

Debating open access: introduction

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It is hard to believe that the long and complex open access debate hit the radar, for most of us, only a year ago, in June 2012, with the publication of the Finch Report.¹ The parameters and travailed history of that debate are chronicled by Rita Gardner in her essay below. There are signs, however, that we have entered into a period of relative calm, now that committees of the House of Lords and House of Commons have both heard a remarkable quantity of evidence (and, more often, opinion) on the subject, which as a whole amounts to some thousand pages,² and now that we are entering a period in which the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) digests the responses from its pre-consultation on the problem. This relative calm will not last very long, but it seems to the British Academy a good moment to publish a set of contributions to the debate that aim to explore some of the issues involved in more detail.

Introductions like this one often summarise the articles that follow and offer a synthesis of them. Each article here has an abstract attached, and we refer the reader to them, rather than setting them out here. But a simple synthesis is in any case impossible. We decided at an early stage when thinking about putting these papers together, in January 2013, that we needed to have as contributors people who thought open access was a good thing, the way forward; people who thought it was a good thing but fraught with practical problems which were ill-understood by some of its advocates; and people who thought it was a bad thing in principle. This is what we have indeed commissioned. We have not got the full spectrum of views about open access, for sure, which would have required very many more articles (we have for example an advocacy of Gold open access, by Stuart Shieber, but not a matching argument for Green, the main alternative form of open access publishing³ – see Appendix 1 for definitions), but we certainly have a wide range. There is also diversity in the contributors: academics and publishers, representatives of learned societies, natural and social scientists as well as historians and literary critics, although the important perspective of university librarians is one that is missing. Our authors therefore often do not agree on much at all, which makes any synthesising attempt pointless. For the same reason, it would also not be right to try to fit them into the British Academy's own public position on open access, which fits squarely into the second group,

the group which focuses on practical problems, at least as they apply to the Humanities and Social Sciences, the community whose views the Academy seeks to represent. What we offer in this introduction is therefore simply a setting out of some of the terms of the debate, as a framing for what follows. These will be very well-known to many readers, but in our experience readers often only read half the debate, not the other half, and a brief recap of both sides will not go amiss. Appendix 2 provides a compilation of some of the key dates and documents in the recent debates on open access.

The open access movement has taken off in the very recent past, it seems to us, for two main reasons (see in this volume above all Stuart Shieber and Stephen Curry). One is ethical: all knowledge should be freely available to everybody. This view, which is an old one, and often phrased in all-or-nothing idealistic terms (as any googling of the words 'open access blog' will show very fast), has recently been taken up by governments and major research providers, with the added argument that, since research in the UK is publicly funded, funders should be able to require that its results be available to the community at large – any interested reader, anywhere. The argument that project funders (such as the research councils in the UK) should be able to determine the rules for the dissemination of the knowledge they fund is a recognisable one. But the added argument that, since virtually all academics in the UK (and in the EU; not always, however, in the United States) are paid salaries which come from public funds in one form or another, they have the same obligation to make their work available free, is a newer one, surprising to many, and also one which not by any means all academics easily accept (see Robin Osborne in this volume). It has a current force, however, which is not only moral but now political, with Conservative politicians in effect lined up with unequivocal egalitarians (Martin Eve here, for example, explores the argument that even peer review needs to be considered very critically in an open access world, as unacceptably elitist and unaccountable). It has also gained the strong support of those scientists who need to have access to large electronic data-sets, unrestricted by paywalls, in order that their search engines can generate the meta-analyses which are often the only way to make sense of the uncontrollable mushrooming of information in disciplines such as the Biosciences.

This is given added urgency by the second main reason, the fact that library budgets in universities are currently spiralling out of control, as a result, almost exclusively, of the vastly increased costs of journal subscriptions – which makes even the virtually unlimited access to knowledge taken as normal by users of very large university libraries something which will soon be impossible to guarantee anywhere. Something has to change here, then, somehow; and open access, at least for journals, is the solution now proposed by many people. It was not by chance that the only institutional responses to the Parliamentary enquiries this year which were unequivocally in favour of open access (apart from those of government and quasi-government bodies) were from libraries and their representatives, and Harvard's very large but justifiably worried Widener Library has played a particular vanguard role here worldwide.

