

One Door Opens: Another Door Shuts?

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ABSTRACT

This article explores some of the consequences of open access (OA) for scholars in the global South, centering on what constitutes their equal participation in the global circuit of knowledge production. Building on critical reflections by contributors to the ‘Power Shifts’ project within the *From Poverty to Power* blog, the limitations of the OA model are shown to be tied to a series of structural features characteristic of the twin systems of academic research and publishing. What the challenges faced by many scholars in the global South demonstrate is that ‘openness’, or inclusion in this format, is not yet the guarantee for equality that many had hoped. The article frames this as a systemic knowledge issue at a global scale that cannot be remedied by a simple reform to academic publishing. The article points to some creative efforts by scholars to forge alternative models for scholarly communication that move away from a marketized and restrictive model of knowledge production, and towards epistemic justice. The authors conclude that while OA represents a positive step forward in making knowledge a public good, it is no substitute for a more comprehensive rethink to pluralize our ways of knowing.

INTRODUCTION

In considering the impact of open access (OA) on Southern scholarship, we should start by declaring our own biases and starting positions. We have in the past been highly supportive of OA (Green, 2017), for both normative reasons — distaste at the origins of the journal system in the profit-gouging model developed by the late and unlamented Robert Maxwell

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(Buranyi, 2017) — and practical ones: neither of us is a full-time academic and accessing paywalled journals is a process that we prefer to avoid. More broadly, we are concerned that paywalls constitute part of a wider barrier between ‘academia’ and the rest of the world, which we consider unhelpful. As a ‘Professor in Practice’ at the London School of Economics, Duncan Green’s role is precisely to challenge this division, and to encourage greater cross-fertilization between ‘academic’ and ‘practitioner’ communities. Open access is a helpful step in this direction.

To add to that, we have also had positive experiences with publishing in OA formats. We jointly curate the *From Poverty to Power* blog, which attracts some 300,000 readers per year and has become a stimulating forum for discussion on a range of topics spanning research and practice. Duncan Green’s last two books (Green, 2012, 2016) were both published in OA formats. While the latter, *How Change Happens*, has sold some 10,000 copies (an old-fashioned form of paywall) in the three years since its publication, over three times that number of free PDFs have been downloaded, and 10 times that number of readers have accessed the book online. Up to now we have seen few downsides to OA.

We were therefore intrigued and keen to explore the potential unintended consequences of open access for scholars in the global South, raised by the editors of *Development and Change*. The aims of OA for Southern scholarship need qualifying for several reasons, starting by asking the following question: does inclusion come from access to journals, or from the ability to participate equally in the global circuit of knowledge production? If it is access to journals, the debate would stop at OA. However, if equity in research concerns us, we must explore the conditions upon which this inclusion is granted, and by whom. In a time of multiple, interrelated crises that have brought to the fore inequalities and exclusions that continue to persist in our societies, what is considered hegemonic knowledge — and the processes that create it — must also be questioned. We therefore see this debate as part of larger efforts to dismantle epistemic asymmetry and challenge the monopoly of institutionalized (and marketized) knowledge production.

To investigate the issue, we decided to use our blogging platform. For the last two years, we have been running a project on the blog, named ‘Power Shifts’, which seeks to identify and elevate authors and views from the global South. To build up a picture for this article, we first emailed 25 Power Shifts authors (Faciolince and Green, 2019), and then invited further comments and links from readers of the blog. This article builds on those inputs.

Our main argument is that accessibility, and thus Open Access, is only one part of a broader challenge over the democratization of knowledge, which we call ‘epistemic justice’. Until these wider challenges are addressed in the way academics and others conceive of and resource knowledge creation, the hope of a world in which different forms of knowledge are supported, discussed and interact respectfully with each other is likely to remain largely a mirage.

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WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT SOUTHERN SCHOLARS AND OA?

A useful starting point is the survey of 3,000 early career Southern researchers conducted by the NGO INASP in 2016 (Nobes and Harris, 2019). A pre-print analysis of the results found that: ‘40 per cent found OA research quite useful and 30 per cent extremely useful’ (ibid.), and that:

Of those who had published in an OA journal, 31 per cent had published only in journals that had charged an Article Processing Charge (APC), 29 per cent had only published in journals that did not charge an APC, and 40 per cent had published in a mixture of APC and non-APC OA journals. In total, 71 per cent of those who had published in OA journals had paid some kind of APC in the three years leading up to the survey. (ibid.)

