

BIROn - Birkbeck Institutional Research Online

Eve, Martin Paul (2013) Digital literatures; digital democracies; digital threats? In: E-reading between the lines: 21st century literature, digital platforms and literacies, 5 Jul 2013, University of Brighton, UK. (Unpublished)

Downloaded from: <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/id/eprint/12216/>

Usage Guidelines:

Please refer to usage guidelines at <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/policies.html> or alternatively contact lib-eprints@bbk.ac.uk.

Digital Literatures; Digital Democracies; Digital Threats?

Dr. Martin Paul Eve, University of Lincoln

Paper delivered at conference: 5th July 2013

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Unported License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>.

My usual realm of speaking, recently, has been primarily on Open Access to academic material in the Humanities, be that in public events at Harvard, the House of Commons BIS Inquiry into Open Access or in smaller level departmental events at Birkbeck or my own institution, Lincoln. Today, however, I want to expand on my work in those areas to intersect with broader theorisations of publishing in both literature and the academy. Many areas of what I'm going to discuss here will not, for this reason, be intrinsically linked to open access, but I am, rather, using the reconfigured economics and politics of publishing that OA introduces as a springboard to other areas, some of which are speculative and in the early stages of germination; I'm hoping that these statements can galvanize our discussion, rather than being treated as any kind of final position statement. Some of them are a bit polemical. In this paper, then, I want to point out the various points of labour that are involved in publishing of various kinds – and I want to stick rigorously to this kind of material grounding – but also to ask whether the potential collapse of the gatekeeper model that sits on the horizon poses a threat to certain spheres of dissemination and publishing, both academic and trade. I'm also going to slightly apologise for reading this paper – as this is an expansion of my thinking I want to ensure I do justice to the detail and logical structure that has led me there and I can achieve that better than if speaking off the cuff. Ultimately, as an incredibly learned summary, or not actually, I think, the crux of this paper reveals me to be more of a Leavisite than I might otherwise like to admit!

Before I begin in earnest, given that this panel features the term “open access” in the title, it's worth clarifying the essential aspects about which I'm here talking. Open Access, by the definition that Peter Suber puts forward in his eponymous book on the subject, and synthesized from the three prominent so-called “triple-B” statements of the early twenty-first century, is a term that connotes a movement that is dedicated to the removal of price barriers and permission barriers to access to scholarly material. This can be translated as the removal of the need for the reader to pay for access to scholarly material (the removal of price barriers) and the enhanced ability to re-use this academic material beyond the provisions enshrined in the fair dealings statutes (the removal of permission barriers). It is envisaged that the transformative power of the internet to facilitate non-rivalrous commodity exchange essentially changes the economic suppositions that underpin our traditional models for the dissemination of research. To unpack that a little: it is no longer the case that if you want to have access to a piece of scholarly research, it must be at the expense of somebody else not having access to your copy; commodities are not in ontological rivalry with one another; they are non-rivalrous. My instance does not deprive you of your instance. This fundamentally reconfigures the economic basis upon which commodities exist and, as you will have seen from the music industry, for example, the transference of metaphorical statements to the online realm become problematic. Take the idea of online “piracy” being equivalent to “theft” (those “you wouldn't steal a car” adverts). It isn't. Theft must deprive somebody of an item. Piracy doesn't deprive anybody of any tangible currency or item. Instead, it only *complex* and seemingly *probabilistically* deprives the party selling the digital content of the *potential* to sell the item again to a different client; hardly a certainty, as in theft, and there is also controverted evidence that piracy may have a knock-on exposure effect in some cases. Now, I don't want to draw

parallels between open access and piracy; that's a dodgy route. However, I do want to use these thoughts as a springboard to think about e-reading between the ledger lines. Indeed, the economic basis for the creation of works in different spheres, the primary area upon which I want to focus, but which is linked to this re-worked system of cultural exchange, differs greatly from area to area. This is why, argues Suber, academics are uniquely placed in the sphere of production and able to disseminate their work in an open access mode. Let me elaborate a little upon this.

Under the current system of scholarly publishing, in broad strokes, academics are paid by their institutions (or work under a despicable system of exploitative casualized labour with the slim forward-promise of a job) to do their research. When this is done, they select a publication destination. Survey after survey shows that the motivation for selection of publication, however, is a return on investment in terms of *prestige* to the academic, not any kind of financial return – even in the monograph sphere. Journals, in particular, though, are evaluated not necessarily on their reach, pricing, editorial input or speed of publication, but on the nominal brand prestige that is conferred. In short, as Martin McQuillan put it to me, academic publishing works on genealogies of validation; we “invest” prestige in a venue and then use the nominal name to confer a certain standard of quality. I'm going to return to the fact that I think the measures that we use are flawed, but the key point that I'd like to highlight is that, in almost all areas of publication, academics do not publish because they want financial recompense from the sale of their material. Indeed, excepting textbooks, even in the academic monograph sector (as the Jisc OAPEN-UK project survey results show, of which I am a board member) academics do not select a publisher because it returns royalties on their books except in the select few cases of mega-superstar academics. Indeed, you would be somewhat delusion to believe that you're going to get rich off writing your academic monograph!

