

Why open access makes no sense

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- Academic research is different in kind from industrial contract research where the funder determines the activity and therefore is entitled to decide the use to which the results are put.
- The inspiration for research-council projects come from academics who therefore should retain the right to determine the form and location of the outputs.
- There is no clear dividing line between projects funded by research councils and an academic's daily activities of thinking and teaching. If there are fees for access to teaching there should be fees for access to research.
- Under the current system quality control is encouraged, and so is writing for a broader rather than a narrower readership.
- Under Gold OA there is a risk that the amount of work published increases and the quality decreases as publishers seek to maximise income from APCs.

The fundamental argument for providing open access to academic research is that research that is funded by the taxpayer should be available to the taxpayer. Those who have paid for the research, it is urged, should not have to pay a second time for access to the publication of that research. Proponents of what has come to be called 'open access' claim that this is simply obvious, but in fact this argument mistakes the fundamental nature of academic research, it mistakes the nature and process of academic publication, and it mistakes what is involved in providing access to academic research. I shall limit my claims here to research in the Humanities, but very similar arguments apply to research in the sciences also.

The argument about open access was first applied by research councils to specifically-funded research. Although it is the potential extension of the argument to cover all research done by those employed on contracts which require them to do research that has aroused greatest concern, the argument for open access does not follow even for research projects funded by research councils.

When I propose to a research council or similar body that I will investigate a set of research questions in relation to a particular set of data, the research council decides whether those are good questions to apply to that data-set, and in the period during which I am funded by that research council, I investigate those questions, so that at the end of the research I can produce my answers. The false assumption behind open access is that this is exactly parallel to what would happen if I were a commercial researcher. In that case a company would commission me to do market research; they would pay me on the basis that I spent my time doing that market research; I would carry out that market research during whatever period I was paid for; and at the end I would deliver my results to the company who had paid me.

The problem is that the two situations are quite different. In the first case, I propose both the research questions and the data-set to which I apply them. In the second the company commissioning the work supplies the questions and may supply or determine also the data-set to which the questions are applied. In the first case the researcher wants to do the work, and the research council is persuaded that that research has more claim on its funds than other research proposals it has before it. In the second case the company commissioning the research wants that research done and the researcher does it because that is what they are employed to do.

But the differences go further than this important question of who sets the agenda. Suppose that I have a project to investigate whether the overthrow of King James II in 1688 brought about less liberal attitudes among the population at large. This might involve my proposing to discover some evidence (how many crimes of what sort are mentioned in the Church Court records for 1687 in Berkshire, and how this compares with the number of crimes of similar sorts in January 1690) in order to investigate my hypothesis (that the Glorious Revolution of 1688–9 had consequences for popular toleration). Formally this looks to be much like the act of market research: the act of research involves assembling a database and sorting it. The result of the research can be expressed as a quantity, or as a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answer to a simple question or series of questions.

If this were a piece of commercial contract research, those who commissioned it might want simply to know the answer. They would have directed me to the database, and my job would have been to tell them what I found in the database relevant to their concerns. They are unlikely to want my database, particularly since they have employed me precisely because I have analytical resources (skill, time) they don't have. What they want is my results, probably expressed in numerical form.

What is it that the research council wants from my publication? On the parallel of contract research they would not want me to publish my database (the list of all the crimes recorded in those records for those periods, sorted by type of crime); nor would they be asking me to publish my research decisions – an account of how I chose what to look at first, how looking at that led me to look at the next item, and so on. Rather they would want me to publish my results – a table showing how many crimes were mentioned in those records at those dates, what the degree of correlation was, and a short explanatory text. My proposal to do this research was framed in terms of my answering of certain questions, and so, on the parallel of contract research, publishing that research should mean publishing the answers to those questions.

But this isn't what publication of Humanities research means at all. Reporting a correlation may be sufficient for consumer research, but for Humanities research a list of correlated data would be essentially meaningless. What Humanities research expects to do is bring out the significance of correlations by putting them into a framework. That framework depends upon, and displays, the understanding that the researcher has achieved. Publishing research is a pedagogical exercise, a way of teaching others, not a way of giving others information which they are expected to handle on the basis of what they have already been taught.

