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Why should open access be moving quickly in the humanities?

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This article aims to provoke new discussions on open access in the humanities by offering a thought experiment. Based on an earlier article by Peter Suber, *Promoting Open Access in the Humanities*, in which nine points are identified and discussed to explain why open access is moving slowly in the humanities, this paper asks instead: Why should open access be moving quickly in the humanities? To answer this question, the author attempts to invert each of Suber's original points to identify a counter argument. The article concludes that change is occurring more quickly than one would suspect.

Why should open access be moving quickly in the humanities?

In November 2009 I was asked to speak at the OpenAccess.se meeting hosted by the Swedish National Library to address open access and the humanities from an international perspective (the Swedish title: *OA-publicering på frammarsch inom humaniora. Internationella initiativ och trender*).

In preparing for my presentation I came across a manuscript by Peter Suber, originally written for a lecture he gave in 2004 and later modified (Suber 2005). In his paper, Suber identifies nine challenges for the humanities with respect to adopting open access publishing models (in true Peter Suber style he also provides some suggestions for how to meet these challenges though I will not present those here.).

As a thought experiment, I decided to take each of Suber's nine points to see whether I could turn it on its head. Rather than asking, "Why is open access moving so slowly in the humanities?" I would instead ask, "Why should open access be moving quickly in the humanities?" Admittedly some of my answers to these questions are pro-

vocative and even naïve. But when we seek to break the boundaries of current discourse, which I believe is necessary in order for the humanities to move forward with open access, provocation and naiveté can be rather useful tools.

Below I present condensed versions of Peter Suber's points, followed by my alternative responses. I encourage all readers to visit Suber's original article to access his more developed arguments for each of these points.

Why is open access moving slowly in the humanities? Vs. Why should open access move quickly in the humanities?

Peter Suber: *“Journal prices are much higher in science, technology, and medicine than in humanities....affordable journals diffuse the urgency of reducing prices or turning to open access as part of the solution.”*

This is true. Theoretically then, it should mean that publishers and societies in scientific, technical and medical fields have much more to lose than their counterparts in the humanities. With less to lose, the humanities are freer to experiment.

Peter Suber: *“Much more STM research is funded than humanities research. There is more money in STM fields to pay for processing fees charged by open access journals.”*

At numerous conferences I have heard STM funders, such as the Wellcome Trust and the Howard Hughes Medical Institute, state that open access fees account for less than 1% of their overall spending. The publication of research is in actuality a very small proportion of the total cost of supporting research. Humanities research costs less than STM research, certainly. If we consider 1% of these smaller funds, the costs of funding open access in the humanities will be much less than for STM. Even if this figure climbs to 2%, given that humanities research generally costs less than say medical or technical research that might involve expensive equipment, the total cost to the humanities will still be less in total. Again, funders ought to be experimenting with open access in the humanities because it costs less.

As a side note, it is also the case that research councils and other bodies in the Nordic region provide publishing stipends to cover the costs of books publishing in the humanities, but as yet do not provide funding for the publication of individual articles.

Peter Suber: “*At least in the US, the government funds far more STM research than Humanities research. Hence the taxpayer argument for open access...is stronger in the STM fields.*”

This is also largely true in Europe, maybe even more so because most higher education facilities, including much of the research being conducted there, are funded through public taxes (channeled either through the institution or through national research councils).

When it comes to the taxpayer argument, one might expect a greater demand from taxpayers for insight into what humanities researchers are up to; quite simply because many taxpayers have no idea what humanities researchers actually investigate while they have a general sense of what cancer researchers, for example, are working towards. I have personally experienced more than one dinner party where I have had to defend some of the research I have been involved in publishing. If taxpayers are more skeptical to spending tax money on investigating Greek grammar than on e.g. cancer research, we should expect them to want more insight into what “those humanities people are doing.” And for humanities researchers, giving taxpayers access to their work gives an opportunity to demonstrate that some of this stuff is pretty darned interesting and useful!

