

Open is multiple, not defined. Attempts to focus the concept could exclude other economic models.

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7/15/2013

Taking a humanistic, long view of the openness of scholarly material, [Tim McCormick](#) argues that the concept of 'open' is difficult to approach because it is essentially "that which can't be defined". So attempts to legislate for certain versions of open through particular advocacy movements have limited its meaning. Rather, 'open' is the capacity to resist a single or final definition.



In "[Open is a state of mind](#)," Cameron Neylon explains "what 'Open' means, drawing on "all the core definitions of 'open' such as Open Access declarations and the Open Definition. But, he says, we have to get beyond "rules-focussed...religious wars," and realize the core truth:

"Being open..is about embracing a particular form of humility...It is about embracing the idea that... you cannot predict [the use of your work]...and insights could come from unknown sources."

Fair enough, this sounds admirable, and who would really disagree? Well, for fun, let's say I do. Let's say I propose some other point of view, such as, say, a human development notion that "Open" is those practices which facilitate the most people having the most freedom and agency to live as they wish to — or even, not all people, but scholars. In this case I might focus on economic structures to allow scholars to have sufficient and stable income and services to work, mobility, perhaps even the agency to work employed by an institution or not. I come up with a universal frictionless microcompensation scheme, and call the whole model "Fair Access." Perhaps crazy ideas, far from the usual discussions of say "Open Access," but nonetheless I have them.

Unfortunately, this view might rather conflict with Neylon's in places: for example by calling for scholarship to have certain usage restrictions, or participation in the microcompensation system, to ensure the creator can be employed and continue to create. Now what?

Neylon's concept of 'Open' is plausible, even inspiring; I see where he's coming from, I see how it supports the policy objectives he and Public Library of Science advocate such as CC-BY licensing, and so on. However, I can also imagine *other* models of 'openness, even scholarly openness, which are different and in conflict with it. They might even make more sense to someone living in, say, not a stable and advanced country like the UK with well-functioning social institutions, but in a precarious, informal economy and underclass, a struggling knowledge worker in some barbaric environment of violent class warfare and no safety net like, say, Silicon Valley.

In my view, 'Open' is what can't be defined; it's the capacity to resist single or final definition, and accept all understanding as provisional and evolving. I believe it's an extremely difficult "state of mind" to even approach, because we are continually beset and enclosed by cognitive biases, habits, routines, engagements and institutions which precisely oppose the state of real openness that holds every definition as provisional, every configuration as potentially fluid.

Taking a humanistic, long view of this, we could rewind from this cognitive science view of today, and recall a famous idea of English Romantic poet Keats, which he coined in an 1817 letter:

"it struck me what quality went to form a Man of Achievement... I mean Negative Capability, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching

Wikipedia summarizes the idea as “the capacity of human beings to transcend and revise their contexts.” Generations of commentators have explored this provocative and paradoxical concept: the supreme capability is to be able to operate in contradiction. Incidentally, it’s speculated that Keats’ unusual term drew from his studies of medicine and chemistry, including the idea of negative electric charge.

Keats’ “Negative Capability” is a type of radical openness, defined though a somewhat paradoxical term. But we could take that further and question our own ability or tendency to define *any* social phenomena or human quality. As Nietzsche observes in “On the Genealogy of Morals” (1887), any existing concept such as ‘good’ or ‘punishment’ (or I’d suggest, ‘open’) is a linguistic and historical accretion, of many practices and articulations, which we can’t every fully grasp or define: “All concepts in which an entire process is contained escape definition. Only that which has no history is definable.” So perhaps ‘open’ or ‘open access’ are terms one can’t and shouldn’t attempt to finally define, at least not any longer, now that they are part of human history.

Taking another perspective entirely, I’d note that in locating and presenting the Nietzsche quote above, and showing it in the context of the original text, I used Google Book Search, as I do many times every day. Google Book Search, however, fails just about every notion of “open” that Neylon puts forward, as it is definitely not given for unrestricted use, and is done by a public for-profit corporation with clear self-interested and profit motives for the work. But nonetheless, that economic structure has delivered this extraordinarily valuable economic good, which does exactly what I want done, for free, and offers the same to any Web user on the planet.

Is Google ‘open’, do the leaders of the company and this product have an “open state of mind”? It’s clearly a complex question, and you can in your nearest bookstore pick up current best-sellers with completely different opinions on that, e.g. “The New Digital Age” from Google chairman Eric Schmidt and Google Ideas director Jared Cohen, versus “Who Owns the Future?” by Jaron Lanier.

Should we accept a specific definition of “open” that would exclude Google Book Search, or for example any other type of mixed/versioned, self-sustaining economic model like OECD’s publishing program or Unglue.it or OpenEdition or DeepDyve? No, that would probably be narrow and short-sighted; it would deprecate and misunderstand and exclude innovators in related fields. Open is a state of mind that resists or holds provisional all final or single definitions, because our understanding is always changing and evolving. This is being open to others, to our evolving selves and circumstances, to other views, and to the future, in the difficult, radical, and necessary way that we must.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Impact of Social Science blog, nor of the London School of Economics.

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