



Open Access, Alternative Scholarship, and Public Engagement

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The for-profit academic publisher Elsevier recently reported record profits. Elsevier publishes over 2,000 academic journals in a variety of disciplines. Some random examples include *Accounting Forum*, *Mammalian Biology*, and *Robotics and Computer-Integrated Manufacturing*.

Let's consider for a moment the business model that Elsevier is operating under. For-profit journal publishers don't have to generate the content that they publish. Scholars conduct research and subsequently write that content. Similarly, the publisher does not have to vet the content that it publishes. Editors and reviewers, also scholars employed by universities, undertake that work, ensuring that what is published will make a sound, trustworthy contribution to the scholarly record of their respective disciplines.

The work that the publisher actually does is relatively light, and includes copyediting, journal layout, and finally the actual printing and distribution of the journal, as well as some database indexing. Then the publisher turns around and charges our libraries for the very same content that we have generated and vetted. For example, an institutional subscription to the aforementioned *Robotics and Computer-Integrated Manufacturing* annually costs \$1,033.60 for digital-only access, and \$2,067.00 for a print subscription. For those prices to be justified the journal would pretty much need to be typeset and printed on an original Gutenberg printing press, perhaps by a custom-built robot.

What a rip-off for the university community of students, faculty, and staff, and what a rip-off for the taxpayers of North Carolina. What a rip-off for everyone except the publisher.¹ Universities pay an awful lot of money to access content that our own faculty have generated, and content that, through both our salaries and grants, has already been subsidized by taxpayers. The taxpayer is essentially having to pay twice in order for us to generate and access the research

¹ For those interested in a more detailed discussion of this business model, *The Guardian* published an [excellent](#)

that drives industry, health, business, education, and every conceivable realm of human endeavor that, over time, academic disciplines influence and help to advance. To add insult to the taxpayer's injury, within this model the content that we produce and that is guarded behind paywalls is too expensive for interested individuals in the non-university public to access.

I'm not against profit, not by a long shot, but I question the ethics (and finances) of having to buy back research that we and our colleagues at other public and private institutions have generated, largely with public subsidization. I don't like being the sucker in a private firm's profit plan, and higher education today is exactly one such sucker.

The Open Access publishing movement is one that seeks to break the cycle that Elsevier, and other for-profit academic publishers, perpetuate, by creating scholarly publishing venues that are as credible as our traditional publications, but that are freely available on the internet to scholars and the public alike. In addition to preventing taxpayers from, essentially, paying twice to access publicly funded research, scholars invested (ethically speaking) in the Open Access movement generally believe that there is common good in making scholarship accessible to the general public, even if layperson readers are not formally trained in our own areas of expertise. Open Access is good for scholars too—articles freely available to the public on the internet are [generally read and cited more than those that are not](#). Open Access publications are sustainable, in both a logistical and an economic sense, in ways that traditional publications on dead and bleached trees simply are not. Finally, by taking publishing to the internet (for the most part), Open Access venues allow for many more manifestations of scholarship than just the traditional scholarly article or monograph, but without dismissing either of those traditional genres.

In recent years the Open Access movement has gained traction as [Harvard](#), [MIT](#), and the [University of California](#) system have taken concrete, and sometimes sweeping, steps to encourage their own faculty to support and participate in Open Access publishing practices, and many university presses are also getting on board. I bring up Open Access because it is, in my view, an economic and ethical imperative that we make as much future scholarship as possible accessible to the broadest public possible. To do so is in the interests of students, faculty, taxpayers, and the long-term sustainability and accessibility of the work that we labor to produce.

I also bring up Open Access here because it is closely linked with other, emerging issues regarding the changing nature of scholarship and scholarly productivity. The Open Access movement and the growth of alternative forms of scholarship are linked within our current technological, economic, and cultural moment. So-called “alternative” or “non-traditional” scholarship expands the boundaries of the work that we can accomplish with our scholarship. Public engagement is the idea that at least some of our scholarly endeavors need to be addressed not only toward our disciplinary peers, but towards the public more broadly, in order to show how our hard-won insights can improve the economic, cultural, social, and environmental quality of the lives of people in our region, state, nation, and world. Alternative scholarship and the idea of public engagement go hand-in-hand with the Open Access movement. And I'm pretty

confident that Open Access, so-called “alternative” scholarship, and public engagement represent the future of research and pedagogy within higher education.

