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The Future of Open Access

“Open access” (OA) refers to peer-reviewed scholarly material that is disseminated freely online (with no charges to readers) that also grants some additional permissions to readers (such as the right to redistribute the work and to create derivatives).¹ Open access clearly has benefits for readers since academic journals and books are often priced well above a level that is affordable for individuals. It also has benefits for authors since sales runs on books have narrowed considerably over the past thirty years and online digital availability, without a paywall, can increase one’s readership substantially.

This is not to say that open access is easy to achieve; particularly in the humanities disciplines. The labour of publishing still must be remunerated, even if more technologically-orientated thinkers believe that much of this work could be taken on by authors to lower costs (just as the role of “typist” was absorbed into “author” with the advent of the word processor).² Institutional accreditation procedures can also motivate academics to publish in toll-access venues for purposes of appraisal and career accreditation, thereby slowing the rate of uptake of OA.³

I have been asked here, however, to discuss “the future of open access”. This is no easy task; for everything is easy to forecast, except the future. Those who would like more information about open access in general should see my book on the subject.⁴ In this section, though, I will now discuss three areas of potential future open-access expansion and evaluate the challenges and opportunities that each presents. These areas are: monographs, preprints, and humanities data.

1 Peter Suber, *Open Access*, Essential Knowledge Series (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012), p. 8 <<http://bit.ly/oa-book>>; Martin Paul Eve, *Open Access and the Humanities: Contexts, Controversies and the Future* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 1–3 <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781316161012>>.

2 For more on the absorption of the labour of typing into authorship, see Matthew G. Kirschenbaum, *Track Changes: A Literary History of Word Processing* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2016), pp. 139–65.

3 See Peter Suber, ‘Thinking about Prestige, Quality, and Open Access’, 2008 <<http://dash.harvard.edu/handle/1/4322577>> [accessed 21 April 2014].

4 Eve, *Open Access and the Humanities: Contexts, Controversies and the Future*.

Monographs

Annex C of the UK's Consultation on the Second Research Excellence Framework (REF) notes that the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE)/Research England "intend[s] to move towards an open-access requirement for monographs in the exercise that follows the next REF (expected in the mid-2020s)".⁵ While monographs have heretofore been excluded from OA mandates, this signal shows that research funders are interested in harnessing open, digital dissemination for research books. Such a move will likely cause alarm in the disciplinary space of English, but there are some reassurances. Any mandate at present stresses the co-production of print editions; the codex looks set to remain. HEFCE's document also follows Geoffrey Crossick's sensible report by hinting at liberal exemptions in areas with challenges of third-party copyright; creative writing; and trade-crossover books.⁶

However, as a member of the UUK/HEFCE Open Access Monographs Working Group, I undertook some economic analysis of the costs of such a mandate. There were 28,628 outputs across categories A (authored books), B (edited books), C (chapters in books), and R (scholarly editions) in REF 2014. Taking a rough measure of eight book chapters to be equal to a single book, this yields 17,032 outputs (with no de-duplication for entire edited books being double counted via all their individual chapters). Assuming HEFCE wanted a 75% compliance rate, this would be 12,795 outputs. In early 2017, a market average of open-access publication charges between Open Book Publishers (a small, new, but prominent and high-quality OA press), Manchester University Press, Cambridge University Press, and Palgrave Macmillan came to £6,725 per book. Rounding this up to £7,500 for mathematical convenience and the mandate would cost approximately £96m to move the UK's monographic REF outputs to a gold open-access mode over the next census period, or roughly £19m per year in a five-year cycle.⁷

5 HEFCE, 'Consultation on the Second Research Excellence Framework', *Higher Education Funding Council for England*, 2016, sec. Annex C <<http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/year/2016/201636/>> [accessed 2 May 2017].

6 Geoffrey Crossick, 'Monographs and Open Access: A Report for the Higher Education Funding Council for England', *Higher Education Funding Council for England*, 2015 <<http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/year/2015/monographs/>> [accessed 24 May 2015].

