

Commonplace

Labour of Love: An Open Access Manifesto for Freedom, Integrity, and Creativity in the Humanities and Interpretive Social Sciences

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Over the next decade, Open Access (OA) is [likely to become the default](#) in scholarly publishing. Yet, as commercial publishers develop new models for capturing revenue (and as policy initiatives like [Plan S](#) remain reluctant to challenge their centrality), researchers, librarians, and other concerned observers are beginning to articulate **a set of values** that critically engages the industry-driven project of broadening access to specialist scholarship.

While [alternative genealogies exist](#), conversations about OA in the Global North have largely been concerned with the model of the STEM disciplines, lately [shifting to focus](#) on the development of infrastructural fixes that transcend traditional journal formats and enforce the openness of research data and protocols. There has been far less discussion about the **political implications** of labour and value in OA, particularly as they relate to the defence of what we perceive as **increasingly imperiled principles** of academic **freedom, integrity, and creativity**.

The undersigned are a group of scholar-publishers based in the humanities and social sciences who are questioning the **fairness and scientific tenability** of a system of scholarly communication dominated by large commercial publishers. With this manifesto we wish to **repoliticise** Open Access to challenge existing rapacious practices in academic publishing—namely, often invisible and unremunerated labour, toxic hierarchies of academic prestige, and a bureaucratic ethos that stifles experimentation—and to bear witness to the indifference they are predicated upon.

In this manifesto we mobilise an extended notion of research output, which encompasses the work of building and maintaining the systems, processes, and relations of production that make scholarship possible. We believe that the humanities and social sciences are too often disengaged from the public and material [afterlives](#) of their scholarship. We worry that our fields are sleepwalking into [a new phase](#) of **control and capitalisation**, to include continued corporate extraction of value and transparency requirements designed by managers, entrepreneurs, and politicians.

We fervently believe that OA can be a powerful tool to advance the ends of civil society and social movements. But opening up the products of our scholarship without questioning **how this is done, who stands to profit from it, what model of scholarship is being normalised, and who stands to be silenced by this process** may come at a particularly high cost for scholars in the humanities and social sciences.

Indeed, we run the risk of **flattening our voices and aspirations** onto a purely quantitative horizon of metrics that makes knowledge a remunerative asset for corporate players, precisely because it reproduces existing hierarchies in [knowledge production](#) and [higher education](#). When scholars from the Global South are charged high fees to publish in “prestigious” OA journals with a reach in the Global North, what happens to the original democratising spirit of Open Access? In this respect, STEM

researchers, predominantly in the Global North, are [directing the conversation](#) in a particular way by arguing that freely accessible data is a **prerequisite for the global knowledge commons**, without due consideration of what [consequences](#) their proposals could have on the “soft” sciences or on existing [inequalities](#) within North-South research collaborations.

As humanities and social science scholars, we want to reclaim the project of Open Access and key it to a different register of shared **creativity** and **responsibility**. Pushing Open Access beyond its corporate limits means challenging the many enclosures to which we as scholars and knowledge workers in research institutions tacitly consent. Why do many of us not consider the ethical status of the outlets where we publish, but only their prestige? Why do we review scholarship the way that we do? How do we write, and for whom?

What is clear to us is that the future of a more **accessible, ethical, transparent, and creative form** of scholarly communication largely relies on a *labour of love*—unremunerated, off-work time that is freely given as a result of political, emotional and otherwise idealistic investment in projects that transcend the quest for academic prestige and seek to transform the publishing system from within. However, scholar-led OA publishing can also benefit from the expertise and institutional solidity of other actors. While scholars can provide the carefully-argued analysis, the peer review, and the editorial work, we also need the support of our universities, libraries, and other like-minded organisations to ensure that our collective effort can be sustained, archived, and scaled up to [meet the challenge](#) of the digital information era.

After a brief review of the context that prompted us to take action, we advance a number of recommendations through which we hope to enlist new allies and fellow travelers in our quest for [the commonification of Open Access](#)—**scholarship that is collaboratively and responsibly built and shared**.

The Paradox of the Knowledge Commons

[In recent decades](#), academic publishing has been transformed into a **highly profitable business**. In the past, scholarly journals were primarily published through professional associations or academic institutions; today, many are owned or distributed by commercial publishers with [large profit margins](#). These profits are achieved through a system of academic exploitation: not only is the writing and reviewing provided free to the publisher, but authors are increasingly [required to pay](#) an article processing charge (APC) to avoid having their work being placed behind [expensive paywalls](#). Libraries face [a rapid increase in costs](#), at an aggregate rate of 11% per annum, to maintain access to journals and their contents.

Meanwhile, insofar as publication in “high-ranking” journals and name-brand presses is [required](#) for jobs, tenure, funding, and research assessment exercises of all kinds, **academics feel under increasing pressure** to “play the game.” This has serious implications for scholars with interdisciplinary or otherwise unconventional research agendas, and it places enormous pressure on early-career and precarious academics. It is particularly punishing [for women](#), who are still disproportionately charged with various forms of care work.