The insular academic bubble is bursting. The ivory tower of the future will be accessible to all, because large sections of its architecture will live online. And I personally believe that these are very good things.

The obvious force of change here is the internet and the networked nature of information flow within our world today. Only because of the internet can we question the business model of Elsevier and others. Only because of the internet can we imagine alternative forms of scholarship with interactive graphics, hyperlinks to datasets, and digitized versions of original documents. Only because of the internet can we truly hope to engage the public outside of the university on a large scale and in simultaneously economic, socially, and culturally meaningful ways.

Unfortunately, the biggest enemy of Open Access publishing, of new and innovative forms of scholarship, and of the idea of public engagement is us, ourselves, the community of American scholars, writ large. Too many of us remain suspicious or dismissive of work that is born-digital, or that takes forms other than the traditional articles and monographs that most of us were educated with. The only reason that Open Access publications, more innovative forms of scholarship, and broader public engagement have not occurred is because we are a conservative lot, in that academe tends to be resistant to change. Senior and junior faculty alike are wary of banking too much of their productivity in new venues and in new forms for fear of not receiving “credit” for their work from colleagues.

My goal in making these arguments is not to be polemical, but merely to show how, I believe, issues of Open Access, alternative forms of scholarship, and public engagement are intertwined, and that they, I also believe, are integral to the future health and sustainability of research endeavors within higher education. These issues, in terms of how they intertwine, and how they will eventually play out in our universities and in our larger culture, will determine the future relevancy of research and higher education to our region, state, nation, and world. Only by making a significant percentage of our work freely accessible to each other and the public, and finding forms of scholarship that are simultaneously rigorous (in the traditional, scholarly sense) and engaging to the public of interested non-scholars, will the public be willing to keep subsidizing our work. Arguably, many of the current financial assaults on higher education are motivated in part by those who see the world of academe and our research as insulated and irrelevant. In short, we need to stop telling the public about our relevance and instead show it to them, through freely available, intellectually engaging, and publicly meaningful research. Not through traditional articles that cost over two grand a year to access and sit on dusty shelves (if they’re lucky) to be consulted by only a few dozen people annually, or perhaps ever. The public never sees such work.

As an example, take my colleague Brent Kinser's work on The Carlyle Letters Online. Through support from the National Endowment for the Humanities, Kinser and his colleagues across the world have been able to digitize a breathtaking amount of work, which is accessed by over a million people annually. Compare that to the perhaps a hundred or so subscriptions for closely-related Carlyle journals. Many of our other colleagues here at WCU are engaged in work related to Open Access, alternative scholarship, and public engagement. But, I would argue (based purely on anecdote, I admit), not enough of us, and not enough of our work.

We at Western Carolina University are well positioned as a university to adapt to and thrive within these developing (and perhaps soon to be dominant) research paradigms, largely because of our adoption of the Boyer model of scholarly productivity. As we are all acutely aware though, the Boyer model, and our implementation of it, is not without its problems. I think that if we're being honest with ourselves, we all realize that there is significant bias (conscious or otherwise) against some categories of Boyer scholarship, and particularly against those forms of scholarship that do not constitute scholarship of "discovery." Maybe that bias *should* exist. I think there could be compelling arguments that scholarship of discovery is more important than other Boyer categories of scholarship. If that is our belief though, individual Department Collegial Review Documents, and perhaps the larger institution, need to make that distinction clear, where they don't already (some already do). Junior faculty are regularly advised not to attempt to make their entire tenure case on non-traditional scholarship (that is, not exclusively through scholarship in Boyer categories other than that of "discovery"). And, judging from the anecdotes with which I am familiar, I think that junior faculty (such as myself) would be unwise to ignore such advice.