7 Figures derived from Martin Paul Eve and others, *Report of the Budget Transition Sub-Group* (Open Access

There are many complexities and nuances to these headline figures that I am unable to discuss here for reasons of space. Readers may be interested to know, though, that despite the fact that UK academic library budgets could not bear these costs, since the UK is alone moving faster on OA books than other nations and we must still purchase books from abroad, there are funding budgets that are large enough. The funds are, for instance, just 1.2% of the total QR allocation, 19.2% of the AHRC budget, or 9.6% of the ESRC budget. A combination of funding sources, then, could make this possible, were it not politically impossible to top-slice these budgets. It is also important to note, though, that it is not necessarily the case that a single business model (book processing charges) will be used to achieve OA, just as it is not in the journal space.⁸ That is to say that consortial funding mechanisms such as Knowledge Unlatched could also have a part to play in distributing costs worldwide.

In reality, this expense makes it likely that the proposed mandate will be scaled back albeit not removed entirely; the first of my future-spotting predictions. Certainly this is not to say that OA books will be forever impossible; the internet is not going away and other funders are vigorously pursuing OA monographs.⁹ It is also not to detract from any enthusiasm about the possibility of widespread digital dissemination of otherwise under-read humanities books. It is just to note that a smaller-scale pilot probably holds more potential over a decadal timeframe.

Preprints

In high-energy physics and other mathematical disciplines it is common to post working papers online on a site called *arXiv* (pronounced “archive” with the chi character). For authors this establishes priority over a claim, allows others to investigate their findings far more quickly, and creates a permanent record of the work. A recent initiative under Kathleen Fitzpatrick’s stewardship

Monographs Working Group, 2017).

8 For an example of a journal model that has no author-facing charges but maintains peer-review and high production quality, see the Open Library of Humanities, which I run with my colleague Dr Caroline Edwards.

9 ‘AAU, ARL, AAUP to Launch Open Access Monograph Publishing Initiative’, *AAUP*, 2017
<<http://www.aaupnet.org/news-a-publications/news/1561-aau-arl-aaup-to-launch-open-access-monograph-publishing-initiative>> [accessed 24 April 2017].

at the Modern Language Association – Humanities Commons – is helping to pioneer the practice in our subject area.

Of course, there are humanities disciplines that have a long history of sharing working papers. Philosophy, for instance, has a robust culture of sharing work in progress, even if these are not called “preprints”. (Although note, of course, the anachronistic nomenclature of “pre-print” implying the digital object’s originary status but defined teleology towards print.) Those working in various social sciences, which can cross-over into the study of English, also have the *SocArXiv*; an *arXiv* for their disciplinary space.¹⁰ My own crossover work in the social sciences greatly benefited from preprint exposure, gaining national media attention and invaluable peer feedback before undergoing formal review and publication.¹¹

MLA Commons and its underlying platform, CORE, though, form both a subject repository and a preprint server.¹² In the first of these functions, the MLA Commons asks users to deposit their accepted manuscript versions after publication; a procedure that will be familiar to most UK academic authors who work under REF conditions. Although this is hardly drastic news for those already subject to green OA mandates in the UK, it is likely to increase awareness of green deposit substantially in the United States, where centralised government policies have a far lesser effect on scholars’ behaviours. Of the most interesting statements from MLA Commons’s website, though, is the assertion that the site is “not just [for] articles and monographs”, exhorting users to “upload your course materials, white papers, conference papers, code, [and] digital projects”. Aside from the pedagogical angle here, that white papers and conference papers could be shared in a preserved digital environment is a relatively new development for English Studies. That said, there are always the pioneers who have led the way before such matters were formalised. For instance, Steven

10 SocOpen, ‘SocArXiv’, *SocOpen: Home of SocArXiv*, 2017 <<https://socopen.org/>>.

11 Samuel Moore and others, ‘Excellence R Us: University Research and the Fetishisation of Excellence’, 2016 <<https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.3413821.v1>>; Samuel Moore and others, ‘Excellence R Us: University Research and the Fetishisation of Excellence’, *Palgrave Communications*, 3 (2017) <<https://doi.org/10.1057/palcomms.2016.105>>.

