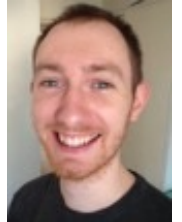


Academics: Ask not what Open Access can do for you, but what it can do for your disciplines

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Arguments for and against Open Access tend to focus on the needs of individual academics. Samuel Moore argues instead that advocates should spend more time emphasising how Open Access might benefit discipline-specific aims to encourage ownership of the movement from the ground up. Focusing on the specific needs of disciplines will help academic communities assess which of their publishing practices are beneficial and which merely persist out of tradition.



The debate on Open Access often centres on how the publishing industry has lost sight of the wants and needs of academics. Traditional publishers are accused of taking increasingly large amounts of money out of research budgets, via library subscriptions, and barring those that cannot afford access, thereby limiting the visibility and impact of academic research. Advocates argue that with Open Access, not only can anyone read and reuse scholarly material, there is also the potential to free up **billions of pounds** for the global research budget. This argument has been successful, and rightly so, and publishers are now being forced to consider (or, more cynically, at least appear to consider) the needs of academics in their business models – either in the subscription/APC fees they charge or in the value they add.

However, now that the OA movement has acquired real momentum, I believe it is time to look in detail at some of the nuances: to focus not on the needs of academics, but more on the disciplines they represent. This may at first appear redundant or unnecessary, but there are real reasons why the needs of academics and the needs of disciplines can conflict. Take, for example, the current practice of not sharing the raw data behind one's research findings. There are numerous [explanations](#) for this, but ultimately it is because a culture of competition has evolved in academia that dis-incentivises sharing. In this instance, the desire to maintain ownership of raw data and maintain a competitive edge on one's colleagues conflicts with the potential benefits that reuse and replication affords. However, recent efforts to catalyse support for open data have emphasised the potential disciplinary benefits, rather than those for academics as individuals. This strategy should be successful because it reminds academics not to lose sight of the disciplines they represent, but it also encourages academics to continually reassess their disciplinary practices as a community.

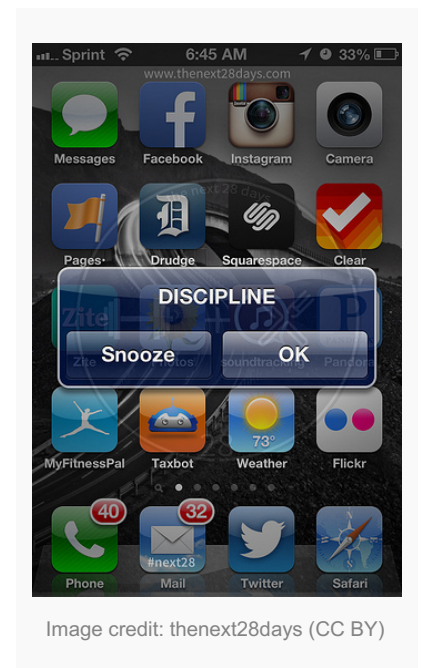


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Naturally, there are instances where practices evolve that benefit both the discipline *and* the academic. An excellent example of this is the arXiv e-print database: a platform for self-archiving that has ensured that the vast majority of physics research is published quickly and in an openly accessible fashion. This initiative arose out of a pre-existing, pre-internet culture in high-energy physics of sharing preprints via post to an 'A-list' of researchers, and the arXiv democratized this process by using the Web to distribute preprints to all who wanted access. The point here is that the arXiv was the right thing for high-energy physics at the time; it evolved from the community in order to benefit physics as a whole. It thus struck the ideal balance between community and individual needs – benefitting authors and readers by offering wide dissemination and rapid publication times, whilst democratising and speeding up the progress of physics itself.

Contrastingly, many humanities researchers have reacted angrily to RCUK's approach of mandating Open Access, partly (or perhaps largely) because it originated externally to their disciplines, i.e., from university administrators. Such top-down approaches to change tend to be met with opposition because academics understandably feel

protective of their disciplines and resistant to external influence. The problem is that it is easier to mobilise opposition to a perceived bad idea than it is to catalyse support for an equally good one. As Open Access advocates we therefore need to be using this time to stimulate discussion among the detractors and non-engagers by emphasising the benefits of open approaches to their discipline-specific aims. For example, long before mandates became central to the discussion, history as a discipline has been involved in reconstructing the notion of peer review to improve critical discourse (see [Writing History in the Digital Age](#)) and economics has relied on the quickness of working papers in light of publishing delays (see [2010 NBER paper on long journal revision processes](#)).

Focusing on the specific needs of disciplines will encourage academic communities to assess which of their publishing practices are beneficial and which merely persist out of tradition. It will allow us to challenge the dogmatic and much abused assertion that 'one size does not fit all', often used as a justification for refusing to engage with anything new. This will allow for a more reasoned approach to disciplinary differences, giving academic communities a sense of ownership of their future and encouraging other more disengaged users to join the discussion. We should therefore not assess a new practice according to whether there is an appetite for it among researchers and instead try to engage communities in judging whether the practice itself contributes to the broader advancement of knowledge.

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.

About the Author

Samuel Moore is a PhD student at King's College London researching the impact and trajectory of Open Access in the humanities. He is also a managing editor for the researcher-led publisher [Ubiquity Press](#). He can be found on Twitter [@samoore_](#)

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