – based on the theoretical research work in my book, *Open Access and the Humanities: Contexts, Controversies and the Future* (published open-access by Cambridge University Press) [9] – takes this model of distributed subsidy and applies it to a journal publishing environment. We currently have over 220 libraries around the world – including Harvard, Princeton, Yale, Carnegie Mellon, Cambridge, UCL, all sites of the University of California System and many others – paying a fee that looks like a subscription to the OLH. The catch is that we make all of our research work openly accessible. In our first year of operation, we published 909 articles (some front-, some back list) across 18 journals. With these libraries supporting, this lowered the cost to just $1.10 per institution per article or, at 118,686 readers, just $0.008 per institution per reader. We have also begun partnerships with university presses. The University of Wales Press is converting one of its journals to use our model and the University of Liverpool Press has just followed, with more announcements scheduled for later this year. The model is also designed to offset against previous subscription costs as journals come on board to flip to open access, thereby saving libraries funds in the long term.

Indeed, then, even if we have had resistance from humanities scholars, there are an increasing number of initiatives finding routes to gold open access in the humanities, while the uptake of green deposit also continues to skyrocket. In the face of apparently insurmountable difficulties, we have progress, nonetheless.

What Are the Humanities For?

In this piece, I've looked at the ways in which the humanities have struggled with open access. At the same time, I have also demonstrated a range of projects that are bringing possibilities to the table for these subjects. The new technologies might be able to help our old traditions after all, if we can address the social challenges that surround changing publication practices in the humanities.

Despite concerns and the slow pace of change, then, it seems important to me that the humanities can benefit from open, online dissemination of our research material. The humanities are, quite literally, the study of human cultures and their artifacts. These subjects do not cure cancers or invent new telescopes but they do tell us a great deal about who we are and where we have come from as people. They help us to understand the phenomena that make us so different as a species from other animals – that is, our artworks and cultures – and they help us to contextualize our political and social environments within broader timeframes of history. To study ourselves, as humans, is the mission of the humanities subjects in all their diverse breadths. I believe in open access for the humanities, though, because a fundamental question should move us: what good is research on the human, if our fellow humans cannot afford to read that work? ■

Resources Mentioned in the Article

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