Peter Suber: “*On average, humanities journals have higher rejection rates (70-90%) than STM journals (20-40%). This means the cost of peer review per accepted article is higher in the humanities, lower in STM fields.*”

This is generally true and a recently published study by Mary Waltham (2009) showed this to be the case for high profile humanities journals. But for precisely this reason, humanities editors should be looking to experimentation because they must process more manuscripts than STM editors. They have a greater incentive to move to an online system to improve efficiency and to experiment with open forms of review, etc. to make the review process easier. And besides, is this not what the *Lancet* and others in STM also argue?

Peter Suber: “*There is more public demand for open access to research on (say) genomics than Greek grammar...Funding agencies perceive STM research as ‘more useful’.*”

To respond to this issue I must first introduce the concept of the “Long Tail”, as developed and popularized by *Wired* Editor Chris Anderson (2006), and refer to his analysis of online music sales. Anderson points out that when

music sales moved from being sold in shops only to also being sold as individual tracks online, this had an historic impact on music sales. Storing bits of information and distributing them online is vastly cheaper than selling CDs in shops, which requires shelf space, transport, etc. Given the expenses, shops can only carry those CDs they have space for and can expect to sell a reasonable number of to cover costs and generate a profit. In contrast, online shops need only store bits, and the bits for each song only once as this can be distributed multiple times. This means that an online shop can carry all songs rather than a selection. As online sales of music have grown, a long tail has emerged. Some popular songs individually sell a large number of copies giving the sales curve its high point, the curve then declines and extends out into a seemingly endless long tail of individual tracks that sell fewer and fewer copies. But interestingly, everything sells. In the online environment everything can be discovered by niche communities, meaning that even the most esoteric music is discovered and bought by someone. Even more interesting is the fact that the combined sales of the long tail are greater than sales of the titles that make up the peak section of the sales curve. And this brings me to my argument for why open access should move quickly in the humanities.

Based on the Long Tail principle, open access to humanities research (online without barriers) will increase its discoverability and theoretically could lead to greater interest from niche communities (both researchers and enthusiasts of Greek Grammar and other subjects) that together form large masses. Although individual articles published in the *Lancet*, for example, are accessed by numbers that would dwarf the number of times individual humanities articles are accessed, the combined readership of humanities articles (the long tail of scholarly publications), possibly would outnumber the access to articles at the peak of the scholarly communications readership curve. In short, open access would help develop a long tail that in turn could make Humanities research look “more useful” to funders.

Peter Suber: “*Preprint exchanges meet more needs in the STM fields than in humanities. STM researchers need to know quickly what is happening in their microspecialization...urgency of timely notification of other work is greater in the STM fields than in the humanities.*”

This is true. But on the other hand, humanities re-

searchers must be aware of and read not only about their own microspecialization, but also about broader concepts that relate to their work and which are covered in large bodies of literature. Furthermore, it is not as easy to pull out small bits of information from humanities publications, which are often in the form of a book, making it cumbersome to carry out necessary literature reviews in the Humanities. Open access holds the potential of making it easier and quicker to discover necessary literature (and data-mining would make it easier to pull out bits of information). Moreover, the speed of discovery that is possible with open access may well fuel a healthy competition to publish more quickly in the humanities.

Peter Suber: *“Demand for journal articles in the humanities drops off more slowly after publication than demand for articles in the STM fields....humanities journals will worry more than STM journals that offering open access to articles after some embargo period, such as six months after publication, will jeopardize their revenue and survival.”*

As an open access publisher I am less concerned about embargo periods and more concerned about making original research immediately available, regardless of how “hot” it is. This makes distribution easier and less expensive. However, the issue then becomes how this publishing shall be paid for. And this is usually at the heart of the embargo period argument. In terms of paying for open access publishing in the humanities I would refer back to my argument for point 2 above. Funders should be interested in supporting potential publication charges in the humanities and/or supporting the operation of journals (e.g. through university libraries) in these areas. Articles published open access under a Creative Commons License that allows reuse, make this point mute.

