

# The Trojan horse of Open Access

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Among the many treasures looked after by the UK heritage organisation the National Trust are 140 stately home libraries, containing around 230,000 books in 400,000 volumes. The books are now increasingly discoverable through the UK COPAC union catalogue and accessible on location, even if often by appointment only. That the libraries have been preserved, and that the books they contain can be located and consulted is an accomplishment of the first order. However, even this fantastic achievement apparently still fails to meet today's digital expectations. Not content with the existing possibilities for access to these National Trust libraries, historian Malyn Newitt recently contributed an op-ed article to the *Times Literary Supplement*<sup>1</sup> suggesting that the books still had not been made properly available to the 'everyone' mentioned in the NT's mission statement:

We take care of historic houses, gardens, mills, coastline, forests, woods, fens, beaches, farmland, moorland, islands, archaeological remains, nature reserves, villages and pubs – and then we open them up for ever, for everyone.

However, Newitt complains, '[o]pening them up for ever, for everyone does not ... seem to apply to its libraries'. Only full digitisation of the books' contents, so Newitt asserts, would live up to that promise.

As one astute commentator remarked, 'The antique chairs in the Trust's properties may (in some sense) belong to its members; that doesn't, however, give you the right to sit on them!' Indeed, by comparison, being allowed to physically handle those 400,000 volumes seems like a wonderfully generous degree of opening up. Yet the comparison

between reading and sitting is of course a misleading one. One may not be able to sit on virtual chairs (because the experience of sitting on chairs cannot be mediated), but one *can* read virtual books. It has in fact become so normal for digitised books to be made available as a substitute for the real thing that it may puzzle, if not affront, the public (here represented by Newitt) that there remain books whose contents are not publicly accessible online.

Many early adherents of the digital faith believed in the credo that ‘information wants to be free’. A paper world may have to obey the laws of scarcity but, so the early digerati reasoned, on the World Wide Web different rules obtain, better suited to information’s ‘desire’ to be freely available. Critics have scoffed at their economic naiveté and dismissed them as politically driven idealists, but it is true that digital copies come at effectively zero marginal cost. In other words, once the cost of initial creation and production have been met, any additional copies can be made available free. In these circumstances to restrict access seems unnecessary, even whimsical. Certainly the ‘information wants to be free’ slogan proved powerful and tenacious. In 1993—to the intense dismay of the digital pioneers, and in direct contradiction to the ‘information wants to be free’ rhetoric—the Web was opened to commercial interests. This gave rise to a flood of entrepreneurial initiatives aimed at using the Web to make money. In the light of this commercialisation of the Web, the extent to which especially textual information has actually become or remained ‘free’ is perhaps astonishing. Of course ‘free’ needs defining—creation, production and, to an extent, distribution costs money even in a digital world, and someone has to pay the bill for that. Nevertheless, the number of places where the curious information seeker finds his path obstructed by a paywall is in fact extremely limited: paying is the exception rather than the rule.

Apart from the need to pay, the willingness to pay for one’s reading on the Web is also low. Still, the places where consumers *are* prepared to pay, though limited in number, are as it turns out exceptionally strong domains and ecosystems, such as Apple and Amazon. These ecosystems can be said to have made themselves indispensable, certainly in the Western world. It was through extreme convenience and user friendliness that Apple’s iTunes managed to persuade consumers to draw from their wallet, helping to wean them off pirated music. A willingness in e-commerce to pay for material goods is of course more natural, and in that respect Amazon, which started by selling atoms: paper books, had it easier. While the company is selling just about anything today, Amazon customers are still prepared to pay for what they buy, including digital media like e-books, games, and music.

Other information providers have fared less well. The few paywalls that exist protect

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some of the best information, and because not enough people are prepared to pay for that information, it is in many instances effectively languishing. Newspapers are a prominent case in point. With ‘citizen journalism’ abounding, and large sections of the public evidently prepared to make do without expert analysis and interpretation, and without a process of due checking and fair hearing, professional journalism is finding it harder and harder to make ends meet. Paper editions are the first to close down, only to be followed by their websites, not without having first put up a heroic struggle.

And then there is the book industry. If it has benefited from the Web at all, for example in the shape of e-commerce opportunities, it has turned out a double-edged sword. As online sales grew, new entrants like Amazon and Bol profited more than any established booksellers. As brick-and-mortar sales drop, the book becomes less visible in daily life. Also, people who spend a lot of time online may not read less—if anything, probably more—but they obtain less of what they read through book trade channels. In today’s attention economy, the wealth of free reading and entertainment to be found on the Web can only detract from sales. On balance the Web’s potential opportunities may not compensate the book industry for the loss of readers to free online information and other pastimes.