This is one of the key differentiations in the material conditions of production between academic work and other models of publishing, broadly defined. In the academic sector, it is ideally theorised that academic work is paid for by an institution (in the UK now via tuition fees, QR funding and an institution's ability to capitalise on its “intellectual property”) and not by the sale of the research material by academics. This casts the academic publisher in a very different role. In one sense, they are service providers to academics, given the roles of facilitating review, typesetting, copyediting, proofreading, marketing and digitally preserving material. In another, though, they are a product provider to the same academics, traditionally mediated through the library. They are also, in many instances, corporate entities whose primary allegiance is to stay solvent and, in some cases, although I explicitly want to say, not all, to make as large a profit as possible. No matter in how radically anti-capitalist terms you want to bill your research, if you play the academic game and publish in A-list journals, it is impossible for your synthesis of form and content, at present, to be complete. What I want to begin to suggest is that, if we want to bill ourselves as critical thinkers in the humanities, we need to be more aware of the conditions of production under which our work is produced. For example, which of our publishers outsource their typesetting? Is this done within an ethical pay framework? Indeed, this should rightly be an area of exploration for postcolonial studies and the potential for reflexive academic complicity in racialized labour practices. Closer to home, though, we need to think critically about models of access and the ways in which we damage ourselves through the perpetuation of models that have progressively weakened over the past thirty years.

Returning, though, despite these observations, to the ideally theorised model of academic production, which doesn't actually correlate to the conditions of many in academia, there is supposed to be a separation of privileges between academic work and

the need for it to sell. We'll come back to that. However, this is not, usually, the case in many models of artistic production. In most areas of artistic practice it is clear that the most valued works are created by those who have been afforded the time to master their craft without having to worry about the material problems of day-to-day existence. For instance, Ian Rankin achieved the completion of his first Rebus novel by using an AHRC grant that was supposed to pay for a Ph.D. on Muriel Spark to instead fund his living costs, a strategy that might have served me well! (NB any AHRC listeners/readers – that was a joke.) As with academic jobs to Ph.D. candidate ratios, there are only an extreme minority of writers who garner the commercial success to live off their earnings, but the point that I here want to raise is that publishers in the commercial fiction sector face an interesting dilemma. On the one hand, they need commercially successful authors for their business model. Conversely, from anecdotal experience it seems highly unlikely that this is why people go into most editorial positions at publishing houses. Instead, many publishers seek a model that facilitates cross-subsidization. An instance of this can be seen in Bloomsbury fiction's strategy towards the novelist Russell Hoban. Hoban only ever had one “hit” novel and even that had limited cult appeal, as you'd expect of a text written in an esoteric, invented, phonetic, future dialect; *Riddley Walker*. However, even before the organisation's financial situation was drastically improved through the *Harry Potter* series, Liz Calder was committed to publishing his work despite its inability to turn a profit for the company.

Academic journals in the humanities – and I'll offer some thoughts on monographs shortly – operate on an analogous “cross-subsidy” type effort. While reach of importance or appeal has to be there so that coverage is achieved and library subscription rates will be maintained, once it has the key articles in place, a journal can use its influence to explore areas that the editor deems important in an attempt at canon formation. This can

work because, in contrast to the financial logic of the fiction sector, academic publishing operates on micro-monopolies. If an article is crucial to my research, not having access is not an option. This makes it impossible for true markets to emerge in the sphere of scholarly publishing. Choice of subscription shouldn't, logically, as neoliberal market logic dictates, here form on the basis of price competition. (Quick note: I'm here taking neoliberal to denote a system that has emerged since the late 1980s the key features of which are 1.) A fixation on quantification and measurement; 2.) The belief that all aspects of society are best handled on a for-profit basis through competition; 3.) a nominal insistence on transparency, accountability and openness, so that point 1 can best be achieved. I'm also assuming that researchers will push for access to the articles they need most, without necessary reference to price as a basis for competition.) This is intensified by practices that, while not illegal under UK competition law, seem designed to frustrate competitive practices, such as non-disclosure agreements on so-called "big deal bundling" where libraries are prohibited from disclosing the price that they have paid for a particular set of journals. As David Harvey has pointed out on multiple occasions, however, neoliberal discourse typically frames its competitive capitalist markets in terms of democracy. Democracy is made to seem synonymous with the market. After all, it is argued, what could seem more democratic (demos, people, -kratos, power) than to allow people to earn credits that they can then re-bestow upon the individual who can provide them with the greatest personal benefit in competition with others?

