The Horizon of The Publishable in/as Open Access: From Poethics to Praxis

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Kaja Marczewska

I am writing this piece having just uploaded a PDF of my recent book to aaaarg; a book published by Bloomsbury as a hardback academic monograph retailing at £86—and that is after the generous 10% discount offered on the publisher's website. The book focuses on copying and reproduction as perhaps the most prominent forms of contemporary cultural production. Given this focus, it seemed fitting to make the material available via this guerrilla library, to enable its different circulation and less controlled iterations. My decision to publish with Bloomsbury was a pragmatic one. As an early career academic working within UK higher education, I had little choice but to publish with an established press if I wanted to continue in the privileged position I currently find myself in. As someone interested in economies of cultural production, forms of publishing and self-organisation, the decision to breach my contract with the publisher offered a welcome and necessary respite from the discomfort I felt every time I saw my unaffordable (and perhaps as a result, unreadable) book for sale. It served as a way of acting (po)ethically within the system of which I am part. It was both a gesture of sharing, of making my book more widely available to a community that might otherwise be unable to access it, and a selfish act, enabling my ongoing existence within a system I

maintain by contributing to it for the sake of career progression and a regular salary. This transgression is unlikely to be noticed by my publisher (who probably does not care anyway).[1] It is a small and safe act of resistance, but it gestures towards the centrality of thinking about the poethics—the ethics and the aesthetics—of any act of making work public that is so crucial to all discussions of open access (OA) publishing.

I open with this personal reflection because I see my participation inside-outside of academic publishing as pertinent to thinking about the nature of OA today. Since its inception, OA publishing has rapidly transformed from a radical, disruptive project of sharing, making public, and community building, into one that under the guise of 'openness' and 'access' maintains the system that limits the possibilities of both. That is, OA has moved away from the politically motivated initiative that it once was, opening up spaces for publishing experimentation, to instead become a constrained and constraining model of publishing in the service of the neoliberal university. With this transformation of OA also come limitations on the forms of publication. The introduction of the OA requirement as one of the key criteria of REF-ability was one of the factors contributing to the loss of the experimental impetus that once informed the drive towards the OA model. My home institution, for example, requires its staff to deposit all our REF-able publications in a commercial, Elsevier-owned repository, as PDFs—even if they have been published in OA journals on custom-built platforms. The death-by-PDF that such institutionalised forms of OA bring about, inevitably limits the potential for pushing the boundaries of form that working in digital spaces makes possible.

While conventional academic publishers are driven by market demands and the value of the academic book as a commodity in their decisions as to what to publish, mainstream OA publishing practices tend to be motivated by questions on how to publish a REF-able output, i.e. for all the wrong reasons. This tension between content and form, and a characteristic commitment to the latter that publishing OA makes necessary, is the central focus of my paper. As I will argue, this is perhaps the greatest paradox of OA: that in its fixation on issues of openness, it is

increasingly open only to the kinds of publications that can be effortlessly slotted into the next institutional REF submission. But, by doing so, OA publishing as we have come to know it introduces significant constraints on the forms of publication possible in academic publishing. In this paper, I consider OA as a limit to what can be published in academia today, or what I will refer to here, after Rachel Malik, as a horizon of the publishable.

'Publishing,' writes Malik, 'or rather the horizon of the publishable, precedes and constitutes both what can be written and read. [...] the horizon of the publishable governs what is thinkable to publish within a particular historical moment [...] the horizon denotes [...] a boundary or limit' (2015, 709, 720-21). Malik suggests that a number of distinct horizons can be identified and argues that the limits of all writing are based on generic conventions, i.e. crime fiction, biography, or children's picture books, for example, are all delimited by a different set of categories and practices—by a different horizon. Her understanding of publishing foregrounds the multiplicity of processes and relations between them as well as the role of institutions: commercial, legal, educational, political, and cultural. It is the conjunction of practices and their contexts that always constitutes, according to Malik, various horizons of the publishable. For Malik, then, there is no singular concept of publishing and no single horizon but rather a multiplicity of practices and a diversity of horizons.

Open access could be added to Malik's list as another practice defined by its unique horizon. Following Malik, it would be very easy to identify what the horizon of OA might be—what processes, practices, and institutions define and confine what can be published OA. But I would like to suggest here that thinking about OA in the context of Malik's argument does more than offer tools for thinking about the limits of OA. I suggest that it invites a rethinking of the place of OA in publishing today and, more broadly, of the changing nature of publishing in HE. That is, I propose that today OA assumes the role of a horizon in its own right; that it defines and delimits the possibilities of what can be made public in academia. If seen as such, OA is more than just one of the practices of publishing; it has become the

horizon of the publishable in academic publishing in the UK today. The new horizon in academic publishing seems increasingly to only allow certain accepted forms of OA (such as the PDF or the postprint) which under the guise of openness, sharing and access, replicate the familiar and problematic models of our knowledge economy. The promise of OA as a response to these fixed forms of publishing seems to have given way to a peculiar openness that favours metrics and monitoring. Where OA was originally imagined to shift the perception of the established horizon, it has now become that very horizon.

