

## Open Access

**Peter Suber. *Open Access*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2013. 242 pp. \$13.95. Paper. ISBN: 9780262517638.**

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This concise and engaging introduction to open access publishing (OA), by one of its best-known proponents, is both timely and welcome.

Suber is presently Director of the Harvard Open Access Project. His previous vocational pursuits have included a stretch as a successful stand-up comic (he appeared on *The Tonight Show* with Johnny Carson in 1976) and as a philosophy professor at Earlham College. His great ease with a variety of audiences comes through in the clarity of his writing; he consistently avoids jargon, and has an inviting style of expression, which places his subject within easy reach of his readers.

His objective is to provide “a succinct introduction to the basics of OA, long enough to cover the major topics in reasonable detail, and short enough for busy people to read”(ix). He believes that “OA benefits literally everyone,” and that for OA to reach its full potential it must be as widely and as clearly understood as possible. Dispelling some of the persistent misunderstandings of OA (that it has a tendency toward degrading academic publishing, that it flouts copyright, that it is bent on destroying conventional publishing models, that it seeks to avoid established disciplines such as peer review, and so on) will help to foster its growth even further.

Suber clearly writes as an advocate for OA, yet one who has a good grasp of what some of the objections and apprehensions are. At no point in the book is there any lapse into implying bad faith on the part of conventional publishers. He understands what the inhibitions are, both inside and outside of OA as a “movement.”

*Open Access* comprises ten very short chapters. Some of the headings are exactly what a reader would expect (“What is OA?”), others less so (“Casualties,” towards the end). The style of writing is inquisitive: the author has a good sense of his intended audience, and works from the assumption that nothing about OA is self-explanatory. A glossary, notes, index, and list of selected additional resources are provided at the book’s conclusion.

The author aims to provide the reader with a working grasp of what’s different (and what’s not) about OA. He discusses what has been accomplished already (several times he mentions that about one quarter of all peer-reviewed academic journals are now OA), what the different “flavors” of OA are, how institutional policies can work to the benefit of both writers and authors, the potential financial models for supporting an OA journal or repository, and where (it is hoped) OA might be growing in the coming years.

Suber begins with the question of why more authors are not taking fuller advantage of digital technologies in a networked environment. This leads him directly into one of the most persistent misunderstandings of academic publishing in general, i.e., the confusion between writing for *impact* and writing for *financial reward*. The illusory prospect of being paid to write in journals has a tendency to deter too many academics from taking advantage of the “access revolution.” As Suber expresses it, “OA is the name of the revolutionary kind of access these authors, unencumbered by a motive of financial gain, are free to provide to their readers” (4). OA has the effect of removing access barriers and copyright/permission barriers, and there are tremendous benefits to authors as well as to readers in this shift.

A short overview of statements/ definitions of OA (Budapest 2002, Bethesda 2003, Berlin 2003) provides a broader defining context. All of these standards uphold at least one limit, i.e., the obligation to attribute the work to the author. (A primary commitment of OA is to remove barriers to all *legitimate* uses for scholarly literature.) The genius of the OA concept is to “make research literature available online without price barriers and without most permission barriers” (8). Contrary to common misconceptions, the “major obstacles are not technical, legal, or economic, but cultural” (9), and “authors want access to readers at least as much as readers want access to authors” (15).

A recurring concern of Suber's is the tendency to misunderstand OA, and he makes it very clear what OA is *not*: an attempt to bypass peer review; or to reform, violate, or abolish copyright; or to deprive royalty-earning authors of income; or to deny the reality of costs; or to reduce authors' rights over their work; or to reduce academic freedom; or to relax rules against plagiarism; or to punish or undermine conventional publishers.

Further, advocating expansion of OA publishing does not necessarily depend on the decline of other models, is not primarily about bringing access to lay readers, and does not constitute universal access (as OA does not in itself address certain other barriers, e.g., lack of network infrastructure, foreign languages, disabilities, etc.).

Suber considers what the impetus or motivations are for OA publishing, observing that there are a number of problems to which OA provides at least a partial solution. These problems include the pricing crisis ("for four decades, subscription prices have risen significantly faster than inflation and significantly faster than library budgets" [30]). This is not simply about budget, but about inequality of access (e.g., during 2008 Harvard University held subscriptions to almost 99,000 titles; by contrast, the biggest collection in India, at the Indian Institute of Science, amounted only to 10,600 titles). The fact is that *nobody, anywhere* can afford to keep pace with the proliferation of scholarly publications, and with continued inflation and price increases. Suber shows a clear working knowledge of the scope of the challenges for libraries and librarians, concluding that the system is broken for both buyers and users (41), and that OA uniquely is able to "scale" to the continued growth of knowledge without becoming unaffordable to everyone.

A chapter on "Varieties" helps explain the difference between "gold" (journals) and "green" (repositories) dimensions of OA. Even most conventional publishers — this was new to the present reviewer — permit authors to put their publications in their institution's repository. He also clarifies the distinctions (related to permissions and copyright) between "gratis" and "libre" arrangements for OA.

Suber's chapter on policies gives an overview of some of the options open to academic institutions, stressing the value of institutions supporting their faculty in publishing in OA venues, instead of leaving it up to individuals to negotiate with publishers. It's worth noting that the more colleges and universities adopt OA policies, the easier it is for others to follow suit: "Every strong new policy creates some of the conditions of its own success. Every institution adopting a new policy brings about OA for the research it controls and makes the way easier for other institutions behind it" (95).

A short section on "Scope" helps the reader consider the extent of OA's potential to alter the landscape. To cite one example, the use of OA pre-prints "gives authors the earliest possible time stamp to mark their priority over others working on the same problem" (102). Similarly, underused institutional publication formats such as theses and dissertations can be made much more accessible through a repository than could ever have been the case through print or conventional approaches. Suber makes an interesting case for publishing scholarly monographs in OA as well, noting how "hybrid" publishing, where searchable electronic versions have been released preliminary to print editions, have in fact helped, rather than harmed, sales.

Suber's chapter on financial considerations ("Economics") maps out some of the business models in use for publishing "gold" (journals) in open access. A relatively small percentage (30 percent) of OA journals charge author fees, but these fees are in fact most often absorbed by someone other than the author. He observes that "fee-based OA journals tend to work best in fields where most research is funded, and no-fee journals tend to work best in fields and countries where comparatively little research is funded" (142).

Because conversations regarding the crisis in academic publishing often posit "winners" and "losers," it's not surprising that a later chapter has the title "Casualties." Suber has no hostility towards conventional publishing per se, nor does he believe that there is room for only one publishing model. His purpose in this section is to map out ten indicators that are shaping how things are changing. For example, early signs are that a rise in "green" (institutional repository) OA publishing does not inevitably result in increased journal cancellations. It will require more time to figure out how one model will affect the other. Suber comments that "... toll-access journals have more to fear from their own price increases than from rising levels of green OA" (158).

Regarding OA's prospects, Suber is highly optimistic that increased familiarity with OA as an option will allay some of the misunderstandings that have been so persistent up to now.

It is very easy to imagine a book on this urgent topic that is too complex, too long, too combative, and deathly boring. Happily, Suber's *Open Access* is none of these things. He has an almost perfect instinct for what his readers are eager to know, and he frames his content in useful examples and in the context of the real-world challenges common to the academy. Likewise, he clearly has a great deal of respect for the issues libraries and librarians must contend with in these times of transition. *Open Access* is highly recommended for anyone who wants to understand better how academic publishing is changing, whether from a library acquisitions or a publishing perspective.

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