Well, as Harvey shows, and Naomi Klein has more polemically argued, quite a lot is wrong with that model. For just one, it seems that neoliberal democratic markets require quite a great deal of the heavy handed State intervention that they decry. Secondly, there is a real problem with distributing power through mechanisms that continually tend towards top-loading. A claimed principle of democracy is supposed to be the equality of each vote.

Market-democracies judge worth on the basis of individualistic accumulation and award power on that basis. This is not directly the same as a plutocracy because such a regime can transparently be defined in terms of a power-capital dynamic. The network construction of market-democracies does not simplistically map into plutocracies because the former delegate moderate quantities of personal consumer power to a wider majority. However, market-democracies have qualities that equate to plutocracies because the pool from which that consumer power is drawn is fundamentally driven by a small oligarchic pool drawn up on a wealth basis. You can read that in whatever terms of base/superstructure you want.

If, as I contend, true markets cannot emerge in the sphere of serials academic publishing, I'd like to also posit a counter-claim that I will explore in relation to models of publishing, both literary and academic. Where there are alternative systems of economics and micro-monopolies that prohibit the emergence of market-democracies, there are greater scopes for alternatively flawed democracies to emerge. Let me first briefly turn to the way in which the gatekeeper model is beginning to collapse in the literary marketplace and to be replaced by a model of market-democracy. And yes, that's right, here it comes, the inevitable mention that you've all been waiting for: *Fifty Shades of Grey*. The second breakdown that the internet's non-rivalrous commodity exchange facilitates is the removal of print economics. It is worth remembering that, historically, the basis of the gatekeeper function was not purely to militate against that which we now term "information overload" but to ensure that, in a world of strict page budgets, only the most worthy material saw the light of day. Now, of course, this is about branding and exclusion to some degree; the publisher brand is used as a marker of quality, or otherwise. However, the logical extension of the market-democratic logic that seems to be unfolding in this sphere is that with the mass small scale distribution of personal commodity power that this system

provides, there will still be viral power and superstar writers, but it is also likely that the threshold for reaching this will be harder and, also, that the criteria for value judgements will change. At present, these value judgements are being propped up by ever-more numerous commercially sponsored literary prizes across different categories (read: value categories) and also by academic courses, which tend to reiterate these judgements and broaden the canon only under the enduring legacy of cultural studies – at least only in the high/low divide, as far as such a mechanism holds.

These aspects look set to continue for some time, but the interesting point is that the value judgements being made, in most cases, tend to be pre-filtered by the gatekeeper at present. In short: material that comes to the notice of prize bodies or academic courses, for the most part, is drawn from the pool of extant circulation. We do not know how that model will fare under a market-democratic system of production. Secondly, it is unclear whether the pool of literature that this segment currently values, especially if commercially unviable, will continue. Market-democracies, in their neoliberal mode, have no space for cross-subsidy. What we would measure under such a system, and what would undoubtedly emerge, would be a twofold rise to the top of material that could afford to engender viral marketing hype and a measure of the literary material that most broadly satisfied the cultural milieu. However, and this is where I get a bit Leavis-esque, the question that the academy needs to ask, even if it is ultimately powerless to affect the outcome, is whether this distributed model of capito-cracy might preclude material entering the sphere of circulation. This, in turn, must lead on to reflexive critiques of academic reading practices in an attempt to explicitly formulate the systems under which we produce value. What are these judgements, what are their limits and what pre-structures them? A critique of these limits and structurations – whether of the Kantian, or Foucauldian, variety – is overdue.

A similar critique, however, is overdue within the academy itself, and this brings me back to my earlier remarks on prestige and thinking through the gatekeeper model in academia. At present, I put it to you, in the humanities we operate on a system that nominally looks to confer greater power through the preclusion of false market-“democracies”. At the same time, however, our gatekeeper seems to be of the Kafka-esque variety. Let us transpose Kafka's convoluted parable into terms of the academy: here, “the law” equates to power and, because prestige is conferred through publication, let us take “the law” to mean “publication”: “Before the law sits a gatekeeper. To this gatekeeper comes a man from the country who asks to gain entry into the law. But the gatekeeper says that he cannot grant him entry at the moment. The man thinks about it and then asks if he will be allowed to come in sometime later on. 'It is possible,' says the gatekeeper, 'but not now.'” As the academic's life wears on, we come to the crux of the analogy: “‘Everyone strives after the law,’ says the man, 'so how is it that in these many years no one except me has requested entry?’ The gatekeeper sees that the man is already dying and, in order to reach his diminishing sense of hearing, he shouts at him, 'Here no one else can gain entry, since this entrance was assigned only to you. I'm going now to close it.’”

