

Culture Clash: Symbolic Capital and the Limits to Open Access Journal Growth in the Humanities and Social Sciences

David Michalski
University of California, Davis
michalski@ucdavis.edu

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Abstract: *Each year brings more open access peer-review journals to the humanities and social sciences. Yet despite this proliferation, for-profit publishers continue to dominate, and hold the most prestigious journals in their portfolios, pushing the tipping point imagined by open access advocates seemingly out of reach. This project examines the social life of academic publishing to better understand the obstacles preventing a more robust turn to open access, one that does not simply mean more journals, but one that sees the more prestigious journals opting for an open access platform.*

Drawing on the work of cultural sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu, I examine social relations in the cultures of academic authors and open access advocates. While attention has been directed toward the importance of social status acquisition in the humanities and social sciences, I argue, open access initiatives too often fail to take this research into account, and, as a result, underestimate the durability of the social structures influencing author decisions when calling for a culture change in academic publishing. I also examine the culture of open access initiatives, to show how the composition of symbolic value within these projects can, at times, come to detract from the invitation they hope to extend to academia.

Against a tendency to see academic publishing platforms as culture-less enterprises, I argue for a more reflexive approach, one that takes into account how contested conceptions of symbolic and cultural capital influence the decisions of authors and open access publishers. I conclude with a discussion possible changes to open access publishing, changes which may jump start the open access movement in the humanities and social sciences.

Once upon a time, one of the promises of open access was that a proliferation of open access peer-reviewed journals could help bend the curve of rising library subscription costs. In the first decade of this century, as internet-based journals, hosted by non-profits, attracted more editors and authors, this new form of academic publishing, one where content was free to readers and available anywhere, seemed to indicate the dawn of a new political economy in scholarly communication. Libraries were quick to support these new journals, developing programs to catalog them alongside commercial journals, and holding them up as models for the future. They were considered a means to solve a crisis in collection development, for they entered the academic world just as journal costs were spiraling upward, and very large publishers were acquiring more and more journals, and altering the market in their own way, by packaging together thousands of journals and selling them to libraries under their own banners: Sage, Taylor and Francis, Springer, Wiley, or Elsevier.

The original dream libraries had for open access peer review journals was that they would steal away prestigious editorial boards from expensive journals, and attract renowned scholars to their nonprofit versions, thereby undercutting the demand for traditional publishers.

This has not, however, been the case, at least not in the Social Sciences and Humanities. Today, the most prestigious journals ranked either by impact factor or by other measures, remain behind pay walls. There has been a dramatic expansion of peer-reviewed open access journals, but within this flood of new journals, the most prestigious journals maintained or increased their value to scholars, and increased their prices to libraries.

The economics of this are a bit counter-intuitive, because inflation in publishing venues would seem to lower the price of any particular venue. Ted Bergstrom, (2001) the UC Santa Barbara economist, was among the first to articulate why this wasn't the case. Using economic theory's notion of a coordination game, he explained how a few journals were able to command high prices, despite an increase in competition. Positing that there is nothing intrinsically valuable in the title of a prestigious commercial journal, Bergstrom argued that a journal had prestige because it has served as a meeting place for scholars in the past. Commercial publishers, aware of the importance of their journals as a location for scholarly communication discovered that they can set their prices far above costs without the fear of scholars choosing new meeting places, such as new Open Access journals. Bergstrom likened these high prices to the rents that can

be collected at certain real estate addresses because of their location. Just as new housing on the periphery of urban centers does not influence the rents in core areas, the availability of new journals had little influence on the value of core commercial publishers. Even if scholars and librarians were distressed by the way overpriced journals drained university budgets or by the fact that access to scholarly work in high priced journals was artificially restricted, Bergstrom argued, the academic community remained stuck in an equilibrium where it would have to continue to pay huge rents to owners of commercial journals.

Unable to compete with commercial journals directly, the open access world of today has seemed to have moved on, concentrating its advocacy on other access-to-knowledge initiatives, such as the support of Open Publishing through the advocacy of creative commons licenses, the creation of Open Data management tools, open editing projects, institutional open access policies and repositories, which aim ingest content from commercial publishers, and Alternative Metrics, which seek to demonstrate the impact value of an article deposited in one of those massive open access repositories. At this point, the promotion of new open access peer-reviewed journals, journals which might compete head to head with expensive journals has been replaced by a movement to bypass the journal form altogether.

