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Digital Economics, Abundance and Symbolic Economies for Academic Open Access

Martin Paul Eve

There are many elements of digital practice that I find fascinating. For one, we have managed to create a virtual space that seems infinitely abundant. The cost of copying within this space is infinitesimal and all the costs inhere in the cost to first copy. For another, it seems that open dissemination of educational material in this space can seem as little more than a logical conclusion. Is not the enlightenment dream of the universal library finally within our grasp?

It is often said, though, that it would be better if all of our problems were technical, rather than social, since one can fix technological problems. And this is an aspect of digital practice that too frequently goes unremarked upon. Yes, we can disseminate online material with infinite abundance, but there are a set of underlying social conditions that limit our potential to harness such technology. These are primarily to do with *scarcity*.

Consider, for instance, that in academic environments, publication venues (impact factors [ugh: don't use made-up journal-level quantifications], journal names, and press names) serve as proxies for quality when search committees are looking to appoint a new member of faculty. What is actually happening here is that there is *insufficient labour time* among panel members to appraise the work independently and so they resort to crude proxies. We know these proxies are inaccurate: “top” presses have published terrible books and unknown presses can publish great material. When there are 250 books before a panel, though, the temptation to jump to judgement using the frame, [rather than appraising the painting](#), to use a metaphor, is great. As we also recently showed, we are also very poor at judging work without such enframing contexts. [We do not recognise “excellence” when we see it](#).

But what does this do to the digital and open space? The logical consequence of the above thinking is that, when we assess people for jobs (of which we have a scarce few posts), we want a proxy *that is also scarce*. Ideally, for the panel's proxies for quality to work, it will be as hard to get a book or journal article published at a “top press” as it would be to get a job at the university. For instance, if X University Press is famed for only accepting the “top” 1% of books, and we have 100 applicants for a position, and only one of them has a book with X University Press, that's the candidate we “should” appoint (I'm being crude here for the sake of simplicity—but this is the logic). This drives people towards venues that prize scarcity.

But we already noted that the digital is a space of abundance and proliferation. Could we not share the data that surround papers and books? Could we not share work in progress? Could we not share... etc. While technically, there is no conflict between being selective in what to publish and then disseminating it broadly, the social situation above pushes academics to publish with known presses. These presses are often old and august, and economically risk-averse. With a constant supply of high-quality submissions, they are not keen to experiment with new business models that could support their publishing operation in an open environment. Because of this social constraint—just one of many—we are dependent on existing entities to migrate their business models, rather than seeing disruption from new entities such as Open Book Publishers, Open Humanities Press, Punctum Books, and others (taking just a humanities book-publishing sample here). A robust

environment for academic publishing is good for ensuring that our existing systems are not destroyed overnight—which is an advantage; most universities outlast governments and many corporations—but it does mean that things move at a glacial pace.

This is also not to say that all existing academic publishers are shying from open. It is to note that while open might seem the logical consequence of the digital environment, it is by no means a logical consequence of the social configuration of the university, even if it seems a logical consequence for *learning*. The material economics of prestige—which translate into material economics of hiring, promotion, and tenure—are ever-present inhibitors of the possibilities of the digital ([as I have noted](#)). To persuade academics to publish openly requires either a concerted advocacy effort, which has been attempted over a 20-year period now, or it requires a mass reconfiguration of the economics of scholarly communications, which we are also attempting. The former method is hard because it involves changing the behavioural patterns of individuals who have been trained to prosper within systems of accreditation based on the above metrics; publish with “top” presses. The latter is hard because those same “top” presses are not keen. And these strike me as the ways in which abundance, scarcity, and prestige economies all interact to form a cycle into which openness is trying to break; with varying degrees of success.