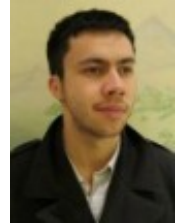


Recomposing Scholarship: The critical ingredients for a more inclusive scholarly communication system.

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2013/10/25/gray-recomposing-scholarship/

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Scholarship is not just about publication, but about interaction, interpretation, exchange, deliberation, discourse, debate, and controversy. Below is the transcript from [Jonathan Gray's](#) talk at yesterday's conference which outlined how at odds the current system of academic publishing, commodification and reward is with the nature of scholarship.



I'd like to start off by raising the question: what is research? Perhaps we might be tempted to talk about "increasing the stock of human knowledge" as an influential OECD manual on research statistics puts it. Perhaps we might turn back to the etymology of the word, to the sixteenth century French word *recherchier*, "to search": to search for truth, to search for better ways of understanding of the world around us. Perhaps we might invoke the metaphor of "the Republic of Letters": research as a kind of a global conversation, whereby scholars from around the world build on and respond to a shared body of arguments and evidence about different matters of concern.

But perhaps all of these metaphors of quests for knowledge and scholarly republics sound a bit too grand when it comes to characterising what researchers actually do, what we are actually engaged in on a day to day basis. (If someone should ask us at the end of the day about how our contribution to the stock of human knowledge is going, we would surely assume that they were making a joke.)

The day to day reality of research is often much messier, more complex and more mundane. If really pushed about what we actually do as scholars, we would have to get into the business of describing an unwieldy constellation of different people, objects, and practices: editorial boards and email threads, style guidelines and spelling conventions, indexes and search engines, bookmarks and bibliographies, legal agreements and literature reviews, conference dinners and calls for proposals, seminars, scholarly societies and social media. This sprawling edifice of interactions and exchanges is what scholarship is made of.

Today I'd like to invite you to reflect upon whether you believe that this contingent bricolage of arrangements is adequate for the task we'd like to give to it. In particular does it succeed in supporting the kind of scholarly exchange that we'd like to see in the 21st century?

If sheer quantity is a measure of success then things aren't going too badly. The amount of research being published is growing at an astonishing rate. Recent studies estimate that around [50 million journal articles have been published](#) since their first appearance in the mid 17th century (Jinha). This colossus is estimated to be expanding at around 1.5 to 2 million articles per year, which is roughly 3 to 4% annually. (Scopus lists about 1.6 million in 2012. The UK Publishers Association suggested global output is [around 2 million per year](#), quoting 120,000 articles as around 6% in evidence to UK parliament. This is up from an [estimated 1.3 million](#) in 2006.)

But more people publishing more words does not necessarily mean that our system of scholarly communication is serving us well. Scholarship is not just about publication, but about interaction, interpretation, exchange, deliberation, discourse, debate, and controversy. Plato writes of understanding as being a kind of flash that occurs between two people trying to come to terms with something from different viewpoints, a flash that arises from the friction of discussion and momentarily floods everything with light.

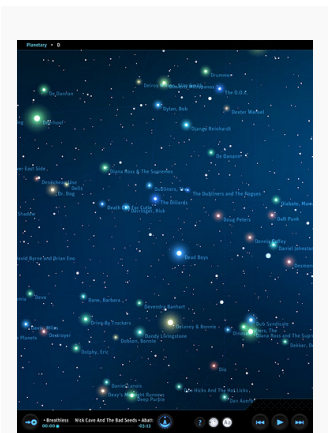


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Scholarship is, of course, not just about the production of text – text which has been processed, reviewed, and packaged up in the right way, in accordance with the dictates of style manuals and in keeping with the appropriate theoretical or methodological genre. Scholarship is about the way in which constellations of people and objects produce meaning, understanding and insight, through interaction, acts of interpretation. The value of a journal article is not the stated impact factor of the journal, any more than the value of a scholar is the aggregate of his or her publishing record. The value of a piece of scholarly text is in the interaction it has with its readers, in the sparks it generates, the friction and light that it produces – whether tomorrow, or in a hundred years time.

Unfortunately our current system of scholarly communication has often developed with other priorities in mind. For a start it echoes our broader cultural and social attitudes towards sharing the fruits of our creative and intellectual labour more generally: our disproportionate focus on protection and compensation, commodification and control. The default is still that our creations cannot be shared without payment or explicit permission. Even though they are unlikely to receive a penny for it, scholars are often inclined to be more guarded than generous about sharing their published work. This social and cultural hostility to sharing in turn reflects the state of the law, which is profoundly imbalanced towards protecting and rewarding rights-holders rather than recognising that copyright is an instrument which should strike a balance between protecting private interests and providing the public with access to the fruits of our collective intellectual labour.