In this presentation I would like to make the case that the creation of open access peer reviewed journals is still an important part of the open access movement, and that nurturing and investing in a non-profit journal publishing, can pay dividends to the research library community, that is, help us in the pursuit of our goal to support the research and teaching missions of the scholarly communities we serve, while reducing overall pressure on our collection budgets.

I contend that research libraries and university offices of scholarly communication need to diversify their Open Access projects to include publishing offices dedicated to the management of premier, boutique, and specialized journal services. These offices must include selection committees composed of known experts in the field, budgets for an office of style management and copyeditors who can service a set of journals, as well as communication and marketing teams that can promote these journals to the audiences they hope to reach. The idea here is to set up non-profit journal publishing offices in libraries to cater to faculty editors by knowing what they desire in a journal. Too much of the emphasis of the Open Access movement has been placed on changing the culture of scholarly communication. Instead of putting all our energy in changing scholarly culture, we ought to be developing systems that are both economically sustainable and conducive to existing scholarly practice.

The recent shift in Open Access advocacy towards creating a new culture of research dissemination based on massive online article repositories, the mandatory application of creative commons licenses, the reliance on crowd sourced reviews, and a general belittlement of the work produced by editorial staff is out of step with the culture of academics in the humanities and social sciences. In fact the disruptive strategies of change embraced by many in the library world unnecessarily reinforces stereotypes held in the academy about open access publishing ventures concerning their authority, and their respect for authorship. The radicalization of open access and open access advocates has worked to harden the preconceived notions about open access in a time when dialogue and collaboration between the content providers and content distributors is most needed.

Two images may serve to illustrate how deep the culture clash is between academic journals and open access advocates are today. The first is the recent article in *Science* by Jon Bohannon (2013) which reports on an experiment where he attempted to place an obvious fraudulent experiment into 304 open access journals only to find that half of these allegedly peer-reviewed journals accepted his paper. There has been plenty of criticism of Bohannon's project in the Open Access world, charges that it did not also test the editorial staff of commercial journals, or that it targeted only gold open access journals, i.e. those journals which charge a fee to authors to offset publishing costs. Yet the *Science* article remains relevant because it taps into an anxiety about open access: in the new wild west of publishing, editorial control has been largely replaced by a reliance on the reader to evaluate scholarship. This shift of responsibility coheres to Ulrich Beck's understanding of the emergence of the risk society, which is to say, no amount of explanation by open access advocates will be adequate to repair the wound opened.

The second image comes in the form of the suicide of Aaron Swartz, the internet activist who some say, succumbed to the withering pressure of prosecutors seeking to punish him for the theft of intellectual property contained in JSTOR. This case, of course, is complex, and the details, if one was to examine them, would undoubtedly show a complex man embroiled in a complex issue. Yet for some in the Open Access movement Aaron Swartz has become a convenient martyr, (Bandrowski) one who spoke truth to power by liberating the articles trapped behind pay walls. His story, like the one above, coheres with contemporary sentiment, this time, a general feeling that the public sphere is collapsing under the pressures of privatization.

To better understand how we got to the state we are in, a situation where academics can be distrustful of open access journals, and where open access advocates can sometimes display an almost vitriolic animosity to the culture of

traditional publishing, it is necessary to draw on the concepts introduced by cultural sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, specifically his conceptions of *symbolic capital*, and *field*. Together these contributions provide a means of better understanding the interrelation between status groups, such as the oppositional relationship between the advocates of traditional peer-reviewed journals in the humanities and social sciences and contemporary proponents of open access publishing. The first concept that sheds light on this relation is *symbolic capital*, which is conceived as a kind of asset that brings social and cultural advantage or disadvantage. Each example of symbolic capital that is sought within a given situation appears to those who value it to be of autonomous and intrinsic importance. Bourdieu, however, maintains that the value of symbolic capital is derived from oppositional position it signifies in a *field* of social relations. (Moore) The value of symbolic capital is not inherent but relational.

