

Two Highly Unexpected E-mails and a Tap on the Shoulder: A personal account of the benefits of open access in the humanities

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Abstract

Open access is one of the most heated topics in the world of scholarly publishing. Humanities scholars sometimes critique electronic publishing—and Creative Commons licences in particular—as a threat to the publication format that they cherish the most, viz. the monograph. This article argues otherwise. Based on personal experience, its author argues that open sharing of monograph-size theses and dissertations in repositories facilitates uptake by serious academic book publishers. Moreover, publishing an open access monograph with a Creative Commons licence paves the way for translations into other languages at no cost whatsoever. Humanities scholars should embrace open access instead of seeing it as a threat and explore new possibilities offered by the emerging diamond open access model.

Keywords: open access, humanities, monographs, book publishing, Creative Commons

Introduction

It is sometimes argued that ambitious scholars should avoid sharing their work in open access. In particular, master's and doctoral theses in the humanities should be kept out of reach of the public, sceptics claim. Allegedly, as soon as a full text is being shared online in open access, no serious publisher will want to publish a book based on it. Here is a personal account that runs counter to such claims. Although I can only share anecdotal evidence, I believe that it is time for sceptics to rethink their reservations and start embracing open access.

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A full text in open access

In May 2012, I defended my PhD dissertation at the University of Tromsø (UiT), Norway (Aspaas, 2012). My work was a historical analysis of the 18th-century transits of Venus, as seen through the prism of an individual, the Jesuit astronomer Maximilian Hell (1720–1792). The doctoral dissertation took the form of a monograph, that is, a single long text on a single topic. During the doctoral defence, my opponents—a specialist on Neo-Latin literature, Vibeke Roggen and a specialist on the Central European Enlightenment, László Kontler—presented suggestions on how to revise the manuscript for publication. My retort was, ‘To my mind, this is already published. My dissertation is there online in UiT’s repository, for all to see.’ In the convivial atmosphere afterwards, a senior colleague looked me in the eye and asked whether it was true I had no ambitions to transform the dissertation into a real book. When I shook my head, he remarked that no publisher would be likely to see any market value in my manuscript anyway, now that it been given away for free on the internet. I remember muttering to myself, ‘The only exception would be if Brill gave me a call, but that would hardly happen in any case.’ Brill Academic Publishing (now part of De Gruyter Brill) is a major international publisher in the humanities and social sciences.

The first unexpected email

More than two years after my doctoral defence, on 16 August 2014, a totally unexpected email landed in my inbox. Referring to the PDF of my thesis in UiT’s open access repository, a specialist on the history of the Jesuit order, Robert A. Maryks, asked, ‘Would you be interested in publishing a book based on your dissertation with Brill’s Jesuit Studies series that I am the editor-in-chief of?’ The series in question already included monographs and anthologies by some of the most outstanding scholars in the field. Nevertheless, as editor-in-chief, Maryks evidently felt the need to browse the web in search of further prospective authors. My guess is that my work would never have been discovered if the dissertation text had not been retrievable online. The Brill book project thus came about thanks to open access, not in spite of it.

I have to admit that I struggled to set aside the time and muster the energy to make the necessary revisions. My day job was as a university librarian with only limited time set aside for research. As luck would have it, there came a message from László Kontler, with whom I had remained in contact since he acted as opponent at my doctoral defence. László now

revealed that he planned to ‘write something, probably just a short book, on Hell’. Realizing the potential of combining my background in Neo-Latin studies, and familiarity with the Scandinavian aspects of the topic, with László’s qualifications as a historian with in-depth knowledge of the Enlightenment and Central Europe, we decided to let the two book projects merge into one.

A tap on the shoulder

By the summer of 2019, our work together had resulted in a book manuscript that had been peer reviewed and copy-edited and was ready for production. Then one of my senior library colleagues in Tromsø, Jan Erik Frantsvåg (a true champion of open access), tapped me on the shoulder: ‘How about this upcoming book of yours, will it be published in open access?’ I was caught completely off guard. The good thing was that Jan Erik pointed to the special Publication Fund for open access at my university. The fund would hardly be willing to cover all the expenses, but perhaps some collaboration with László’s home university (the Central European University) might do the trick? In less than two weeks, an open access charge of €10 000 had been settled, no small amount, but the alternative mode of dissemination was €155 for a hard copy or €155 for the ebook. In our case, our home institutions paid upfront (€5000 each) for unlimited dissemination of the ebook, while the hard copy is offered for sale to customers preferring a real book made of paper. The ebook is available at Brill’s website under a Creative Commons licence—in other words, in open access (Aspaas and Kontler, 2020).