While this dismal state of affairs is fast approaching what property rights theorists call “[a tragedy of the anti-commons](#),” the irony of seeing the same communities that make qualitative social scientific research possible excluded from full participation in the production of knowledge (in the form of expensive journal subscriptions and APC charges) is [too often lost](#) on researchers consumed with the forward progress of their own careers.

Over the past few years, a number of high-profile incidents have further exposed the corrosive influence of commercial considerations, including the **willingness to censor content** in order to maintain access to profitable markets. In August 2017, it was [revealed](#) that Cambridge University Press had complied with the demands of Chinese government censors to block access within China to over three hundred “politically sensitive” articles published in the prestigious journal, *China Quarterly*. Prompted by public outcry, the press ultimately reversed its stance, restoring access to the censored contents for Chinese readers and making them available free of charge for all.

Unfortunately the Cambridge University Press incident was just the tip of the iceberg, and there have been numerous other examples of [major publishers censoring content on behalf of the Chinese government](#). In October 2018, it was revealed that Springer Nature had been [removing chapters](#) dealing with “sensitive subjects” from its *Transcultural Research* book series, unbeknownst to the authors or editors. Despite [public outrage](#) from the academic community, Springer Nature remained defiant. The company refused to reverse its actions and justified them as being necessary for the advancement of research.

These incidents expose [the paradox](#) at the heart of contemporary academic publishing—the fact that academics are effectively required to hand over their research, which is often supported by public funding, to publishers whose primary goal is to earn profit rather than to make the material freely and uncompromisingly accessible. This entrenched system of rewards and incentives, rather than [the conditions for publication being put in place by Plan S](#), is the real threat to academic freedom.

Yet freely accessible scholarship is **not free of political ramifications** and **is not necessarily ethical in its own right**. Within anthropology, [allegations](#) of abuse, misconduct, and exploitation at the formerly open-access journal *HAU* have cast a long shadow on the prospects of placing open-access initiatives on a better footing within the discipline. *HAU*’s recent transition to an “open access cum

subscription” model has *de facto* armed doubters with a powerful argument for why OA may never work without the stewardship of the most conservative players in the industry.

Even so, disquiet with the status quo is growing, and numerous projects across the social sciences and humanities are experimenting with alternative publishing models. The HAU scandal has, for instance, **inspired a call by anthropologists** and scholars in neighboring disciplines for “ethical” Open Access. Rather than [thriving on self-exploitation](#) and a toxic culture of prestige, OA publishing can indeed be made [ethically viable](#) while remaining financially sustainable and inclusive. But this may require that the battle for Open Access be moved to a [different terrain](#) than the one of serendipity and personal alliances. To reconfigure the publishing ecology of academia as OA proponents advocate, the **conversation needs to turn to questions of [financing](#), ownership, and, above all, values.**

Under the banner of concepts like [bibliodiversity](#), [slow OA](#), and [community-owned infrastructure](#), the alternative publishing networks that are emerging today aim to sustain the conditions of possibility for scholar-led projects that are **not driven by the pursuit of impact factors**, but are run on a minimal budget as a “[labour of love](#).” New models aimed at reversing the course of the current system may come in the form of [subscribe-to-open agreements](#) between libraries and publishers or [looser mutual aid relationships](#) that are not predicated on centralized control.

What can we, as researchers, do? We can reinvigorate ties with [journals](#) published by scholarly societies. We can act creatively to [reclaim](#) ownership over the free labour that we mindlessly offer to commercial actors. We can [conjure](#) digital infrastructures (think of platforms from [OJS](#) to [Janeway](#), [PubPub](#), and beyond) that operate **in the service of the knowledge commons**. Scholar-led OA publishing has the power to bypass gatekeeping institutions, bridge the [knowledge gap](#) produced by commercially driven censorship, and provide support to homegrown [digital activism](#) in countries where access to scholarship is restricted. All of this, without neglecting scholarly institutions such as a constructive peer review process or other forms of consensus-building and quality assurance proper to the humanities and interpretive social sciences.

How can we enable these projects—increase their reach, tap into new forms of support, reduce duplication of effort, ward off burnout and discouragement—while being honest about the drawbacks of their institutionalization? Is it possible for projects like these to share certain kinds of social and technical infrastructure, while **retaining their autonomy and the experimental edge** that makes them so vital?

Recommendations

We invite comment on and further development of the following recommendations.

For Authors

1. Consider Open Access as more than a publishing format; rather, it should be seen as part of a broader **political project** that considers the *relationship* between scholarship and its multiple publics.
2. Think about the ethics of the forum in which you are publishing. Just as we all have to think about our travel, personal consumption, and energy usage in a carbon-constrained world, try to publish in outlets whose values align with your own.
3. The publish-or-perish mentality prevalent in academia results in scholars publishing ever-smaller chunks of their research across as many articles as possible. Think about the **consequences** that this behaviour has on the **quality** of your **scholarship** as well as the public **communicability** of your work.
4. Recognise that not all Open Access **is necessarily socially just**. So-called predatory open-access initiatives can seek to capture limited OA funds without regard for quality and thereby siphon resources away from reputable OA journals.