Here I want to posit that we should understand poethics as a commitment to the kind of publishing that recognises the agency of the forms in which we distribute and circulate published material and acknowledges that these are always, inevitably ideological. In her notion of poethics, Joan Retallack (2003) gestures towards a writing that in form and content questions what language does and how it works—to 'the what' and 'the how' of writing. Similarly, the project of imagining OA as a poethics is an attempt at thinking about publishing that forces a reconsideration of both. However, I suggest, that with an often thoughtless and technodeterministic push towards 'access' and 'openness', 'the what' gets obscured at the cost of 'the how.' This attitude manifests itself most prominently in the proliferation of OA platforms, similar to Coventry University's depository mentioned earlier here, that fit the parameters of REF. But platforms, as Nick Srnicek (2017) warns us, are problematic. In their design and modes of operation, they hold out the promise of freedom, openness, flexibility and entrepreneurial success, while maintaining the proprietary regimes and modes of capital accumulation that contribute to new forms of exploitation and new monopolies. The kind of publishing that mainstream OA has become (what Sarah Kember describes as a top-down, policy-driven OA)[2] is more akin to this platform capitalism than a publishing model which evokes the philosophy of openness and access. In a shift away from a diversity of forms of OA towards standardised OA platforms, OA has become inherently antithetical to the politics of OA publishing.

What follows, then, is that any work that takes advantage of its openness and circulation in digital spaces to experiment with 'the how' of publishing, in the current knowledge economy inevitably becomes the negative of publishable, i.e. the unpublishable. OA as platform capitalism is openly hostile to OA's poethical potential. In other words, the REF-able version of OA takes little interest in openness and delimits what is at the heart of the practice itself, i.e. what can be made open to the public (as a colleague from one of the Russell Group universities tells me, this only includes three or four-star rated publications in their case, with other works deemed not good enough to be made available via the University's website). To imagine OA as a poethical mode of publishing is to envisage a process of publishing that pushes beyond the horizon set by OA itself. It invites reading and writing of texts that might be typically thought of as unreadable, unwriteable, and unpublishable.

The concept of the 'horizon' also interest Joan Retallack, who in *Poethical Wager* (2003) explores the horizon as a way of thinking about the contemporary. Retallack identifies two types of horizons: the pseudoserene horizon of time and the dynamic coastline of historical poesis (14). Reading Retallack in the context of OA, I would like to suggest that similarly two models of OA can be identified today: OA as a pseudoserene horizon and OA as a cultural coastline. One is predictable, static, and limiting, i.e. designed to satisfy the managerial class of the contemporary university; the other works towards a poethics of OA, with all its unpredictability, complexity, and openness. OA publishing which operates within the confines of the pseudoserene horizon is representative of what happens when we become complacent in the way we think about the work of publishing. Conversely, OA seen as a dynamic coastline—the model that Radical Open Access (ROA) collective works to advance—is a space where publishing is always in process and makes possible a rethinking of the experience of publishing. Seen as such, ROA is an exposition of the forms of publishing that we increasingly take for granted, and in doing so mirrors the ethos of poethics. The role of ROA, then, is to highlight the importance of searching for new models of OA, if OA is to enact its function as a swerve in attitudes towards knowledge production and consumption.

But anything new is ugly, Retallack suggests, via Picasso: 'This is always a by-product of a truly experimental aesthetics, to move into unaestheticized territory. Definitions of the beautiful are tied to previous forms' (Retallack 2003, 28). OA, as it has evolved in recent years, has not allowed the messiness of the ugly. It has not been messy enough because it has been co-opted, too quickly and unquestionably, by the agendas of the contemporary university. OA has become too 'beautiful' to enact its disruptive potential.[3] In its drive for legitimisation and recognition, the project of OA has been motivated by the desire to make this form of publishing too immediately familiar, and

too willingly PDF-able. The consequences of this attitude are significant. The constraints on the methods and forms of OA publishing that the institutionalisation of OA have brought about, inevitably limit the content that is published. As a result, what is delivered openly to the public is the familiar and the beautiful. The new, radical, and ugly remains out of sight; not recognised as a formal REF-able publication, the new lies beyond the horizon of the OA publication as we know it. In order to enact a poethics of openness and access, OA requires a more complex understanding of the notion of openness itself. To be truly 'open', OA publishing need not make as its sole objective a commitment to openness as a mode of making publications open for the public, i.e. circulated without a paywall, but instead should also be driven by an openness to ambiguity, experimentation, and 'a delight in complex possibility' (Retallack 2003, 221) that the dominant models of OA are unable to accommodate.