Moreover, 60 per cent paid the APC from their personal funds. The authors were surprised at this result, ‘considering the possibilities for developing-country authors to apply for APC waivers with many large publishers (although around a quarter of our survey respondents were from India or Nigeria, which are ineligible for most waivers)’; they raised ‘the possibility that researchers publishing as a result of a collaboration may not have been aware of APC payment’ (ibid.).

Some Power Shifts authors had more critical appreciations of the wider implications of the introduction of APCs. According to Sayan Dey, a researcher and lecturer at the Royal University of Bhutan:

Publishing without a funding agency becomes impossible. In Indian universities, especially in the fields of humanities and social sciences, the faculties and researchers are hardly given any grant support for such publishing processes. Therefore, even before one can write a paper and submit for review, one feels highly discouraged. Often such situations compel researchers and faculties to publish in low-graded journals just to fulfil the API (Academic Performance Index) demands. (Faciolince and Green, 2019)

The pressure to publish without appropriate support leads to the proliferation of predatory journals, which operate without editorial oversight and perpetuate the exclusion experienced by scholars in the South (Mubangizi et al., 2017). These views were developed further in a podcast and transcript with Ethiopian academic Melisew Dejene Lemma (Cochrane and Lemma, 2019). Lemma emphasized that OA for writers cannot be treated separately from OA for readers, because of the inability of Ethiopian universities to access a large number of journals, especially their most recent articles:

When I try to publish my own articles, among the comments that I have received from peer reviewers of the journals from those publishers is that I am using dated literature. The case is even worse when you see my MA students’ theses. Even this year, some of the materials listed in their bibliography or references were from the 1960s and the 1970s We are approaching 2020, but the literature our students have access to, and are citing are including from the 1960s. We are a full generation behind. That is a systematic denial of access. The result is a big problem of the country lagging behind in terms of knowledge, research and even technology. (ibid.)

Despite the sacrifices involved in paying APCs that are often greater than the monthly salary of an Ethiopian professor (which she puts at around US\$ 400), Lemma is supportive of OA: 'It is only thanks to a few researchers who are able to fund their own publications to be open access, maybe from their own pocket or from their own funding or those who fund them. I think they are doing a great thing. Downloading one recent article, in this part of the world, means a lot' (ibid.).

As these accounts show, OA's role in enriching arguments, opening up accessibility and increasing impact is tied to, and limited by, a series of structural features characteristic of the twin systems of academic research and publishing. While OA removes barriers to access for knowledge 'consumers', the dependence on institutional resources and their profit models, which continue to favour owners over producers, can in fact increase barriers to publish.

Such discussions on the broader critique of knowledge production and dissemination were reflected in other replies from Power Shifts authors based in the global South. As scholars working in a higher education system dominated by northern Anglophone countries, many face diverse forms of oppression and exclusion from debates, or what has been called 'epistemic alienation' (Mboa, 2017). Some, such as Navalayo Osembo-Ombati, went so far as to argue that charging authors to make their papers accessible to readers is tantamount to 'economic discrimination'. In Osembo-Ombati's view, 'the more money, connections or institutional backing you have, the louder and more legitimate your voice becomes. Not because you have better content, but because you have tools and resources that give you access' (Faciolince and Green, 2019). This, in turn, mirrors what two African Power Shifts contributors christened the 'black market of knowledge production' (Mwambari and Owor, 2019), another link in the chain that restricts local research(ers).

The debate around OA is often centred on inclusion — a commitment long heralded by the academic sector, yet a distant promise for those working at the peripheries of dominant systems of knowledge production. An influential essay by Mark Hobart emphasizes how the process of knowledge creation is 'acutely political' because, quoting Foucault, 'what is excluded and who is qualified to know involves acts of power' (Hobart, 1993: 9). As such, we could indeed talk about a geopolitics of voice — whose is heard and whose is systematically silenced — that is highly dependent on material resources, but also deeply embedded in cultural processes imbued with aspects of power, authority and legitimation. This raises important questions for inclusion, not only concerned with who is participating in the debates generated within the systems of academic research and publication, but also on whose terms that participation takes place.

In order to publish, all scholars — irrespective of access to resources and other conditions — must follow established rules and repertoires set by Northern publishers and academia. Emma Lee from Tasmania argues

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that, ‘publishing arguments go hand-in-hand with arguments over research institutions/universities that have completely favoured neoliberal models of profits, rather than centering on knowledge’ (Faciolince and Green, 2019). Lee believes that ‘we can’t attack the problem of Open Access without first changing the research models that produce the conditions for publishing monopolies’ (ibid.). A group of Francophone African scholars go even further, stating that, ‘a conception of open access that is limited to the legal and technical questions of the accessibility of science without thinking about the relationship between centre and periphery can become a source of epistemic alienation and neocolonialism in the South’ (Piron et al., 2017).