Bourdieu most famous demonstration of this cultural dynamic is in his book *Distinction*. There he makes the case that the ascetic sensibility of a group that is culturally elite, but economically deprived, say graduate students or underpaid librarians, derives as much from that group's inability to afford high-priced luxuries and as it does to an aesthetic aversion to so-called tactless expenditure. In other words, the judgment of aesthetic value by this group is described to be less a decision made in accordance with any object in question, than a choice made in response to one's place within the tensions of class structure. For Bourdieu it is this structural basis of symbolic capital which allows it to become boundary making, and to symbolize belonging or difference.

These symbols of distinction used by legitimate culture cannot be exchanged as easily as economic capital, because they are not static, and because their purpose *is* to structure the economic field by constricting mobility.

The field of academic journal publishing operates differently than the culture of class, but the markers of symbolic capital here can still be understood as relationally determined. In an earlier part of the open access movement the dynamics of this field is roughly homologous to the illustration above. Alongside Bergstrom's analysis, which shows a coordination game informing the business model of commercial journals, the prestigious academic journals carry significant amounts of symbolic capital, and an author publishing in one of these prestigious journals is able to exchange that symbolic for cultural capital, in the form positive academic notoriety.

Up and coming, open access peer reviewed journals had a difficult time breaking into this world. The symbolic capital held by prestigious commercial journals, proved difficult to acquire. The embrace of the symbols of distinguished journals, made by the upstart journals, was not made with the same effortlessness of those who inherited the status, and publishing in them did not carry the same

weight. In fact, among an elite group of scholars, publishing in them was often read as a step down, into a battery of second class journals. In my cultural analysis here, please remember I am not speaking about the intrinsic quality of the scholarship, instead, I am pointing to the way symbolic capital is used to position players on the field in the game of social status acquisition.

For Bourdieu, the concept of symbolic capital is related to his understanding of symbolic violence. Because symbolic capital often takes its form on the leading edge of resource allocation, as a boundary setting tool, its symbols are effectively used to put people in their place. For this reason, markers of high status will often be rejected by those who are blocked from them. For instance, I may reject high-priced Bordeaux wine, and prefer the hearty wines of, say, Lodi, California, but I have to wonder, how much my preference is determined by my inability to move comfortably in Bordeaux circles.

The defense against symbolic violence often leads to the elaborate construction of new arrays of symbolic values, and the development of new means of status acquisition. These new values, however, are also not independent, but often determined in opposition to the symbols they were designed to escape.

This dynamic of opposing values is playing itself out in scholarly communication today. We can understand Open Access advocates and the scholarly community as operating under different but related rules. The individuals in these groups all seek to acquire cultural capital or high social status, but the measure of that status is not only different for each group, but oppositional. In short, what is symbolically valuable for one group has become a symbol to avoid for the other.

I will illustrate this with two examples. The Open Access movement's downplaying the work of editors, and its more recent embrace of creative common licenses. The depreciation of journal editors as shapers of content surfaces in the open access movement in several forms, in the "good enough" stance some have taken in respect to placing articles that have not been copyedited in pre-print depositories, in the contention that crowd review is superior to traditional peer-review, or in the justification some give for the presentation of articles unbound from their original tables-of-content. There is important reasoning attached to all these views, but it is important to understand them as symbolic within an oppositional field. To Open Access advocates these moves convey a forward-looking, progressive understanding of the future of academic publishing, for tradition journal publishers these same symbols constitute a misunderstanding of intellectual culture.

The recent understanding that: creative commons licenses constitute a central pillar of open access also shows how open access advocacy can operate under different set of values than academics. It is not simply a question of balancing

the public good with author rights, in some academic circles, CC licenses are seen as assault on authorship. Yet despite the anxiety these licenses create among some authors, creating open access journals, which aim to reserve-all-rights of the author, is increasingly taboo in the open access world.

Conclusion

If the goal of open access is to develop prestigious journals that can be read for free, we will need to take a more critical approach when assessing our own values, our own symbolic capital (values perhaps born in nearby Silicon Valley). Against a tendency to see academic publishing platforms as *culture-less* enterprises, we need take into account how our symbolic capital is formed in opposition to the persistent and embodied values in academia. How it rubs against the *habitus* of faculty.

We will also need to be more mindful of the elite culture of academia and its symbolic capital. I contend that rather than looking after our own status as avant-garde technophiles or Open Access activists, we will need to integrate, adapt, and even supplicate ourselves to the traditions of academic culture. That is, submit ourselves to its symbolic violence (for the cause of course). It is after all what librarians have traditionally done as humble stewards of the cultural record.

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