To accuse OA of fixing in place the horizon of academic publishing is to suggest that 'a certain poetics of responsibility' (Retallack 2003, 3) seems to have been lost in the bigger project of OA, responsibility to the community of writers and readers, and responsibility to the project of publishing. OA as a 'poethical attitude' (Retallack 2003, 3) rather than rampant technodeterminism, need not be a project which we have to conform to under the guidelines of the current REF, but can rather be a practice we choose to engage and engage with, under conditions that make the poethics of OA possible. What a re-thinking of OA as a poethics offers, is a way of acknowledging the need for publishing that models how we want to participate in academia. Exploring OA as a horizon of academic publishing is one possible way of addressing this challenge. Although by nature limiting, the horizon is also, Malik suggests, 'a condition of possibility' (721). The task of OA as poethics is predicated on the potential of moving away from the horizon as a boundary or a limit and towards the horizon as a possibility of experimentation and innovation. I want to conclude with another proposition, which gestures towards such rethinking of OA as a more open iteration of the horizon.

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I have referred to OA publishing as a practice a number of times in this paper. A decision to use this term was a conscious attempt at framing OA as praxis. A shift away from poiesis—or making—and towards the discourse of praxis—action or doing—has been shaping the debates in the visual arts for some time now. Art seen as praxis emerges out of a desire for social life shaped by collective, transformative action. Praxis is a means of reformulating life and art into a new fusion of critical thought, creative production, and political activity. This approach grows out of Aristotle's understanding of praxis as action which is always valuable in itself, as opposed to poiesis, i.e. actions aimed at making or creation. Aristotelean praxis is always implicitly ethical—always informed by and informing decisions as to how to live—and political, concerned with forms of living with others. My understanding of OA as praxis here is informed by such thinking about ethical action as absolutely necessary for OA to enact its potential for experimentation and change.

To think about OA as praxis is to invite a conceptual shift away from making publications OA and towards 'doing OA' as a complete project. OA seen as such ceases to exist as yet another platform and emerges as an attitude that has the potential to translate into forms of publishing best suited to communicate it. This is not to suggest that OA should move away from its preoccupation with the form and medium of publishing altogether—the emergence of the so called post-medium condition in the arts, the glorification of generalised 'doing', and more recently, the popularity of related forms of 'entrepreneurship', all have their own problems. Rather, this move towards praxis is an attempt at drawing attention to a necessary relationship between making and doing, forms and attitudes, that seems to be lacking in a lot of OA publishing. OA as praxis offers a way out of what seems to be the end game of academic publishing today; it is an invitation to participate collectively and ethically in the process of making public the work of scholarship.

Doing OA—open accessing—implies a way of thinking about what producing various forms of knowledge should stand for. In other words, open accessing does not suggest a continuous process of producing OA publications, a never-ending flow of new PDFs and platforms. Instead, open accessing is a mode of being in academia through the project of publishing as an ongoing intervention. OA as platform capitalism gives little consideration to the bigger project of OA as praxis, and as a result fails to acknowledge the significance of the relationship between the form of OA, the content published OA, and the political project that informs both. Approaching OA as praxis, then, is a tool for reshaping what constitutes the work of publishing. What a commitment to open accessing, as opposed to open access, makes possible, is a collective work against OA as a tool of the neoliberal university and for OA as a poethical form of publication: a fusion of making and doing, of OA as an attitude and OA as form. But for poethical OA to become a possibility, OA as praxis needs to emerge first.

1 For a discussion of the effects of similar practices of academic book sharing on publishers, see Janneke Adema, "Scanners, Collectors and Aggregators. On the 'underground movement' of (pirated) theory text sharing," *Open Reflections*, 20 September 2009, https://openreflections.wordpress.com/2009/09/20/scanners-collectors-and-aggregators-on-the-'underground-movement'-of-pirated-theory-text-sharing/.

2 see: Sarah Kember, "Opening Out from Open Access: Writing and Publishing in Response to Neoliberalism," *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology* 4 (2014): doi:10.7264/N31C1V51.

3 see also: Janneke Adema, "Embracing Messiness: Open access offers the chance to creatively experiment with scholarly publishing," *LSE Impact Blog*, 18 November 2014, http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2014/11/18/embracing-messiness-adema-pdsc14/.

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