12 Modern Language Association of America, ‘CORE’, 2016 <<https://mla.hcommons.org/core/>> [accessed 13 July 2017].

Connor, now the Grace 2 Professor of English at Cambridge, has shared the full texts of his conference papers in the open on his personal website for many years.¹³

Here, then, is the second of my reckless predictions: formalised, open digital sharing of informal pre-documents will become the norm in the spaces of English Studies. This will have many advantages for our disciplines in an era of globalised communication but one in which air travel becomes less and less tenable in the face of global warming. On the other hand, it will also open cans of worms around our double-blind peer-review processes. While I remain sceptical of such processes anyway (how often, in small literary sub-communities, is such reading actually blind?), in a time when pre-copies can be easily identified online and attributed to authors, will this model remain viable?

Humanities Data

For some, the term “humanities data” will be an oxymoron, antithetical to the study of culture and bringing an overwhelming quantifying bias that distorts the very purpose of the humanities. If, however, we change the term “data” to “evidence”, would the reaction be so strong? While “open data” comes from the natural sciences, we could bolster the rigour of the work we conduct in English Studies through the availability of “open evidence”. For we all draw upon source texts and artefacts as evidence that, often, could be made more accessible to reading publics than they are currently.

There are some difficulties. Often, it isn’t possible for our sources/evidence/data to be open access. Sometimes they are under copyright. Other times, source material is neither digital nor even has a digital-correlate object. Yet, sometimes we are referring to digital texts for hermeneutic projects; working on editions from Project Gutenberg, for example. Sometimes we have consulted digital manuscripts online. Sometimes people write about openly licensed works of e-literature. In these cases the possibility arises that, alongside other research outputs, copies of the underlying

¹³ Steven Connor, ‘Complete Listing’, 2017 <<http://stevenconnor.com/listing.html>> [accessed 13 July 2017].

“data” could be stored and preserved, making it viable for others to check and verify findings and arguments.

All this, of course, is not even to mention the rise of digital methods in the study of literature that do produce quantitative datasets. While these methods are far from prevalent and it is unclear how far they will spread, the same arguments from the natural sciences about replication, reproducibility, and verification hold here.¹⁴ In making underlying data openly available, the degree of confidence we can hold of such work is increased. Further, this also comes with the possibility that others will further our work, using the same datasets to re-evaluate and interpret the work.

Should the digital humanities continue to grow, there is also the question of software availability and preservation. Certainly, given the moves to open access in other areas, it would be disappointing were such work to fall back on closed software that was inaccessible to most people. Such arguments most likely have limited potential in this current moment but they could loom large for us, as they have in other fields of endeavour.

This, then, is my third prediction: ideas of open evidence, open data, or open software will eventually come to prominence in the field of English Studies. This is the most speculative of my predictions.

Conclusions

Open access is here to stay; the questions that remain pertain to scale and delivery routes. In my closing words, though, I do want to address one challenge that could be mounted against my thinking here. A frequently used argument is to suggest that the humanities should “not just follow the sciences” and to claim that open access is being “forced upon us” because of its progress in science.

¹⁴ See, for example, my Martin Paul Eve, ‘JSON-Encoded Textual Variance Between the Published Versions of David Mitchell’s *Cloud Atlas* in “an Orison of Sonmi ~451”’, *Journal of Open Humanities Data*, 2 (2016) <<https://doi.org/10.5334/johd.6>>.

I disagree profoundly. To resist practices that could bring so many benefits to our discipline simply to avoid change is a terrible loss for education, a loss for culture, and a loss for university study of human-made artefacts such as literature. Certainly, we can continue to debate how and at what pace we move to the open circulation of articles, books, ideas, data, conference papers, and software. We can discuss the implications of various open licenses. We must also not neglect economic realities and the need to remunerate labour, alongside concerns for the futures of our learned societies. But to argue that it would be better that interested people should pay to read research material becomes, to my ears, less convincing every day.

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