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Open Access Publishing and the Ends of Scholarship

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Open Access Publishing and the Ends of Scholarship

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Fred Rascoe "Open Access Publishing and the Ends of Scholarship”

“It’s not about where you publish, it’s about who you can reach”

George Botz of the Max Planck Society, at the 2014 Open Access Ambassadors conference, Munich

1. In October of 2014, at the 29th International Conference on Medievalism held in Atlanta, I was privileged to co-host (along with J. Britt Holbrook from the Georgia Tech School of Public Policy) a panel on “Open Access in the Academy.” It was a large panel that featured many medieval scholars who engaged with each other and the audience on what Open Access means to their discipline, to their careers, and to humanities scholarship in general. The panel discussion was filmed and is available to view in SMARTech (Hahn, et al., 2014), but with this brief column I wanted to touch on an aspect of the discussion that, to me, is especially important: how we frame what Open Access is to us – not necessarily how we achieve it.

2. Open Access, or “OA,” is usually defined as making scholarly publications available online without barrier to access, and ideally with little or no restrictions on reusing that work. There are certainly granularities of this definition – you may have heard terms like “Green Open Access,” “Gold Open Access,” “Creative Commons,” “Text Mining,” “Remix Culture,” and so on. At the medievalism conference, I learned about a medievalist-theme definition called “Robin Hood Open Access.” If none of these terms is familiar, don’t worry, it’s not terribly important to this discussion. This is a more general discussion about how we, as scholars, view our own scholarship, and whether Open Access is a tool to help meet the goals of our scholarly work.

3. OA is often referred to as a means of distributing scholarship, a means whose efficacy is framed and controlled by others. There are the “others” in the commercial publishing industry, there are “others” in scholarly societies, there are the “others” in the tenure and promotion committees of faculty. Here are a few brief words about each of those “others.”

4. Publishers, for instance, are the trusted entities that have been producing the academic journals and conference proceedings. Medievalism, as many other historical fields of study, has some of its highly regarded titles published by commercial entities who do business by charging libraries, institutions, and individuals for access to the work produced by scholars. Of course, the scholars (and the peer reviewers and editors) typically do not benefit financially from the sale, but their payment comes in the form of the benefit of publishing in a respected title, presumably for a greater impact on the field. Scholars sometimes worry about keeping publishers in business to preserve this benefit, and whether

Open Access will jeopardize that business. The cost of that benefit, in addition to the free labor provided, is that scholarship remains behind the publisher's paywalled access barrier.

5. Scholarly societies also publish journals and proceedings, and of course provide other benefits to a community of scholars in a certain area or discipline. Medievalists, like those in any other field, want their active professional societies to remain healthy and vibrant to facilitate that sense of community and promote shared ideas. The benefit to the scholar is that there are organizations, conferences, and publications produced by and for scholars dedicated to a field of study, so their work can directly have an impact on their peers. Scholars sometimes worry that by making society scholarship Open Access, the benefits provided by the society will cease to be funded. The cost of that benefit is that often the scholarly work produced by the members has to be kept behind a paywall. Those outside the society will have to pay if they are to read and benefit from the work published by a society; after all, the operation of an organization, a conference, or a society journal costs money.

6. Promotion and tenure committees are vital parts of the success of an academic. They often include departmental (disciplinary) peers who evaluate a body of scholarly work, along with the impact that a scholar's research has had on the field of study or the community at large. Disciplinary peers on these committees are usually familiar with the highest regarded journals and conferences associated with a certain field, and those members of the committee who are not direct disciplinary peers of the faculty member under consideration for tenure or promotion usually grant disciplinary peers a high degree of respect when evaluating a faculty member's scholarship (Holbrook, 2013). Just seeing a certain title or a certain conference on the CV of a faculty member up for tenure or promotion can serve as a quick shorthand for knowing that the work they are reviewing was vetted by experts and deemed worthy of dissemination in the respected titles of the field. The benefit to the scholar is that they have clear goals to shoot for in creating a body of work that such a committee will view favorably. In fact, a candidate's record of scholarly publication is the most important factor in whether she is granted tenure or a promotion (Holbrook 2013). Since their first consideration is publishing in a venue that is looked on favorably by disciplinary peers, and since the best journals in a field are often not Open Access, scholars might worry that anything published Open Access will be frowned upon by the promotion committee. The cost is that often the broader impact or availability of the scholarly work is not a scholar's first priority in their decision to publish.

7. I'm a librarian by profession, and I am not interested in dismantling any of these above institutions, or even changing them radically. As a librarian, although I know how much academic journals cost -- and it's a lot (Bergstrom, 2014)-- I also know that it is important to have prestigious and respected journal titles in any given field and to insure access to those titles to scholars.

8. What I am interested in is changing the frame of the discussion a little bit. In each of the above entities that frame how we think of OA (publishers, scholarly societies, tenure and promotion committees) it is the presumption of the impact of scholarship that is the thread that ties them all together and gets to the heart of what is important about scholarly work. Scholars, rightly in my opinion, seek for their research and scholarly output to, above all, have a wide impact through being of value to their field and to the community of scholars as a whole.

9. If scholars are thinking about their impact first, then Open Access becomes a tool to open doors of access to share that impact with those who may not have had the benefit before. As my panel co-host Britt Holbrook puts it, “we have to think about the ends of scholarship,” rather than just the means of scholarly dissemination (Holbrook, 2014). If we can focus on our goals for the ends of scholarship, then suddenly the means of that dissemination can open wide into an almost infinite array of possibilities, including both the traditional publishing model and emerging Open Access models, plus many other means of disseminating literature and data which are fast coming to prominence in our digital age.

10. So my very humble suggestion is, when you are thinking about what Open Access is and what it means to you, avoid framing the discussion in terms of the impact of Open Access on the “others” (publishers, scholarly societies, or tenure and promotion committees). Think about what the ends of your scholarship are and then figure out the best means to achieve those ends. Perhaps Open Access is one of those means that can help you get where you want to go and have the sort of impact you want to have.

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