To publish my understanding of crimes in Berkshire in 1687 and 1690 is to publish something of which the work I did while publicly-funded by the research council is a necessary but by no means a sufficient element. My understanding will partly be what I brought to the research in the first place, and the reason why I seemed a good person to do the research. And

while in part I may have come to it while collecting the data I was publicly-funded to collect, mostly it will be based on my wider understanding of the world. Some of my understanding is very likely to have been casually acquired – from something I read in *The Guardian* on a Saturday morning, from an idea an undergraduate pupil gave me when I was teaching them in the month after my research leave ended. Some of my understanding may actually not be mine at all, but the product of submitting a paper to a journal and having the anonymous referee point out to me that my own ideas were implausible and that the data I had offered were better understood differently.

Conversely, too, my research has an effect on my wider understanding. If my publication on crimes in Berkshire is to be reckoned publicly-funded research, then all my subsequent publications should be so reckoned also – for my understanding of the world will have been changed by my work on Berkshire crimes. My Berkshire research will be as much necessary for future publications as it was for this one. The only difference in this case is that this publication makes explicit use of the data on Berkshire.

Whereas the contract researcher is employed because they understand already a way of interpreting the sorts of data correlations they are being asked to find, and understand it because that way of interpreting such data correlations is well-recognised, fitting new data into an established framework, Humanities research collects new data with a view to forging a new framework of understanding. The researcher starts with a hunch that there might be a pattern in a particular data-set. The data-set is then formed, often from material that was not itself created in relation to the question the researcher is asking (the church court records were there before I ever thought of my question), but is a by-product of other activity. The publication of the database itself will tell others nothing at all without the framework which I supply – a framework which, if this is cutting-edge research, only I will be in a position to supply. It is my persuasive rhetoric (aka strong argument) that situates the evidence I have assembled into a context in which that evidence says something interesting, and that context is constructed on the basis of other material and of theories which were not collected during that funding period, or often of any funding period.

Giving open access merely to the data-set on Berkshire would be like giving access to a labyrinth without handing over a plan.

There is a logic to the current pattern of academic research. The debts I owe for any piece of research I publish are not simply, or even primarily, to the body that funded me to collect some data, nor indeed to the co-authors and collaborators who may be named at its head or in its first or last footnote. Under the long-prevailing pattern of research-funding and publication, I am given money for research (whether by a research council or by my own university as part of my salary) on the grounds that in the past I have shown that I can do interesting things with the data I have collected with due diligence. A granting body takes the decision that my applying my mind to further bodies of data and asking further questions is something likely to lead me to thoughts that will impress my academic peers. The reasonable expectation of the granting body is that I will not keep my research apart from the rest of my academic life – that I will employ the knowledge and understanding that I gain in my casual and less casual conversations with pupils and colleagues (in the lecture room, in the common room, in seminars) and that this knowledge and understanding will be found sufficiently stimulating by others that they want to be taught by me, encourage others to come and be taught by me, join my research group, invite me to conferences, ask me to advise on projects, and so on.

There is a logic too to the way in which we publish academic research. The granting body also has a reasonable expectation, policed by the publication plans that I am expected to declare when I apply for a grant and by the periodic research assessment exercises by which the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) check on what is done with their research money, that, beyond merely this more or less informal exploration of my ideas, I submit my ideas to the more formal scrutiny of publication. In doing so I invite others to engage with my arguments and to assess their cogency and expression. When I send in my paper or book I expect the journal or publisher to select appropriate readers, and those readers to engage with my material and claims. Those readers may have little to say; they may say a great deal. I may be invited to revise and resubmit. I may be rejected, by that journal or publisher and have to consider how

to reformulate what I am claiming before submitting to an alternative publication. When the publication appears it will have been shaped along the way by a great many inputs, none of them funded by those who funded my research.

Declaring that a publication would not have been possible without grant X or employment by University Y is easy. Attributing the publication itself to a particular funding body is simply impossible. Some of what is there should be attributed to QR funding (research funding distributed to universities by the four UK higher education funding bodies on an annual basis) some to a British Academy Small Grant, some to a research project grant, some to an earlier research project grant. Some of what is there needs to be attributed to the Arts and Humanities Research Council, who funded one of the graduates who offered a crucial example from their own doctoral research, some to the Deutscher Akademischer Austausch Dienst who were funding a visiting student who asked a sharp question, some of it to my college who funded the Junior Research Fellow whose own work on a quite different topic provided a model for one of the arguments. Much of it cannot be attributed to a funding body at all – the thoughts were had, and much of the substantive work done, not during hours when it might seem reasonable to reckon my time to have been bought by a research council, or indeed by my main employer, but in my own time (and not infrequently when I was in bed).