Whatever we think of Finch and the compromises which have followed (tracked here with different emphases by Gardner and Shieber), the library issue is one which will not go away; and anyone who wishes to resist the current proposals for open access, whether in the UK or worldwide, will have to find an answer to the problem of spiralling journal subscriptions. (Some are on offer, but to discuss them in detail would be out of place here.) But it has seemed to large sections of the UK academic sector, all the same, that the solutions offered by government and the research councils are flawed in a variety of ways. Some have almost nothing to do with the pro-open access arguments set out above, such as the issue of the generous CC-BY reuse licences that the research councils wish to impose on Gold open access articles. These may well be justified in the natural sciences, particularly the Biosciences, where the size of the data-sets and the sheer number of published papers mean that they cannot be searched and analysed without the aid of computational tools. The same need is not evident in the Humanities and the Social Sciences, where instead the risk of plagiarism looms large. We do not try to deal with this very technical argument here, but nothing else in wider debates really hangs on it. Some concerns, by contrast, are very general indeed, such as 'why mess the whole research ecosystem up for a dream?', which is indeed quite widely felt, even if seldom articulated in quite such blunt terms. We can, all the same, single out four main practical issues, which have been particularly

important in forming critical responses to the whole OA agenda on the part of practising academics. They have for the most part resonances right across the disciplinary spectrum (particularly that concerning learned societies), but we will here concentrate on the way it is seen in Humanities and Social Sciences (HSS).

The first is Gold vs Green open access. The Finch Report was – it was one of its strengths – concerned about the sustainability of journals if the information in them was available free, and proposed a Gold means of paying for the information, via article processing charges (APCs) directly to the journals concerned. This did not please those who favoured sweeping away the entire current journal system, but it was at least sustainable. The problem was that such payments would inevitably be made alongside subscription costs, as long as the rest of the world did not adopt Gold open access, which there is little sign that most of it will; so that someone – the UK government? Research councils? Universities? – would have to be paying twice for indefinitely long periods.

In a period of great financial stringency, it was never likely that all of the money would be made available that was estimated to be needed for all the Gold open access publishing which would result even just from research council grants, still less all article publishing in UK universities; and so it proved. In the middle of the year 2012-13 it seemed that reduced money for APCs meant that university managers might have to be the people who would determine what articles got published, a very threatening move to academics, but an equally terrifying one to universities who saw that they would have to pay for that decision-making process too. The APCs proposed for Gold open access were also, it seemed to many (not all) HSS journal editors, very low, given the high costs of organising the reviewing and copy-editing of relatively long articles in journals with often very high turn-down rates. The log-jam was broken when the research councils finally conceded that Green open access, which simply depended on embargo periods, was an equally acceptable (although still non-preferred) publishing procedure. It seems to us, for reasons outlined in several articles below, that Green is going to be by far the main route for HSS open access publishing now. But the confusion soured much of

the sector, and many who were initially persuaded of the merits of open access are beginning to have doubts, at least as far as the version proposed by the funding bodies is concerned. And the debate has left no consensus between the funding bodies and academics, in HSS in particular, about the length of embargo periods.

The second issue is the role and indeed the survival of learned societies, one particularly close to the Academy's concerns as in effect it is a learned society itself (even if one nearly entirely funded by government). Learned societies are disproportionately, especially but not only in HSS, dependent on journal subscriptions; and their very considerable contribution to the academic ecosystem in the form of scholarships, travel grants and the like is thus itself dependent on people and institutions continuing to buy journals, or at least pay (if Gold open access continues to be relevant) for the articles contained in them. The Finch Report nodded to the particular needs of learned societies, but did not discuss in any detail how they were to be supported; and subsequent government-led debate paid little attention to them, until the societies concerned began to organise themselves.

