



Fast and slow at the same time

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Fast and slow at the same time

Peter Suber

May 2023

Congratulations to SciELO for 25 years of innovative open access publishing, influential advocacy, and inspiring growth.

To honor its birthday, I'd like to expand on a recommendation I've only made briefly in the past.

We should work for open access on all fronts at once. For example, we should work for OA through journals and repositories, universities and funders, libraries and publishers, authors and readers, policies and practices, for-profits and non-profits, journals and books, preprints and postprints, data and code, sciences and humanities, north and south, all at once.

I want to focus here on a special case of this parallel processing that is often overlooked. *We should pursue fast and slow strategies at the same time.*

Here are some examples of faster, short-term strategies:

- publish more work in OA journals
- deposit more work in OA repositories
- enable more authors to retain the rights to their work
- cover more new publications with open licenses
- make more new work open without embargoes
- negotiate better agreements with publishers next year
- correct more misunderstandings about OA itself

Here are some slower, long-term strategies:

- adopt strong OA policies at more funders and universities, and strengthen policies that already exist, for example to eliminate embargoes and add open licenses

- reform research assessment, for example to drop perverse metrics, stop mistaking impact for quality, and stop outsourcing judgments of quality to publishers
- amend copyright law to facilitate OA to research
- build, improve, and adopt open infrastructure for open research
- move away from article processing charges
- move away from read-and-publish agreements

We can make incremental progress on the faster strategies every day, and we should. But we can't afford to wait on the slower strategies while we work on the faster ones, or vice versa. To avoid unnecessary delays, we must work on both sets at the same time.

This kind of fast-slow parallelism isn't strange if you've ever started a soup on slow simmer while you work on the salad and sides, or if you support immediate steps toward climate adaptation while working toward the longer, harder, and deeper goal of climate mitigation.

If we accept the wisdom of fast-slow parallelism, then we must also accept that the slower strategies are — well — slower. When the faster strategies are obstructed, our impatience is understandable, even functional. But we can't bring that impatience to the slower strategies. On the contrary, we must bring the patience and persistence they demand. We can't lose hope, energy, or motivation when we encounter the friction and cultural inertia that make these strategies slow. Indeed, one ground for optimism in the face of difficulties and harmful trends is the mere fact that we're playing the long game.

One long-term goal of the OA movement is to reach the point at which OA is routine or second nature. This is slightly stronger than saying that OA should be the default. It's about attitudes and habits, not policies. It's about culture, not cultivation. OA should be as ordinary and unexceptionable as publishing. Researchers today would find it unthinkable to finish a new piece of work and leave it hidden on their hard drive. It should be just as unthinkable to finish a new piece of work and leave it hidden behind a paywall or shielded by an all-rights-reserved copyright.

One critical strategy to get us there is for researchers and their institutions to care more about research itself than where it is published or (specifically on articles) to care

more about article quality than journal prestige, brand, or metrics. But this is a slow, long-term strategy.

We can take steps in the right direction by making OA easy (technically, legally, and financially), and we should. We can also reform research assessment to expect and reward OA, and we should. But those steps merely make a start on the needed changes to research culture.

We make incremental progress by caring more than we do now about research itself and less than we do now about the brand, prestige, or metrics of the venue where it is published.

The further we go along this path, the less it will matter where new research is published. Note that this is goal-setting by will, not prediction by evidence or trends. The aspiration is that research authors and research readers won't care where new research is published. Promotion and tenure committees won't care. Funders won't care. It won't matter whether authors make their work OA through journals, repositories, or other channels still to come. Above all, journal name, prestige, and metrics won't matter. Journal business models won't matter, at least to researchers and research institutions. If some journals charge author- or reader-side fees, and researchers shun them for that reason, nobody will care except the journals themselves, which in time will either change their models or quit the field.

It will only matter that new works meet certain functional conditions, for example, OA under open licenses, with adequate metadata, exposed to peer-review services, hosted on open infrastructure, running under open standards, interoperable with related platforms and tools, subject to effective discovery and preservation, in file formats friendly to humans and machines, and so on.

This long-term strategy is intimately tied to our short-term strategies. Research culture changes through the cumulative successes of our faster, short-term strategies.

This long-term strategy is slow because we can't directly engineer cultural change. We can create new incentives, and we should. But incentives start as "nurture" and take time to become "nature". It takes time to think of good incentives, time to adopt them,

time for them to have their effects, and time for new practices to become new habits. It's not just a challenge to our patience. It's a challenge to our imagination.

In the short and medium term, we want to change policies, journals, publishers, repositories, business models, prices, licenses, tools, services, platforms, infrastructures, and incentives. But in the long term we want to change research culture, and changing culture is the longest of long games. To do this in the full spirit of parallelism, we must keep the long-term goal in mind while occupied with our foreground projects and exertions, like mountain climbers who never forget the summit while focusing on the zig-zag path and loose rocks in front of their feet.

One difficulty with fast-slow parallelism is that progress on the most important goals is slow. Another is our natural impatience. A third and more delicate difficulty is that not all friends and colleagues see the need to pursue fast and slow strategies at the same time. It's always easier to find allies on short-term strategies than long-term strategies, for the same reason that it's easier to hitch a ride to the next town than the town ten exits further down the road. It's hard enough to play the long game on its own terms. It's harder to play it with the dispiriting twist that many research institutions embrace inadequate interim solutions that may function as obstacles to long-term solutions. Part of working on all fronts at once is to work constructively with all friends and allies, if necessary on short-term projects alone, and if possible on long-term projects as well.

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