Furthermore, the academic career structures in many disciplines are heavily focused around and driven by publication. Not even on scholarly output, but very specific forms and genres of publication, with a strong focus on certain journals and publishers. Journal articles and monographs have become the de facto currency of scholarship, and certain venues are worth more than others. Other forms of engagement – from collaborative projects to conferences – are often not recognised, or only recognised insofar as they result in publication.

If publishing operations such as journal titles and monograph series are the stars which structure the orbits of scholarly communication, then we may forget that what gives them their gravitational force is ultimately the scholars and scholarly communities associated with them. Hence we may conflate the trust, reputation and authority that derives from the scrutiny, energy and attention of a particular group of scholars, with the avenue through which this is manifested: namely the title of a particular publication or series. So entangled are the reputations of scholars and publishing operations that sometimes we may find it hard to wrench them apart and to recall that ultimately it is publications which are dependent on scholars, and not the other way around.

The result of all of these things is the lamentable situation we find ourselves in today, whereby a huge amount of the intellectual energy and attention of researchers is funnelled into the creation of products for the publishing industry which are then locked up and sold back to the institutions which employ them: the very same institutions which effectively subsidise the creation, editorial and peer review of said products. In 1999 [a scholar and a librarian wrote a report](#) unpacking the implications of this situation, which they called the 'crisis in scholarly publishing', which they described as: "a vicious cycle of increasing prices and decreasing distribution, straining (or breaking) library budgets, and leading to cancellations of journals and cuts in other acquisitions, as well as dangerous erosion in confidence in the integrity of peer review". "Ultimately", they concluded, "the flow of scholarly communication is at stake, eroding the academic mission."

The system of scholarship that we currently have is exclusive, protected and restricted. The light, insight and scholarly interaction catalysed by these documents in which we so heavily invest is obscured to all but those who can afford to pay, those who are part of an institution which can afford to pay, or those who are willing to break the law to take what they need. I think its worth explicitly highlighting that the current academic climate – not just the UK but in many countries around the world – means that a great many institutions are increasingly hard pressed for cash, and that a great many aspiring researchers are or will be operating without institutional affiliation or support. Hence unless there is a significant change, it looks like more and more researchers will be locked out, excluded, or forced to spend significant sums in order to keep abreast of developments in their field.

Unfortunately the social, cultural and institutional conditions we looked at above conspire to create an environment

in the humanities and social sciences which is generally unfavourable to the idea of open access – which at first sight might look to be an affront to authorial sovereignty and integrity, an impediment to career progress, and at best ignorant and at worst brutally indifferent as to how scholarship and scholarly communities actually function.

These are myths. Open access to research is not only commensurate with authorial integrity, career progress, and the flourishing of free and independent scholarly communities – but perhaps even more conducive to the realisation of each of these things than subscription-based access. Open access enables researchers to present the record of their views more fully and more accurately (so – for example – it is harder to overlook arguments, claims or qualifications made in publications which are less accessible). It gives their work greater exposure and increases the probability that publications will lead to meaningful interaction. And it affords richer, more sustained, more comprehensive and more inclusive engagement with what the philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer calls “the conversation that we are”.

What must happen if we want to make this constellation of people, things and practises more open? If we want to make our scholarly system less exclusively focused on protection, monetisation and control, and more fair, more inclusive, more collaborative? What must happen for it to become more centred around the production of meaningful interaction than on the production of saleable commodities for the publishing industry?

Two critical ingredients are public-interest policymaking which is sensitive to the dynamics of scholarship, and proactive support from researchers to champion new initiatives and arrangements discipline by discipline, institution by institution, country by country. In the UK open access policy is outpacing the researchers who are supposed to benefit from it, and risks forcing scholars away from familiar operations and arrangements before they have had time to create, plan or even imagine new, fairer ones to start using. Hence it is imperative that researchers – including those of us here today: researchers in the humanities and social sciences – become actively involved in critically reflecting on, reimagining and recomposing scholarly communication so that we have a system which is fairer, more inclusive, and more centred around interaction and conversation than around subscription-based products and profit.

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. Please review our [Comments Policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

About the Author

Jonathan Gray is Director of Policy and Ideas at the [Open Knowledge Foundation](#), a global movement to open up the world's information, research and culture. In addition to his policy work he has initiated several cultural projects at the Foundation including [The Public Domain Review](#), a widely acclaimed web-based review of works which have entered the public domain, and [TEXTUS](#), an open source platform for working with collection of texts on the web – particularly scholarly corpora. He studies philosophy and the history of ideas at Royal Holloway, University of London. You can follow him on Twitter at [@jwyg](#), and find out more about him at: [jonathangray.org](#)

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