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Open Access helps both: authors and readers

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Peter Suber in an interview with Bodo Rödel (24 June 2022)

"Open Access helps both: authors and readers"

Bodo Rödel: Dear Dr. Peter Suber, thank you very much for being available for an interview. Your book "Open Access" (see Suber 2012b) has become an important reference in the Open Access discourse. Since when have you been dealing with the topic of Open Access and what made you deal with the topic of Open Access? Finally, what was your motivation to write the book about Open Access?

Peter Suber: Thanks. It's good to talk with you. When the web was new, I made HTML editions of my print publications and put them online. Mostly I wanted to experiment with the web and play with HTML. But I soon learned that the free online editions of these works — in philosophy and law — received more serious attention, and more quickly than the print editions ever had. I started getting useful feedback from people in my fields, invitations to conferences, and citations to my work. I stumbled across what is now obvious, that the internet is a powerful medium for research. I looked around for other researchers who had stumbled across the same fact and were either writing about it or launching projects to take advantage of it. There were not many. But as I found them, I reached out and we began corresponding about new developments and future possibilities. In 2001, I launched my newsletter and wrote it for more than a dozen years. I wrote my 2012 book on OA to step back a bit from the detailed analysis in my newsletter and present the bigger picture.

Bodo Rödel: As you pointed out, the digital age has opened up new opportunities for sharing research. Scientists can publish with conventional or open-access publishers, deposit their work in an OA repository, or post it to another sort of OA platform. In your opinion, how will the publication landscape in science change in the medium and long term? Will we still need publishers in the future?

Peter Suber: Platforms for sharing research will continue to evolve and diversify. Today some support multimedia and some don't. Some support peer review and some don't. Some like wikis support community edits and some don't. Some like PubPub let authors update older versions with built-in version control and some don't. I look forward to further steps in this evolution. One reason is that these adaptations support evolving genres for scholarship itself.

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We are already moving beyond the traditional genres of the article, monograph, dissertation, and dataset. Some of us want to push the envelope and experiment with very different containers for research, but find ourselves held back by the inflexibility of current platforms. We need infrastructure to catch up with our creativity. Speaking for myself, I'd like to see better infrastructure to support what I call open-access evidence racks (see Suber 2012a).

If publishing just means making a work public, then no, we won't need publishers in the future and don't even need them today. We'll always need platforms for sharing or making work public. But those can be built, maintained, and governed by organizations very different from what we now call publishers.

If publishing includes different kinds of added value, such as peer review, metadata, preservation, and discoverability, then the need for publishers is steadily declining. More and more of these kinds of added value are emerging as separate services interoperable with sharing platforms. I see no end to this process and no reason to want to end it. We're moving toward a living ecosystem of tools and services running on open infrastructure under open standards and open APIs for interoperability. When the ecosystem is sufficiently mature, users will be able to replace one module with another, as new ones emerge that better suit local needs, cultures, economics, and research genres.

Among other benefits, this evolution will separate peer review from distribution, which will remove the incentive — and power — of peer-review providers to limit access to the content.

For many people, publishing also means brand or prestige. But that's a feature of current publishing that we can do without, and the sooner the better. However, the pull of brand and prestige is a cultural obstacle, not a legal, economic, or technical obstacle, and there are no shortcuts to cultural change. It's a long game and we must commit ourselves to it, and not let ourselves be satisfied with inadequate interim solutions, such as finding money to pay APCs at high-prestige APC-based journals. As we change the research culture, and let ourselves care more about the quality of new work than where it was published, then there will be no reason to pay a prestige tax to publish new work in certain branded venues.

Bodo Rödel: In your last answer important terms like "prestige" and "APC" are mentioned. The discussion in the German open access community is essentially about funding. In a research project[1], the Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training (BIBB) asked authors of vocational training research about Open Access. One result was that the authors are essentially concerned with increasing their reputation and therefore publishing in renowned journals. Whether this happens open access is less important. Do you think that "soft aspects" such as reputation and quality are sufficiently taken into account in the open access debates?

1 See URL: www.bibb.de/oabbf (accessed 28 June 2022).

Given the importance of reputation building through publications in closed access journals, how can up-and-coming young researchers, who have yet to build an academic reputation, be supported and motivated to publish open access?