The mediator in all this was Arjan Dijk, a fellow with several decades of experience at Brill. In one of his emails to us, he pointed out that, on average, ‘an Open Access book is downloaded about twenty more times than a book behind a paywall’. This was a nice deal for László and me, who both support the ideal of free and unhindered dissemination of knowledge. Towards the end of 2019, the ebook was published in open access; we received our complimentary hard copies in the first week of 2020.

There followed an exciting period of book reviews (summarized in Aspaas, 2022) and some book launch events, which had to be held in digital format owing to COVID-19 lockdowns. By January 2022, the book was no longer a recent one. We had said what we wanted to say; readers had had their say; that was that. Or so we thought.

The second unexpected email

Then, on 5 January 2022, another totally unexpected email arrived. A reader in Spain, Adrian Corbi Cabrera, wrote, ‘He leído vuestro libro sobre Maximilian Hell, al no dominar el inglés, lo he traducido al español y ya tengo un primer borrador (que os adjunto).’ In other words, he had found our book online, but felt that his English was not quite at the level it should be—therefore, he had translated the text into his native language, possibly as an exercise to improve his English. Amazingly, *our entire book* was attached to his email, as a manuscript in Spanish. Needless to say, we were as delighted as we were bewildered.

In the blink of an eye, we cleared the rights with Brill, who had no objections whatsoever. ‘This is another benefit of Open Access,’ Arjan remarked. Our translator meanwhile took the manuscript to a publisher in Valencia, Editorial UPV (Aspaas and Kontler, 2024). Much to our joy, Editorial UPV is a major publisher of academic books in Spain and a publisher that sticks to the principles of open access. We are now delighted to see our study of Maximilian Hell, SJ receiving renewed attention as it passes from an English readership to a Spanish one.

Quod erat demonstrandum

The story of the two unexpected emails demonstrates that humanities scholars should not be afraid of open access. Rather, we should embrace it with both hands. The dissertation text’s availability in open access was what triggered the Brill project initiated by Robert A. Maryks. The Brill book’s availability in open access was what inspired the translation project undertaken by Adrian Corbi Cabrera. Moreover, the Creative Commons licence rendered the rights clearance process an extremely quick and smooth one, facilitating the transition from an English to a Spanish readership at no extra cost and blessedly free from time-consuming negotiations.

Practising open research is not always straightforward. As individuals, scholars need infrastructures (repositories) and the people (advisers) to curate them and introducing scholars to them. I have been lucky to have worked at an institution where such infrastructure and advisers were at hand. The open access repository was in place, there were advisers such as Jan Erik Frantsovåg, and there was even a Publication Fund that helped us across the line. Similarly, László Kontler managed to find strategic funds in his university to cover his part of the publication fee for open access at Brill. However, not all scholars enjoy the same

privileges. A more inclusive and all-encompassing way forward will be open access funded by other means than individual publication fees (book publishing charges). Editorial UPV uses the model known as ‘diamond open access’: no fees for readers, no fees for authors.

Anyone interested in learning more about diamond open access for academic books on a systemic level should consult the ongoing PALOMERA (Policy Alignment of Open access Monographs in the European Research Area) project, which aims to align policies and strengthen support for non-profit open access monographs on a European level.¹ The slow but seemingly unstoppable development towards more multi-dimensional assessment of researchers and our research outputs also works in favour of sharing work in open access instead of hiding content behind paywalls. See, for example, the CoARA Commitments that are being signed by more and more research funders and research-performing institutions.² If there is one take-home message that I am particularly eager to get across, it is this: supervisors should stop dissuading PhD candidates from sharing their theses in open access repositories. It is to the benefit of all stakeholders, not least the junior researchers themselves, to share their work as openly as possible.

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¹ <https://operas-eu.org/projects/palomera/>

² <https://coara.eu/agreement/the-commitments/>

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