Perhaps the most effective things we could do as a faculty right now to support Open Access, alternative scholarship, public engagement, *and* to ensure that we and our colleagues are engaging in academically credible, rigorous work are the following: 1) make sure that our departments have within our Collegial Review Documents established, rigorous procedures for evaluating non-traditional work, so that our faculty can be sure that they will be "credited" for work that is innovative and perhaps unusual looking to some of us, but that also meets disciplinary standards for credible scholarship, and also to ensure that sub-par work does not receive recognition, and thereby undermine the credibility of our disciplines and departments (I'm biased, but I think that the English Department has a particularly good example of this in our DCRD); 2) We need to recognize that a piece of scholarship's categorization within the Boyer model (and whether or not we want to privilege the Boyer category of "discovery") is a different issue from whether or not a piece of scholarship is traditional or non-traditional, for non-traditional works might fall into any Boyer category. And we need to recognize that whether or not a piece of scholarship has been adequately reviewed in its publication process or requires an *ex post facto* review set up by the department before being credited to the its faculty author(s) is yet another issue.

Too often I hear these issues confused, hear the assumption expressed that online works are not peer reviewed (some are and some aren't), hear that online work is inferior to printed work (how quaint!), or hear assumptions that forms of scholarship that look unfamiliar are somehow lesser than traditional, staid articles (might be better, might be worse, right?). In my capacity as a teacher of writing, I frequently have to remind students that the fact that something has been published, whether in print or online, does not automatically make a source a credible one. It still has to be evaluated for credibility on its own merits. So too with the scholarship that we ourselves produce, of course.

It is quite astounding to me how frequently I encounter the assumption that online and/or Open Access journals are less rigorous or less prestigious than printed journals. There is no *de facto* rule that makes a traditional, printed journal more credible than a respectable online journal.² In my own discipline of Rhetoric and Composition, several of our most respected journals (namely *Kairos* and *Enculturation*, both of which I have served in an editorial capacity) were born digital, and exist in only digital versions. *Enculturation* publishes mostly traditional scholarly essays, double-blind reviewed, but free to access for anyone on the internet. Contrastingly, *Kairos* publishes interactive scholarly works, primarily falling into the Boyer category of "discovery," that were unimaginable prior to the internet, and which are reviewed by no less than the entire editorial board of nationally prominent scholars.

I don't make any of these arguments presuming that I personally have "figured out" all that there is to Open Access, alternative scholarship, and public engagement. Very far from it. Rather, I hope to place issues of Open Access, alternative scholarship, and public engagement at the fore of our consciousness. These are the issues that will dominate the near future of scholarship, and the positions we take, either consciously or through complacency, will determine Western Carolina University's relevance as a site of scholarly productivity.

Personally, I don't intend to stop publishing in traditional scholarly venues. However, I do intend to make an effort to place a hopefully large portion of my future scholarship in Open Access forums. Similarly, within my own discipline of Rhetoric and Composition I have been a vocal advocate for moving my discipline's traditionally published (and very expensive) publications online and into Open Access formats, all of which can be indexed just as traditional publications have been for years and years. One reason I can entertain the possibility of committing myself and my future work to Open Access, alternative scholarship, and public engagement is because I have faith in (and have seen work) the procedures laid out related to these issues in my department's Collegial Review Document. I hope that my colleagues in other departments feel similarly free to pursue non-traditional work, or that they soon do.

² Especially given the proliferation of predatory for-profit journals that charge scholars to publish their work and employ only a pretense of peer review.

Editor's Note: The Faculty Forum is published monthly by the Coulter Faculty Commons to provide opportunity for faculty to converse about issues of the day ranging from academic matters to policy questions and community concerns. Each issue has two parts. The first part is a commentary from one or more faculty members, and the second section contains responses to the previous month's issue.

The Faculty Forum is in its 28th year of publication. While its original purpose was to “spark a lively dialogue about college teaching,” even in its earliest days, the subjects went far beyond teaching tips and techniques. It has often been a catalyst for revealing and resolving campus problems such as salary inequities and the status of fixed-term faculty. See the CFC [publications website](#) to read past issues.

Thanks to Nate Kreuter for starting the year with a provocative piece about new approaches to scholarship. I hope you will consider writing for the Faculty Forum. Send me your ideas for a lead commentary as well as your responses to each issue.

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