Currently the costs of making my research available to a wider world are borne by the wider world that wants to know where my research has got me, and that thinks from the title, place, and nature of my publication that my publication can teach them something they would like to know. A market operates. I publish my research in a great number of different ways, ways that are adapted to the needs of different readerships. By my choice of highly specialist journal, generalist journal, university press or a popular publisher, in a magazine for sixth-formers or a political weekly, I signal to whom I think I have made my research accessible. Those who, on the basis of those signals, expect that they will understand and are interested enough in what I think and what I have said, pay for access to my thoughts.

There is an entirely virtuous relationship here between my publication and others' research and publication. When I write, I build in expectations about my readership, about what they already know, about how they read my text, a text that is inevitably written in relation to other texts, some of which it will reference, some of which it will 'take as read'. If I write things that those who read find sufficiently accessible and sufficiently interesting they encourage others to read it, the journal or magazine finds itself in higher demand, the publisher sells more books, and those who have contributed in more or less unseen ways to my publication (referees, editors, etc.) find themselves rewarded, if not financially then by seeing their publications flourish and their contributions acknowledged. If what I publish is popular it enables other research to be encouraged; journals can take pieces they are less confident about because they know that readers will think this a good issue because it has my article in it; learned societies that own journals will gain more members because more people want to read my paper, and will recycle their income in more grants that will enable graduate students to go to conferences or young scholars to pay for expensive illustrations that will bring their own work to life; publishers are enabled to take additional titles because of the return they have had from my title. Under the current system quality control is encouraged, and so is writing for a broader rather than a narrower readership.

Imagine a world of so-called 'Gold' open access in which the costs of my publishing my research are borne by me or by my university. Purely Gold journals have no concern for satisfying subscribers or for the number of readers. Since payments are not dependent upon the nature of the journal, the quality of editorial input or the quality of the final product there is no incentive to take care over any of these. Since payments are being made for publication, the only limit on how much is published is how much is being paid for. Nor is there any concern for whether the research is, in intellectual terms, accessible. Accessibility has become a matter of there being no charge, not a matter of making oneself widely understood. The size of journals increases, the quality of journals declines, the papers become less widely readable, the job of editing becomes less rewarding – indeed the most important quality of the editorial department becomes its value for money, that is how many articles can be handled by how few staff.

The relationship here between my publication and others' research and publication has become vicious. At the end of the day the paper published in a Gold open access journal becomes less widely read – it has been less improved by editorial intervention and less required to be accessible. Since the more international the journal, the less the incentive to go over to open access, UK scholars who are obliged to publish in Gold open access journals will end up publishing in journals that are less international and, for all that access to them is cost-free, are less accessed in fact. UK research published through Gold open access will end up being ignored. Those who are really concerned with getting their views across to those they wish to influence will seek out journals and other forms of publication that are not open access, publishing their really interesting findings in those, and publishing in Gold open access journals token papers to satisfy research council or HEFCE stipulation.

There can be no such thing as free access to academic research. Academic research is not something to which free access is possible. Academic research is a process – a process which universities teach (at a fee). It is neither a database, nor the ways and techniques by which the database is manipulated. Just as my database is useless to you without your having the skills to manipulate it, so those skills are useless to you without the database. Research-funding pays researchers to enable them to form databases not previously formed in order to hone skills not previously sharpened. Like it or not, the primary beneficiary of research-funding is the researcher, who has managed to deepen their understanding by working on a particular data-set. The publications that result from the research project are only trivially a result of the research-funding, they come out of a whole history of human interactions that are not for sale. Not even in a slave society.

There is a gross misunderstanding in the open access debate about the nature of academic research and publication. Academic research publication is a form of teaching. Academic research publications deal not in sets of facts or figures but in understanding. But academic research publication is a form of teaching that assumes some prior knowledge. For those who wish to have access, there is an admission cost: they must invest

in the education prerequisite to enable them to understand the language used. Current publication practices work to ensure that the entry threshold for understanding my language is as low as possible. Open access will raise that entry threshold. Much more will be downloaded; much less will be understood.

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His list of publications is freely available at www.classics.cam.ac.uk/faculty/staff-bios/academic-research-staff/robin_osborne but you have to pay for his books.

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