Thus, it becomes evident that the debate around OA cannot stop at inclusion. As activists with a foot in academia, scholars such as Lee have been struck by the reification of particular forms of knowledge as constituting ‘The Literature’ (Green, 2018) on any given topic. In theory, nothing prevents literature reviews from including a wide range of types of knowledge, including peer-reviewed academic literature, ‘grey literature’, social media discussions, fiction, audio-visual material and so on. In practice, however, that is very far from the case. Professional incentives for academics focus on measuring contributions to The Literature that further cement global power dynamics. In many — if not most — cases, research grants lead to research agendas, which lead to research projects designed to respond to those funded criteria, leading to ‘new’ knowledge that fits firmly within, and helps reinforce, the dominant paradigm. This has been similarly observed by African faculty members in African and Northern universities: Western theories, methodologies and concepts tend to govern all research, no matter the geographical location, echoing a ‘neo-colonial face of open access’ (Mboa, 2017).

What the challenges faced by many scholars in the global South demonstrate is that ‘openness’, or inclusion in this format, is not yet the guarantee for equality that we hoped for. So far, most of the impacts of OA on Southern scholarship seem to reflect a perpetuation of centre–periphery disparities of power and influence, and have not heralded changes in prevailing institutional practices. Important questions around power and the construction of legitimate knowledge must be asked simultaneously in order to truly equalize participation in academic debates. These have led to hierarchical systems of evaluation — including research rankings and the Academic Performance Index — that foster a highly competitive culture wherein the mantra ‘publish or perish’ reigns. These particular challenges can be re-cast as opportunities for the larger effort to challenge knowledge hierarchies.

IS OA EVOLVING IN MORE POSITIVE DIRECTIONS FOR SOUTHERN SCHOLARS?

The move to OA is still evolving. Cochrane and Lemma (2019) identified three current trends: corporate journals making individual articles open

access; the emergence of new corporate publishers with lower fees, where all articles are OA; and thirdly (not necessarily new), more public universities hosting fully open access journals with no fee to read or to publish. In a review of 29 journals published in Bangladesh, Haseeb Irfanullah found that more than 70 per cent of the journals did not charge any money from their authors (Irfanullah, 2019).

One aspect of this evolution is the introduction of APC waivers for authors from the global South. Prominent groups such as ‘Coalition S’ — an international consortium of research funders — require journals to have APC waiver policies. This has led to some of the ‘big publishers’, including Wiley and SpringerOpen, now offering waivers for corresponding authors in developing countries, or in countries classified by the World Bank as low-income economies (as of July 2019).¹

There are other open-source publishing solutions like Open Journal Systems (OJS) available, already widely used in parts of Latin America and East Asia. In Latin America AmeliCa, a cooperative, non-commercial, academic-led system publicly subsidizes scholarly communication through academic institutions. Non-commercial platforms such as Redalyc, Scielo, Latindex, CLACSO and La Referencia are financed with public funds intended for education and research, and many have rejected APCs for authors. However, by depending on public funds, this ecosystem is in constant risk of underfunding and cannot always compete with larger commercial OA publishers.

Beyond this, however, decolonizing knowledge demands multi-pronged approaches that are able to account for true inclusion in all areas of the knowledge production system: from research methodologies, to curriculum design, all the way to communicative praxis and publication schemes. Moving from the commodification of knowledge favoured by standard approaches to ‘opening up’ the production and dissemination of academic work, Southern scholars are pointing towards exploring, and funding, collaborative proposals aimed at democratizing knowledge that also radically reframe disciplinary lenses.

An important move along these lines is to broaden the possibilities of what constitutes legitimate knowledge, echoing much of the work done by anthropologists who have questioned whether Western scientific knowledge is as ‘all-encompassing and efficacious as its proponents claim’ (Hobart, 1993: 1). These include the distinctive perspectives of Southern scholarship, starting with a long hard look at the lack of authorial diversity on many university reading lists, but also opening up the space to other sources of wisdom and ways of knowing. One example given by Odomaro Mubangizi is the inclusion of African proverbs as tools of qualitative knowledge generation in reading lists, which have been long excluded from mainstream

1. For a fuller overview of the waiver situation, see Inlexio (2019).

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academia. After all, these represent ‘concise expression[s] of African ontology, epistemology, moral, social and political philosophy’ (Murrey et al., 2016).