But for those who would regard an embargo period as a possible means of continuing to sell subscriptions yet meet open access demands, Peter Suber himself raises this argument: “The revenue from selling access to old issues is miniscule, and losing that revenue will not harm a healthy journal...”

Peter Suber: *“Humanities journals often want to reprint poems or illustrations that require permission from a copyright holder. It’s much harder to get reprint permission for open access distribution than for a limited circulation, priced and printed journal. And when permission is granted, for either kind of*

distribution, it usually costs money. This is why open access will come last to art history.“

Hmmm....Had you been present for my presentation you would have seen that here I simply showed a large picture of former American President George Bush scratching his head in confusion on the overhead screen. Of all the arguments, this is the most difficult to address. Although efforts such as Wikimedia are helping to support the re-use of images under alternative licensing policies, we are a long way off from meeting the needs of art historians. I am hopeful, however. The Creative Commons has tackled more than one difficult area of proprietary usage policies. Usage rights to poems and illustrations may be one of the final frontiers to be tackled by the Commons.

Peter Suber: “Journal articles are the primary literature in the STM fields. But in the humanities, journal articles tend to report on the history and interpretation of the primary literature, which is books....The logic of open access applies better to articles, which authors give away, than to books, which have the potential to earn royalties.”

Reading this point I was reminded of a debate that was brewing while I was in Sweden working on my own PhD in Sociology. At that point in time sociologists wrote books to fulfill their dissertation requirements. Due to a shift in national funding policies the university administration was putting pressure on the department to move towards dissertations that consisted of a collection of published articles with an introduction (*sammanläggningsavhandling*). We were outraged, because as sociologists that just was *not* what we did. We wrote books. Period. On the same day that I was to give this talk, I visited my former department and asked one of the senior researchers there what type of dissertation PhD candidates typically submitted today. She looked at me like I had posed a very strange question and responded, “*sammanläggningsavhandlingar*, of course.”

I could argue here that change comes to those who wait, but I'd rather point out a more self-serving argument (for humanities researchers) in favor of publishing articles in the humanities. At the same time, however, I do not want to argue that one should throw the baby out with the bath water. Rather than regarding articles as a replacement for books, humanities researchers might choose to regard articles as an opportunity to market themselves, making themselves more discoverable to book publishers. Articles allow you

to publish 'teasers' of your work, and if that work is Open Access, this means wide dissemination to a greater number of potential publishers. At Co-Action Publishing we have seen the effects of this distribution on our journal *Ethics & Global Politics*, a political science journal that includes much political philosophy. We have received multiple requests for reprinting articles from this journal in anthologies and in different languages. The authors are thrilled.

Is there hope for change in the humanities?

Peter Suber's points and my own perceived need to argue counter to them might give the impression that humanities researchers are some rather conservative people. By and large it is probably true that change is moving most slowly in the humanities. However, it seems only fair to point out that Humanities folks are also trend setters in one area of open access publishing – books. Open access as applied to book publishing is a highly contested area. Yet, numerous projects on open access books publishing exist precisely within the humanities. These include the work of many university presses worldwide, the OAPEN project in Europe and the Open Humanities Press in North America, to name a few examples. The growth in publishing platforms run by university libraries across the Nordic region and elsewhere offer humanities researchers greater low-cost opportunities to test the waters of open access publishing and a growing number of open access mandates, also in the Humanities, across Europe indicate that not everyone is turning a blind eye to opportunity.

As Heath, Jubb and Robey (2008) report in the UK, "...if we step back and compare the current situation with the situation a decade ago, we may instead find the changes in the arts and humanities research landscape astonishing. At the very least, we perceive a bridgehead: new concepts and resources have become firmly established; it is possible that developments will accelerate from this point." An acceleration of open access in the humanities can be supported through more experimentation, the creation of central funds at an institutional level, open access mandating that also covers the humanities and dialogue between members of the humanities community to share experiences and set best practices. Change and acceleration might also emerge when we begin to ask new questions and look for opportunities rather than barriers.

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