

What Open Access Could Mean for the Humanities

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Unlike the humanities, in most of the sciences today, the debates about open access (OA) are focused on ethical, professional and financial issues, not intellectual ones. In other words, few disagree that "the world-wide distribution of peer-reviewed journal literature and completely free and unrestricted access to it by all scientists, scholars, teachers, students, and other interested minds" (to use Professor James Till's phrasing) is a positive intellectual move.

Whether open access means publishing in an open access journal or self-archiving one's work in an institutional repository (such as the University of Toronto's T-Space) within 6 months of its publication elsewhere, most scientists understand the intellectual and professional importance of the increase in dissemination (and in a timely fashion) of their ideas and research. When their research has been funded by government agencies, the logic and ethics behind making findings publicly available seem even more obvious. When rich and poor nations can share knowledge, other basic scholarly inequalities can at least be addressed and perhaps even corrected. As for publishing in OA journals, the pressures are professional: many of the most highly respected journals are not (yet) OA. Here the issue becomes not only professional but also financial. The cost of online journals has escalated astronomically as the commercial publishing sector responds to drops in print sales and individual subscriptions caused precisely by the new online availability of journals. Libraries therefore find they cannot afford to carry all the journals they once did; economics controls availability of knowledge. Because OA shifts the costs of accessing knowledge away from the user, it arguably could be the answer to this financial crisis.

In the humanities, little of this debate has been evident. Perhaps it is because the publication of humanities research findings is less time sensitive, so rapid OA archiving has not seemed necessary. The silence about OA publishing is likely because of the continuing emphasis on monograph rather than article publication: books are still the currency in the tenure and promotion market. But the much discussed "crisis in scholarly publishing" has steadily been taking its toll, prompting the Modern Language Association of America to urge changes in the tenure process to provide more recognition for research disseminated in other than book form. If libraries cannot afford to buy new scholarly books and university presses cannot afford to publish books few will buy and so cut back on their lists, junior scholars cannot get their books into print and therefore find it difficult to get tenure.

There are two obvious answers to this professional problem and both should be considered seriously. The first is the publication of books electronically: in July, an announcement was made that Rice University Press (which ceased publication in 1996) was being revived but would publish only online books --- peer reviewed, like all high quality scholarly publications. For disciplines like art history and music, in particular, the savings in the high cost of publishing their books could be immense. The second answer is that university tenure and promotion committees in the humanities should move away from the printed book as the measure of success and validate journal articles (in print or online) or electronic books as well, when the same processes of peer review are in place. Is it the scholarly quality of the work itself, not the name of the press or the quantity of the publications that should count. In some institutions, candidates for tenure are asked to submit what they consider their best 5 pieces of research for assessment by the committee. It is this kind of step that would be a positive response to the crisis faced by young scholars whose careers are being hijacked by the economic problems of the scholarly publishing industry.

Humanities scholars have been slow to take advantage of OA for other reasons, however, than the lack of time-sensitivity in their research. Many simply do not know of the availability of institutional repositories like the University of Toronto's T-Space for their published research and even their research findings/archival materials. And, if they do, like their scientist colleagues, they may have concerns about ease of submission, control of the material once online, and the permanence of the archive. But work in the humanities --- be it in journal or in book form --- also goes out of print easily, so the benefits of self-archiving for future reference of scholars in the field are large. T-Space, for instance, is Google-accessible. In our historical research we know how important it is that out-of-print materials be made available online; the same is true of our own work.

In the course of our research, we often amass enormous files of visual and print materials that we could store --- and share --- through open access repositories. In my experience, few scholars feel particularly possessive about the material, even if they have often gathered it arduously: they share it readily with colleagues and students. The next step would be to share it with even more interested people through this kind of public archive. If their research is funded by SSHRC or some other public agency, then the argument might be that this material should be shared openly. The "Federal Public Research Access Act" currently being debated by the US Congress would, in fact, make this the law.

OA offers new opportunities for humanities researchers both to disseminate and to archive their work and their work materials. The ethical and political implications of the kind of sharing of knowledge that OA allows are appealing to many of us. But what may be just as exciting is the possibility that rethinking the medium-specificity of "publication" of research

might lead to a positive rethinking of the criteria for tenure and promotion.

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