Peter Suber: You're right that authors are very concerned to publish in journals high in prestige or metric scores. But on the whole, this concern is a side effect of the ways universities and funders assess and reward research. That's one good reason to reform research assessment. When universities and funders care less about where or how research is published, and more about its quality, then authors can also care less about where or how it is published. They will see no point in paying for journal brand, let alone paying extra for journal brand.

But it's important to add that changing research assessment is a long-term goal unattainable in the short-term. For the foreseeable future, while we work to change research culture, we have to deal with the reality of prestige and metric scores as strong incentives for authors. Part of dealing with them is to realize that they needn't function as obstacles to OA. There are two reasons, roughly speaking, a gold one and a green one. First, there are already many OA journals high in prestige and metric scores. Second, authors can publish in high-prestige non-OA journals and still make their work OA through repositories. Too many publishing researchers are still unaware of these facts. Hence, as I've argued (see Suber 2012b), we can concede that today most publishing scholars will choose prestige over OA if they have to choose. However, the good news is that they rarely have to choose. The bad news is that few of them know that they rarely have to choose.

You are right to mention early-career researchers. Too often they are the rope in a tug-of-war between their funders, who want OA, and their promotion and tenure committees, who want high-prestige journals, whether or not they are OA. Again, this problem will disappear when promotion and tenure committees care more about the quality of research than where it was published. But again, those reforms are still over the horizon. Fortunately we needn't wait. When early-career researchers face pressure from their promotion and tenure committees to publish in high-prestige non-OA journals, they can do so and still make their work OA by depositing it in an OA repository. Most non-OA journals already permit this. Authors can raise the percentage to nearly 100% if they use the Plan S rights-retention strategy or work to adopt a Harvard-style rights-retention OA policy at their institutions.

Of course I acknowledge that it's convenient for promotion and tenure committees to use journal prestige or metric scores as surrogates for quality. But that's an abdication of our responsibility as scholars and has terrible consequences for university budgets and access to research.

By the way, I also acknowledge (see Suber 2008) that journal prestige tends to attract quality, just as quality tends to attract prestige. However, there are many circumstances in which quality and prestige diverge, and academics must put quality ahead of prestige.

Bodo Rödel: On the subject of quality and prestige, one more demand: In many ways, publications in influential English-language journals are the most important currency in the

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global academic job market. To what extent can Open Access publications offer an alternative currency?

Peter Suber: I think a lot about multilingual research. On the one hand, it's highly desirable. The dominance of one language creates obstacles, stress, expense, and rejection for excellent scholars whose first language happens not to be the lingua franca. It also creates an unearned advantage for scholars whose first language happens to be the lingua franca. On the other hand, a lingua franca is also desirable to facilitate global communication. I don't see an easy resolution to this dilemma.

By the way, I'm very aware that my native language is the lingua franca today, and that I benefit from the unearned advantage I just mentioned. But the points I want to make about multilingual research would not change if the lingua franca were Latin, Chinese, Spanish, or another language.

Any adequate solution will involve publishing new works in more than one language, and most of these solutions are orthogonal to OA. That is, we could adopt them without adopting OA, and we could adopt OA without adopting any solution to multilingual research. But at least one solution does arise from OA itself. Open licenses are an essential part of OA, and most open licenses make translation simpler and faster. Potential translators need not identify the rightsholder, need not ask the rightsholder for permission, need not wait for an answer, and need not face 'no' for an answer. For this purpose, CC BY is the best license since it permits derivative works and even permits their sale. CC BY NC also permits translations but not their sale. At the other end of the spectrum, CC BY NC ND blocks permission for derivative works, including translations, or requires special permission for them.

Some open tools like Wikidata and Wikifunctions are multilingual and have already been used (see Harrison 2021) to keep the different language editions of Wikipedia in sync on basic facts. This doesn't directly help scholarly journals but it's a powerful step forward and a sign of the kind of help we can expect as the genres of scholarship continue to evolve beyond traditional journal articles.

Other potential solutions arise from the digital medium, not from OA itself. For example, machine translation. Whether you think it's already adequate for minimal scholarly purposes, or still inadequate, at least it's a good start and continuously improving.

The digital medium also means that digital journals don't labor under the length or space limits of print journals. Hence, if they are willing, they could publish multiple copies of an accepted article, for example, in the lingua franca and author's first language, when the two differed. The journal could even solicit translations into a handful of other languages. For example, a 2021 article on multilingual research was published in six languages (see Henry et al. 2021), partly to live up to its own recommendations and partly to show that it could be done. A new OA journal on indigenous and minority languages publishes in the target languages to ensure that it serves the communities it discusses (see Sanchez 2022).