In this precarious balance between the ever-expanding ‘docuverse’ of free online information and conventional toll-access exploitation of textual resources (traditional publishing and bookselling), enters Open Access. I would like to suggest that the struggle between free and paid access to (textual) information sketched above, gives the significance of Open Access publishing an extra dimension.

The Open Access movement began with a very straightforward practical aim: to stem the rising tide of the cost of knowledge. After a prolonged initial struggle to be taken seriously the movement has gained momentum over the last few years, and is now chalking up one victory after another. Almost five hundred organisations have so far signed the Berlin Declaration on Open Access to Knowledge in the Sciences and Humanities (2003), and the number of signatories is still growing. As the Registry of Open Access Repositories Mandatory Archiving Policies shows, Open Access mandates have been adopted by 208 institutions worldwide. Add such recent milestones as the UK and Dutch governments’ plans for a national Open Access policy, and it becomes obvious that the march of Open Access is unstoppable.

It is true that the knowledge system as we know has become very expensive. With its journals, peer review, libraries, etc. it evolved on the foundation of a print paradigm and the inherent properties of printing on paper. This meant that economic principles such as scarcity, ownership of the means of production, and shareholder pressure for profit maximisation were at play. Open Access, by contrast, rides on the back of the same fact that we have just observed: that digital information can be copied without limitation at no extra cost. Knowledge (but the same goes for such another mainstay of the conventional publishing industry as fiction, for instance) has always been a non-rivalrous good. Sharing one’s knowledge in no way detracts from it: knowledge can be enjoyed by any number of people simultaneously as well as consecutively without any risk of deplet-

ing it. However, as long as knowledge is distributed in the form of a paper product, it is de facto a finite resource: each extra copy costs money to produce and distribute, and a print run can get depleted. The digital file, by contrast, has, as it were, a built-in printing press. That is to say that in a digital context, the *distribution* of knowledge can join knowledge itself (the ‘content’) as a non-rivalrous good. Therefore it can be referred to as a service rather than a product, the service being that of offering access to the content. This suggests that when the knowledge system is reinvented in a digital paradigm we can—and should—make a fundamental separation between the two costs that used to be covered by a single figure: the cost of the product and the cost of the access the

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product provided to the content. As we saw before, the costs of authoring, peer reviewing, production and storage will still need to be covered, even if each copy of a work is distributed free of charge.

Whether or not Open Access will actually manage to bring about the intended reduction of the cost of knowledge, there are two unintended side effects of a knowledge system based on Open Access that warrant pondering. The first is that it will variously affect different fields of academic disciplines according to their publication culture. Most scientific knowledge products are journal articles, and journal articles

is what Open Access policies are concerned with. In the case of articles digital consumption is not a problem: they are short, and anyway not necessarily fully read (or if they are, they can be printed by individual readers at little extra cost). However, for the Humanities, Law and, albeit to a lesser extent, the Social Sciences—the situation is different. These fields continue to set great store by monographs for the purpose of scholarly communication. What this means in effect is that Open Access will cause inequality between STEM disciplines and the humanities in terms of the level of public access to its research output. Most STEM research will become publicly available free of charge to the public, while much if not most of the knowledge produced in the humanities, published in the form of monographs which are not (yet) affected by OA policies, will remain behind a paywall. There is no reason in principle why monographs might not also be published in Open Access form. In fact there are a number of initiatives to do so already. However, reading long-form texts from screens remains much less popular than reading them from paper, and probably largely as a result of this these initiatives have not had a great deal of impact yet. The extent to which the *distribution* of knowledge can in actual practice become non-rivalrous as a service is in other words obviously dependent on the extent to which text is consumed digitally.

A second effect of Open Access that has to the best of my knowledge not received much—if any—attention is that it contributes to establishing the expectation that paying for information is the exception rather than the rule. This makes Open Access a significant reinforcement of the troops beleaguering the ‘old economy’ of the textual media. The more digital reading takes off—which seems inevitable given the rise of screen use,

and especially in the shape of tablets, phones (and phablets)—the more the public’s habits and expectations will be based on their online experience of free information. Open Access will, moreover, confirm the perception that *all* textual information, even important and valuable information—such as that published in academic journals—*should* be available to the public free of charge: that information not only wants to be, but indeed *ought to be* free. One may well wonder how that will end up affecting the book industry.

#### Notes

1. Times Literary Supplement, 28 March 2014; <<http://www.the-tls.co.uk/tls/public/article1392148.ece>> (Accessed 25 March 2014)