**GLOBAL**

**Moving past denial in open access publishing**

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The humanities and social sciences are more resistant to open access publishing than the sciences for a variety of reasons. But academics in these fields need to ask the question: what is the purpose of publication? Is it about personal prestige and promotion or widening access to knowledge? It is said that all new ideas go through three phases: first they are ridiculed, then strongly opposed, before being finally accepted as self-evident.

In the last couple of years, open access publishing seems to have left stage one behind and is now approaching stage three due to significant changes in the realms of funding policies, laws, library infrastructure and in the attitudes of academics.

Most of these developments have been taking place in the science, technology, engineering and mathematics, or STEM, fields, but the humanities and social sciences, or HSS, are also faced with the issues that this new way of academic publishing brings with it.

However, the notion of producing HSS research results in open access gold, that is, offering free, universal digital access to the final versions of books and articles immediately upon publication, is in many ways just escaping ridicule and entering phase two: resistance.

There are three major reasons for this delay. HSS publications, particularly in the realm of journal subscriptions, are nowhere near as costly as they are in the STEM fields so the sense of fiscal urgency was, and still is, perhaps not as keenly felt.

Secondly, there is a significant difference in the culture of publishing.The major academic genre in most HSS fields is still the monograph and not so much the article. Consequently, while the pressure to ‘publish or perish’ may be as intense, it takes much longer to produce a book.

Authors, and those assessing them, still prefer to see the result of years of effort manifest in a tangible object rather than as a downloadable file.

Finally, and this is perhaps the most fundamental difference, HSS research predominantly produces textual works based on text (in the widest semiotic sense), rather than lab results and formulas.

This means authors and audience alike ascribe a heightened importance to the discursive aspect of the output. Any monograph on philosophy will serve as an example.

**Tension**

Unfortunately, these differences have not been sufficiently considered during recent decision-making processes by some funding and policy stakeholders in the open access debate, which has led to much discontent.

Two examples are the much debated and publicised fall-out of the UK’s Finch Report on open access and the recent protest surrounding the German state of Baden-Württemberg’s amendment to university law that requires all state-funded institutions of higher learning to embrace an obligatory open access policy.

As a result much tension has arisen between academic authors, trade publishers, funding bodies, university governments, libraries and open access initiatives. Add a persistent lack of information and exchange permeating these layers and the difficulties of establishing open access gold publishing of HSS books becomes self-evident.

The sword with which to cut through this Gordian knot is communication. It is vital that the technical developments in open access publishing, their advantages and shortcomings and the costs associated with them, are clearly relayed and discussed among funding bodies, libraries, university administrators and academics alike.

We need more advocacy, roundtables and diplomatic efforts across and including these different agencies to find a productive way forward. But this is not enough. There is another, deeper issue that needs reflection within the HSS scholarly community: authors should ask themselves and each other wherein the purpose of their publishing really lies.

This includes, for example, that HSS authors at affluent institutions discuss the fundamental need for sharing knowledge not only with colleagues who are also at institutions that can afford pay-walled content, but with those who are not.

Naturally, these basic principles of all academic pursuits – engaging in academic communication and sharing academic knowledge – concern all disciplines, yet the humanities and social sciences seem particularly afflicted by denial when it comes to these issues.

Still haunted by the elusive spectre of ‘prestige’ associated with brand names of publishing houses, many academics would rather publish all of their books in small and overpriced print-runs after having single-handedly prepared the manuscript and signed away their copyright than publish with a new open access publisher.

Often, and to a certain extent understandably, the lofty pursuit of universal knowledge takes second place to the existential interest of securing a job or a promotion by impressing conservative committees.

**Moving past denial**

Yet asking these questions is inevitable and the denial at the core of the current rejection of open access in many HSS disciplines will eventually melt away, not only because of fiscal difficulties and technological advances, but also because academic communication is rapidly evolving on a global scale.

Information consumers worldwide increasingly expect to access content immediately and for free or low cost, just as it has done in the entertainment industries. This development will pull along the vast majority of institutions and the academics that work in them – whether they like it or not.

As the American poet and academic Kenneth Goldsmith put it back in 2005: “If it doesn't exist on the internet, it doesn't exist.”

In view of more and more decisive steps taken by influential bodies, such as the Chinese Academy of Sciences’ open access policy statement of 15 May, Goldsmith’s words continue to gain validity.

And yet, such non-existence may be inconsequential to some academics, particularly if they work on topics that require little external input or international discussion.

But one thing is certain: most books produced in the humanities and social sciences do not come out of such isolation and would work just as well, if not better, as open access publications.

It would be very fruitful if all stakeholders invested in academic knowledge output discussed this issue frankly and productively so we can move decisively towards accepting as self-evident the potential and benefits of open access gold publishing in the humanities and social sciences and find a way of making it work.

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