

# Book Review: Open Access and the Humanities: Contexts, Controversies and the Future by Martin Eve

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*Martin Eve's new book is essential reading for anyone interested in the future of open access and scholarly communication in the humanities. With chapters on digital economics, open licensing, and technological innovations, the book represents a rallying call for researchers to shape the future of open scholarly communication and public engagement, writes **Jonathan Gray**.*

**Open Access and the Humanities: Contexts, Controversies and the Future.**  
Martin Eve. Cambridge University Press. 2014.

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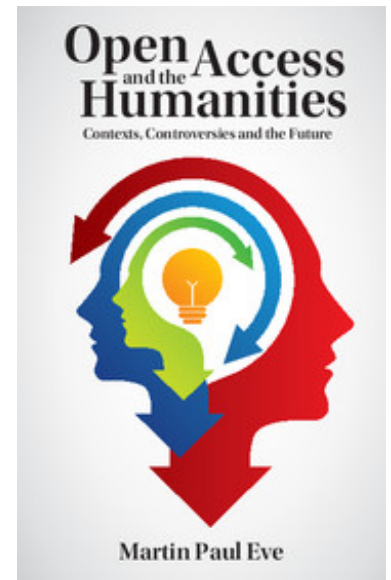
The dream of “universal access to all knowledge” (as the Internet Archive puts it) is, of course, not unique to our age. Aspirations to enable ever more people to partake in the fruits of human knowledge evolve in tandem with the practises, epistemologies and mythologies of the day – from [magical and mathematical languages](#) to [universal library catalogues](#), [hubristically epic corporate scanning empires](#) to [climate controlled bunkers for endangered books](#).

The advent of the internet has given this kind of dream a level of traction and tangibility that it may have lacked when the primary infrastructure of global knowledge transfer consisted of paper, pigeons, and postal systems. The spread of information technologies and communication networks have given rise to bright-eyed new narratives of sharing knowledge at what economists call “the marginal cost of reproduction”, which, in principle, could give everyone with an internet connection access at close to zero cost.

The past couple of decades have seen the growth of a global movement promoting open access to the outputs of research – including journal articles, monographs, research data and software – facilitated by the rise of digital technologies and the internet. Last month saw the celebration of the 7<sup>th</sup> global “[Open Access Week](#)”, where students, scholars, and institutions in dozens of countries around the world organise events and activities to promote open access to new audiences.

Advocates argue that open access can lead to higher quality, more collaborative, more widely read and more frequently cited research. They argue that open access can help to reduce inequalities between the shrinking group of institutions and individuals who can afford hefty subscription fees and cover prices, and those who cannot. The open access movement has now gathered significant momentum around the world and has had [numerous high level policy victories](#) securing public access to publicly funded research. However, it has also been met with considerable opposition and recalcitrance.

The current situation in the UK exemplifies many of these tensions. In 2012 the UK government launched [a series of initiatives](#) with the aim of making academic research accessible to the public. Speeches begat reports which begat a series of policy changes which would transform the way that research is disseminated, and how scholarly publication is paid for. Some open access advocates celebrate the UK's plans as amongst the most progressive in the world. However, dissenting researchers (particularly in the humanities and social sciences) [express concerns](#) that these new policies shift costs onto already cash-strapped researchers and institutions, threaten “academic



freedom”, lower standards and encourage plagiarism, accelerate the neoliberalisation of higher education, constitute a kind of corporate subsidy to a small group of highly profitable publishers, and remove one of the few lifelines supporting the work of small but essential scholarly journals, societies, and research networks.

[Martin Eve's \*Open Access and the Humanities: Contexts, Controversies and the Future\*](#) does an admirable job of unpacking and analysing arguments and evidence on both sides of the open access debate, re-examining these in relation to a rich and nuanced picture of the complex dynamics and political economics of scholarly communication which he builds up over the course of the text. The book itself [will be published on 18th November 2014](#) as one of the first open access monographs from Cambridge University Press, after the successful launch of Jo Guldi and David Armitage's [The History Manifesto](#) earlier this year.

The five chapters of the book are dedicated, respectively, to introducing open access in the humanities; the economics and labour of open access; rights and licensing; the challenges and developments around open access to monographs; and a survey of the kinds of innovations that open access both enables now, and which it might enable in the future.

The book puts advocates and critics of open access into a kind of productive dialogue, serving to recognise and address concerns and critiques in their strongest form, and challenging advocates to strengthen their case by taking some of these reservations more seriously than they sometimes do.

The central question in the second chapter (which from this reader's perspective contains some of the most interesting and original material in the book) is “How is the labour underpinning [research and publishing] to be subsidised and who will pay?”. To tackle this question, Eve undertakes a critical examination of what he calls the “cultural and symbolic capital” or “reputational capital” of academic publishing. In effect, he argues that any workable analysis of the economics of open access cannot neglect to look at the roles of prestige, trust, and reputation in scholarly publishing, and that a better understanding of the dynamics of reputational capital is a prerequisite to a successful transition to open access in the humanities.

The book also foregrounds the labour of both academics and publishers required to bring scholarly publications to press in the current system, and looks at several alternative funding models to support this labour. This includes a model whereby co-operatives of libraries pay up front for the production of infrastructure and production costs (such that the greater the number of supporting institutions, the lower the costs), and then open up the publications for all to use and benefit from. This is the model that Eve and Caroline Edwards are experimenting with through their [Open Library of the Humanities](#) project, as well as that being used by other projects such as [Knowledge Unlatched](#).

The economics section contains astute comments about a number of other topics including how academic publications as commodities constitute “mini-monopolies” (in that there are no direct substitutes for a particular publication); how attention needs to be paid to “supply side” crises (too much competition for top publications) as well as “demand side” crises (where institutions cannot afford to pay for the material they need); and how one cannot see open access as in issue in isolation from other recent changes in higher education.

*Open Access and the Humanities* addresses an important gap in the recent literature on open access, identifying and offering responses to a wide range of concerns raised by humanities scholars. As Peter Suber writes in his introduction, in comparison to some other better watered disciplines, humanities subjects can be like rare plants surviving in dry climates, living in rocky soil at high altitudes. While there is a growing body of research about open access more generally, a book specifically focused on challenges, arguments and evidence in the humanities is a welcome addition to the literature. It also gestures towards further empirical and historical work to be done in this area.

In summary, Eve's book gives a synoptic and multi-layered overview of many of the different factors at play in scholarly communication in the humanities, and offers valuable suggestions about how a transition to open access in the humanities might take better account of these factors, bringing much needed critical and constructive

reflection to the contemporary pursuit of a long held dream. It is essential reading for anyone interested in the future of open access and scholarly communication in the humanities, and a rallying call for more researchers to join those working to shape this future.

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**Jonathan Gray** is Director of Policy and Research at Open Knowledge, an award winning not-for-profit organisation dedicated to opening up public information, research and culture to benefit the lives of citizens around the world. At Open Knowledge he has just launched a new initiative about [the future of open access in humanities and social sciences](#). He is also a Doctoral Researcher at Royal Holloway, University of London, a Research Associate at the Digital Methods Initiative, University of Amsterdam, and a Tow Fellow at the Tow Center for Digital Journalism, Columbia University. More about him can be found at [jonathangray.org](http://jonathangray.org) and he tweets [@jwyg](#).

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