What I mean to infer through this (flawed) parable of my own is not that it is impossible to get a paper published – this is patently false. Rather, I mean to draw attention to the fact that the gatekeeper function is flawed; it is esoteric, unique to the individual and unformulated. As an example of this, consider that a double-blind review process is rarely as myopic as stated. In small fields, we can often infer who will review our work and they will frequently be able to ascertain, through conference presentations or online presence, the name of the author. This begins to de-stabilize the resistance to market-democracies that seemed present in the academic setup because if the author of a

paper can be determined to be a well-known, influential (and powerful) figure, it is more likely that their work will get past the gatekeeper. Furthermore, moving into the realm of monographs, this seems especially to be the case. As Kathleen Fitzpatrick points out in her excellent book that everybody should read, *Planned Obsolescence*: “Perhaps there is a particular form of book, the academic book – or more specifically (given that marketing departments prefer known quantities) the first academic book – that is indeed threatened with obsolescence”.

Once more, this is not to speak of the impossibility of publishing an academic monograph, or even of the impossibility of publishing a first monograph. The empirical evidence is stacked heavily against this! Instead, this brief statement is a prediction of the logical outcome of the strange intersection of markets, quasi-democratic parallels and technological shifts. Indeed, as I'm sure others here will be able to testify, academic monograph publishing is not a hugely profitable activity. There is a large degree of labour involved in the production of a book that involves a vast number of manuscript reviews for each single book that is successfully published. When your profit margins are narrow, however, there has to be a baseline figure that you will sell. Academic monograph print runs are small, 200-250 copies is a common figure. There is, therefore, an incentive to find monographs that will sustain an academic publisher, financially. This system of review, however, is at least honest about its review process – there is no pretence of blindness of the author. This is well known. Decisions are made on a competitive basis and, certainly in the monograph world, there is a degree of populism.

This is where, though, I want, once more, to intersect the two spheres of reading, academic and literary, that I have been playing off one another. In this instance, it comes down to models of cross-subsidy, that, of all places, Bloomsbury might well be a good example. First of all, I want to note that I have no inside knowledge of Bloomsbury's

finances and, in some senses, I have little interest – I want to put forward an outside reading, of an almost new critical variety, of how their model *appears*, because the mode suggests future possibilities in relation to value appraisals. So, let's be blunt! It looks as if Bloomsbury are using their Harry Potter success to buy up academic publishing houses that are in the black (but, let us remember, not bringing in Potter-level-bucks). The 2012 financial report for Bloomsbury overall noted a profit of £4.2m on a margin of 18%, which is very healthy indeed. However, the academic and professional portion of this was 34% (although notably academic and professional only make up 24% of total revenue for the group, so academic books are sold at a higher profit margin).¹ This is not, though, an exercise in publisher-slamming, which is an easy position for those situated on certain points of the OA spectrum to adopt. Rather, I want to ask whether, if in their intra-literary mode, Bloomsbury and the like still have space for esoteric authors working on a system of (again, unspecified, but worthwhile) value, then the same might be true for a cross-subsidy system in academia. In this case, of a commercial, successful, literary publisher subsidising an academic mode, there is, however, an interesting dilemma at play for literary studies. If literary studies broadly holds, as I believe it does, a series of non-explicit, but nonetheless extant, value judgements, then the potential cross-subsidisation of its own esoteric productions (ie. the removal of the gatekeeper's financial incentive) is propped up by the gatekeeper on the literary-commercial side. As I've been suggesting throughout, though, there could be trouble brewing on this front as market-democracies flourish and “self-publishing” erodes the gatekeeper function in some spheres.

At this point, I want to put out a few remarks that start to bring me back to open access and academic production. What I've been trying to think through today is the interrelation between changes in technological practices and the economics in both literary

1 http://www.bloomsbury-ir.co.uk/annual_reports/2012/018.asp

and academic production circles that centre around non-rivalrous commodity exchange. While, in many ways, it becomes easy to criticize publishers in this situation, or to claim they aren't needed, what I think we really need is a critique of publishing businesses and their practices and, instead of berating the individuals involved, to think more broadly about the types of labour that publishers undertake (and which are valued as an independent enterprise) and the compensation for that labour that must rightly take place. In other words: before anybody moots the idea that we should do away with academic publishers, we must look at the services they undertake. I would venture that, especially in the monograph segment, where the labour involved seems qualitatively and quantitatively different to the journal sector, we do not have the resources in-house, at present anyway, to simply erode this place. What I would say, though, is that I am interested in finding models that could work to find a symbiosis between publishers, whereby we work out whether profitable journal models, run by non-profit entities, can cross-subsidise certain forms of monograph production. To that end, the Open Library of Humanities project, which I run, has teamed up with four presses, two big-name UK university presses, one big-name Stateside UP and one born-open-access publisher to undertake a monograph costing study, in addition to the Jisc OAPEN-UK project, in order to ascertain whether our unique business model of Library Partnership Subsidies can sufficiently cross-subsidise the production of open access monographs.