The problem here is that, to a supporter of open access in principle, journals are the problem to be solved, because of their cost and the way they lock up data; but most such supporters are natural scientists, where journals are not only overwhelmingly the main way of publishing, but also often eye-wateringly expensive. In HSS, the situation is different; the type of journal which first comes to people's mind is by no means the huge and costly science and medical journals (Elsevier's *The Lancet* costs £1,000 a year to institutions, Macmillan's *Nature* £6,700 to medium-sized institutions, ratcheting up or down dependent on size; and these are only the best-known, not the most expensive, journals) but the journals of each learned society, often held not only in respect but affection, where £200 a year is commoner, and often rather less. Journal publishers (mostly the larger presses, even in the case of learned societies) are often seen as enablers, as Ziyad Marar puts it here, rather than as profiteers. The library-cost argument thus seems less biting to HSS academics, and the issue of the survival of such journals rather more important. The government

realised that this was a key issue sooner than the research councils did (if indeed they yet do); but, again, the debate here hangs on embargo periods, and how long they need to be in each discipline (for not all HSS disciplines are the same in this respect) for their subscription-base to survive – at least until each of them adapts to a different funding system, if one exists. Funders find it hard – in some cases impossible – to imagine that a 24-month embargo period would allow research to become available fast enough outside subscribing institutions to remain relevant; whereas to many HSS academics an article published in 2010 still seems pretty recent, not to speak of a book published in the same year. Indeed many of us still reference seminal work published in 1910. This issue, as already stated, has not been resolved, and nor will it be without more research; both sides have in its absence often been content to reiterate their beliefs rather than argue on the basis of data.

A third issue is the ability of UK academics to publish abroad. The discussions of the last year have resulted in many (but certainly not all) UK journals becoming what the research councils call ‘compliant’ with their requirements; but non-UK journals have fewer reasons to do so, and in HSS very many have no intention of so doing. The prospect of UK academics thus being cut off from an international intellectual culture has, it is fair to say, not been as much on the horizon of the debating parties as are the first two of these concerns, but it may end up as being one of the most problematic, not least because international excellence has always been the benchmark for the UK’s national research evaluation exercises (RAE and REF). We simply list it here rather than discuss it; it is introduced and discussed by Chris Wickham in his article below. It, too, badly needs data to make clear how serious the issue really is.

The fourth issue is simply that the whole open access debate, above all the ethical element of it, depends on the assumption that all publishing is now online. In HSS, this is not the case. Books, whether monographic or collective, are usually only available in hard copy. Journals, it is true, are usually online in HSS as elsewhere, although even here it would be wrong to assume that without checking, especially in non-anglophone countries; but in the Humanities only a few disciplines publish more

than 40% of their research in journals, and in Social Science only a few over 70%. (The advocates of immediate public availability for publicly-funded research also do not recognise, it must be added, that some of this research may not be published in English.) How to fit books into an open access structure is a very hard task indeed, as Nigel Vincent explores here, and it is therefore not one which is on the immediate horizon either; but it is one which is constantly invoked as a future desideratum by open access advocates, even if rather vaguely, so academics can scarcely be blamed for worrying about it. This too has soured the debate, and needlessly.

The essential final point, it seems to us, is this. The position that open access is ethically necessary and/or inevitable, and the position that it has so many practical problems attached to it that it risks being pointlessly destructive unless they are resolved, each seem the obvious starting-point to substantial groups of researchers: so obvious, indeed, that it is often not necessary to take seriously the other position at all. As editors, we have strong personal views ourselves; but it also seems to us essential to set out as many differing views as possible, expressed in relatively calm tones for the most part, so that readers can see what alternative viewpoints consist of. We therefore urge readers, of whatever persuasion, to read all the articles here, not just those they agree with. As we stated at the start of this introduction, synthesis is impossible here; but a solution needs to be found to solve the questions posed by each side. If practitioners do not create a solution for themselves, others will continue to do it for them. No solution will be able to satisfy all parties entirely, but solutions which satisfy no one at all are very much to be avoided. There is no alternative therefore to us working out our own solutions. We hope that this collection may be one of the tools which allow that to happen.

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Notes

- 1 *Accessibility, sustainability, excellence: how to expand access to research publications. Report of the Working Group on Expanding Access to Published Research Findings*, www.researchinfonet.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/Finch-Group-report-FINAL-VERSION.pdf. For the origins and earliest statements of the open access principle in the so-called Budapest initiative of 2002, see www.budapestopenaccessinitiative.org
- 2 See, respectively, www.parliament.uk/documents/lords-committees/science-technology/Openaccess/OpenAccessEvidence.pdf and www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201213/cmselect/cmbis/writev/openaccess/contents.htm
- 3 A good example is the extensive work of Stevan Harnad, who advocates immediate Green self-archiving in institutional repositories – for which see, for instance, his blog, openaccess.eprints.org