For Senior Scholars

1. The scrutiny of job applications, tenure and promotion needs to **undergo a revolution**. These processes are what drives much of the obsession with publishing in expensive, “high-impact” journals. Surprisingly, senior academics (like some among us) don't step outside the box much and are appreciative of high citation counts, big-name journals, and other conventional criteria when assessing the “excellence” of candidates. While assessment criteria are discipline-dependent, it is important to actually read the work, [discounting its place of publication](#). An article in an ethical scholar-led journal, a regional journal, or a journal published in a language other than English should receive consideration on its merits, along with articles in so-called top journals. **It is scientifically untenable to do otherwise.**

For Deans and Provosts

1. A candidate can come up for hiring or promotion who is absolutely brilliant and whose work is published primarily in DIY or socially just OA journals. **Don't penalize them for these choices.**

For Librarians

1. Library budgets are under severe strain, and this is sure to be exacerbated by the fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic. Under these conditions, preserving access to currently available content is a logical starting point. But consider supporting scholar-led publishing, whether by small subventions to projects led by faculty and staff at your institution or (more boldly) projects that originate elsewhere but that contribute to a knowledge commons from which all can benefit.

Increasingly, [platform-and consortium-scale initiatives](#) make it possible to connect with these projects, which are cheaper than the overpriced mainstream and which point the way to the future of publishing.

For Journal Editors

1. “Flipping” existing journals (from toll access to an OA publishing model) is a big step: consider taking it, in conversation with supporters and [the resources they can provide](#). Also, **agitate** for other journals to do the same: there is strength and bargaining power in numbers.
2. Accept and foster more **public-oriented** scholarship. Scholars in the humanities and social sciences should strive to publish in ways that will make academic research understandable for larger audiences: that is, spell out clearly and concisely its societal relevance and the ethical soundness of its methodology, reduce the use of jargon, use non-textual and other experimental formats. **Publish work that “cares.”**
3. Consider rethinking the peer review process more broadly, entertaining innovations such as [open peer review](#) or [publication](#) (alongside the articles themselves) of reviews to facilitate more fruitful exchange between scholars.
4. Ask reviewers to consult the [COPE guidelines](#) for ethical peer reviewing, and consider adopting [diversity and inclusion in citational practices](#) as an explicit criterion on which submissions are evaluated. Make the labour of editing and reviewing more transparent and recognise it (rather than simply filing it under 'service'). This could potentially be done through **establishing awards for reviews**, which would help to recognize them as intellectual contributions without reducing them to yet another metric. Provide additional [support for new peer reviewers](#).

For Our Fellow Independent Journal Editors

1. Begin to explore options for pooling resources: when you apply for funding as part of a grant, **there may be a benefit to casting your request in terms of a publishing cooperative**. While collective decision-making can get bogged down in endless rounds of process, there may be economies of scale and pools of expertise to be accessed by working together. This might also include **cost and labour reduction strategies**, such as sharing copyeditors, reviewer databases, or other IT and non-IT infrastructure.
2. Even as we try to free ourselves from commercial publishers and other proprietary systems, we also need to pay attention to what **new dependencies we create**. **Web developers for open-access platforms, for example, are usually underpaid and potentially exploited**. Ask hard questions about the corners you may be cutting.
3. Publishing on platforms that we control also offers **creative opportunities that we are not yet engaging in**. Scholar-led publications mostly replicate existing formats, e.g. making articles

available as PDFs. Existing standards for citation may make this a necessity, but we need to pioneer **new standards** even as we branch out into web-native formats with clear advantages in terms of accessibility and preservation.

4. Posting catchy or “in your face” content on social media can draw attention to scholar-led publications and boost their visibility. While social media is crucial, being effectively present on it is **time-consuming and politically sensitive work that should be rewarded both in terms of compensation and professional recognition.**
5. While rising submission numbers can be one index of a journal’s reach, they can also grow beyond the point of staff or reviewer capacity. **Keep a watchful eye on how this burden is distributed and consider just ways to cap submissions**, such as requiring some form of in-kind investment in the project.
6. The humanities and social sciences **need [new metrics](#) for the impact they have in the world.** Participate in crafting them, even while pushing back against metricization on other fronts.
7. **Formalise principles for evaluating alternative publishing models and arrangements:** sources of support (e.g. cash vs. in-kind); infrastructure (e.g. original or adopted, vulnerability to commercial capture); governance (e.g. nature of the legal entity); the “ground game” (e.g. social infrastructure for enlisting and retaining supporters).
8. Begin working toward a **formal and comprehensive benchmarking** for scholar-led OA publications; this could be anonymized to dispel worries about the disclosure of sensitive information. Relatedly, explore the implementation of a **certification system** for scholar-led OA publications, attesting that a publication is **academically sound** (driven by scholarly concerns, having editorial independence as well as checks and balances on individual figures, providing high-quality peer review, using DOIs, backing up its data); **responsive; sustainable** (arranging for long-term preservation of its output); **focused on equity** (pays its copyeditors, typesetters, and IT staff a fair wage, unless these tasks are performed by the editors themselves) and **actively working against inequities in knowledge production and access.** [The DOAJ Seal](#) is an existing example of such a certification, which could be critically evaluated and supplemented as needed.

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