Other examples that move away from a marketized and restrictive model of knowledge production and dissemination include concrete efforts by scholars to create alternative models for scholarly communication. Since 2018, the Convivial Thinking collective has been fostering interdisciplinary discussion and sustaining a collaborative writing culture that aims to ‘deteritorialize and de/re-centre’ debates on development by ‘inculcating those voices, art pieces, opinions that get silenced or lost in the hierarchical spaces of publications’.² There are also more radical journals, such as *Alternautas* — an independent OA peer-reviewed journal focusing on publishing Latin American scholars — with editors who welcome more alternative and creative methodologies and expressions.

Foregrounding a commitment to an ‘ethics of care’ and equitable participation of under-represented cultures of knowledge, the Radical Open Access Collective has been ‘shifting [volunteer labour] away from commercial profit-driven publishers and gifting it to developing not-for-profit open access projects instead’ (Adema and Moore, 2017). Other initiatives focusing on the process of knowledge production itself include research–action projects like ‘Project SOHA’, which has been working on understanding what open science, empowerment and epistemic justice could look like in French-speaking Africa and Haiti. This space offers practical resources for scholars, as well as opening a process of crafting a roadmap towards open science that supports local knowledge, fosters collaboration and builds a network of open science researchers.

Going further in a similar vein, Emma Lee suggests dismantling the metabolism of academic worth and prestige as a bolder but surer path to inclusion.

In order to democratise knowledge, we must reduce or expand the concept of ‘prestigious’ or ‘high-ranking’ to include other forms of publications, media, knowledge-sharing; we should be campaigning with websites that create overall indexes, rankings, impact to include other forms besides journals. Blogs ... are a great case in point, where developing a capacity to peer-review papers, blogposts, etc., could begin to even out the market forces in favour of the producer of knowledge, rather than [its] owner. (Faciolince and Green, 2019)

Unsurprisingly, tensions stemming from debates around OA in the academic publishing system reach beyond the world of journals and suggest the need for creative transformations beyond reforming a flawed system. Discussions around the geopolitics of voice have gained special prominence in the movements to ‘decolonize the university’ and ‘decolonize the

2. See ‘About’ Convivial Thinking on the website: www.convivialthinking.org (accessed 16 October 2019).

curriculum' in the last five years. The student movements which started at the University of Cape Town in 2015 (Chaudhuri, 2016) through the 'Rhodes Must Fall' campaign and quickly made their way to the UK, fundamentally aim to challenge the dominance of the Western canon and the under-representation of ethnic and racial minorities in academia. Ultimately, the challenges of epistemic justice laid down by these movements and initiatives point to three vital reflections. First, we are grappling with a systemic knowledge issue at a global scale, compounded over centuries, that cannot be remedied by a simple reform to academic publishing. Second, given the scale of the challenge, a plurality of methods is needed that can centre creative and collaborative experimentation. Third, this will necessarily require a redistribution of resources, prestige and power between different forms of knowledge generation, North and South.

CONCLUSION

Short of doing away with the whole edifice of academic journals, we remain convinced that open access represents a positive step forward in making knowledge a public good beyond the walls of relatively privileged academic institutions. But if we want to eliminate the pay-to-read business model for everyone, there needs to be more thinking and investment going towards supporting knowledge creation from (and *for*) the global South.

Questions about 'inclusion' must not stop at opening access to academic publications, but must be attentive to the structural constraints for all scholars to be equal participants in debates. Where APC waivers for Southern scholars are absent or ineffective, funding bodies should be looking to create strategies around publishing that reward researchers without access to massive publishing grants in the first place, instead of penalizing them. In addition, funding bodies could look to support new spaces for knowledge sharing that help nourish a knowledge commons (Hess and Ostrom, 2007), incentivizing researchers to look beyond the one-dimensional path of 'prestigious' academic contribution. That would make much more sense than to step back behind the paywalls once again.

Our discussions suggest that APCs do represent a barrier for some Southern scholars, though perhaps not enough to outweigh the overall advantages of OA. More generally, however, introducing even a positive reform into a system as flawed as the world of academic journals is bound to lead to unintended consequences, as the gatekeepers of that system mobilize to protect their interests. OA is no substitute for a much more comprehensive rethink of what constitutes useful and legitimate knowledge about the world, and efforts to break down the artificial walls that the journal system has helped create between academics and the rest of us.

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