Of course it can be expensive and time-consuming to arrange for multiple translations and ensure that they are good. A simpler alternative moving in the same direction is to publish abstracts in multiple languages, as recommended in a 2008 editorial (see Fung 2008).

Sometimes we find OA and multilingualism connected even when we can't easily see the reasons why. For example, Chinese journals published in English have stronger open-data policies than Chinese journals published in Chinese (see Wang et al. 2022), and diamond OA journals are multilingual almost three times more often than APC-based OA journals (see Bosman et al. 2021).

Bodo Rödel: Our edited book is mainly about open access in one specific research area: vocational education and training. Do you think the challenges and potentials of open access are broadly similar across academic disciplines, or are particular traditions and disciplinary habitus important in this respect?

Peter Suber: For better or worse, disciplines matter. They differ in size and funding. They differ in relevant cultural attitudes and practices, such as familiarity with OA and willingness to share preprints, data, and code. They differ in the availability and use of disciplinary or subject-based repositories. In some fields, the major funding agencies have strong OA policies, while in others funder policies are rare, weak, or both. Some fields have a longer history of OA, and hence more success stories and working examples to educate and encourage newcomers. Some base research assessment mostly on journal articles, and some base it more on books, which are much harder to make OA than articles. In the sciences, quantitative metrics like journal impact factors are almost universal, while they are less common in the humanities. In some fields, truth, glory, and money are all at stake in new research, while in others only truth and glory are at stake. In funded scientific research, the cost of research is usually greater than the cost of publication, sometimes thousands of times greater, while that's rarely the case in the humanities. In the sciences, the demand for new articles drops off soon after publication, while in the humanities it lasts much longer, which affects the financial case for embargoes. In some fields, immediate or unembargoed access to new research is more urgent, while in other fields it's less urgent. Journals in the social sciences and humanities have higher rejection rates than in the natural sciences, which increases their costs per published article. In some fields, like computer science, cutting-edge research is presented first in conferences, not journals, and in other fields the reverse is true. In most fields, authors seldom need to include images under copyright by others, but scholars in art history don't enjoy that luxury. Some fields like particle physics are small enough that most authors have university-subsidized access to all or most journals in the field. That's what made SCOAP3 possible. But in larger fields authors are much more likely to face access gaps in what their library can provide. The Ingelfinger Rule, which inhibits the use of OA preprints, may be declining in every field, but some fields like medicine still use it more than other fields. Returning to multilingual research for a moment, journals in the sciences get more submissions

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from non-native speakers than journals in the humanities, which affects their need for copy editors and their operating expenses.

But having said all that, the benefits of OA are essentially the same in all fields. In all fields, OA helps both authors and readers. It helps authors reach a wider audience and amplify their impact. It helps readers find, retrieve, read, and use the research they need.

Bodo Rödel: The central organization for research funding in Germany DFG (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft – German Research Foundation) supports the "Action Plan for Diamond Open Access" of Science Europe, *cOAlition S* and OPERAS (see DFG 2022). Is this the long-term strategic solution for Open Access – tax-financed organizations provide the infrastructure to publish professional publications at no cost to authors or readers? What is your opinion on this subject?

Peter Suber: Kudos to DFG for endorsing the Action Plan for Diamond OA. I'm happy to say that Harvard Library has done the same and was one of the first libraries to do so (see Harvard Library 2022).

There are many long-term strategies for OA, not just one. But advancing diamond OA journals is certainly one of them. For details and arguments, see the Budapest Open Access Initiative 20th anniversary recommendations (Budapest Open Access Initiative 2022), in which I participated. See especially Recommendation 3 on taking full advantage of green and diamond OA. The BOAI recommendations are a consensus document, not just my thinking, but they capture my thinking very well.

You mention taxpayer-funded infrastructure. To me, open infrastructure is enough. It doesn't have to be taxpayer-funded. But it could well be taxpayer-funded, and I'd like to see more governments, including public funding agencies, feel more responsibility for building or improving open infrastructure for open research. In this context I'm talking about research-hosting platforms, not other kinds of infrastructure. To me, open platforms run on free and open-source software, operate under open standards, use open APIs for interoperability, whenever possible, are owned or controlled by nonprofit organizations. Note that we say more about this in Recommendation 1 of the BOAI 20th anniversary statement.

Dear Peter Suber, thank you very much for this interesting interview.

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