A Take on Peter Suber's "The Opening of Science and Scholarship"

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Essay by Jean-Claude Guedon, June 5, 2008 in response to The Opening of Science and Scholarship

> The Opening of Science and Scholarship

There is much to be liked in Peter Suber's piece, but one of the most important facets of his argument certainly lies in his beginning: "Who controls access..?" Indeed, the issue of control is closely related to access. Placing it center stage as Suber does reminds us that power is at stake in the quest for Open Access. Discussing the issue of power is not always appropriate in polite company, but in the case of Open Access, it cannot be avoided.

Open Access is not a completely novel process coming out of nowhere; on the contrary, it stands at the end of a long string of transformations in human communication that stem back to the beginnings of writing. Writing is a form of coding. It can be used to hide or to expose. It depends on one's mastery of the needed arts. Scribes, therefore, wield power. With writing came control over access to the capacity to write, and over meaning (through reading and commenting). Eric Havelock has argued that if Plato advocates the overthrow of the poet (or bard) by the philosopher, it is because he stands on the side of scribes (unlike Socrates) and wants to locate political power in writing. Preserving the collective memory and local traditions became the province of writers. It also affected the power structure of society. In other words, a political revolution was afoot.

Anthony Grafton and Megan Williams have documented a similar phenomenon in relationship with Origen's Hexapla. Origen made a massive use of codices to compare and critique texts, and to select a canon that could stand further rebuttals. In imitation of Peter, Origen wanted to build the Church on his Hexapla. What emerged was the Christian Canon. But he also repositioned the reader with respect to texts and thus achieved a somewhat paradoxical result: to generate orthodoxy, he developed critical tools which he probably treated as mere scaffoldings needed for his grand edifice. However, the scaffoldings somehow survived in the form of critical thinking.

Print also opened opportunities for revolutionary shifts. The Thirty-Years War and the development of the "public sphere", to use Habermas' terminology, bring support to this claim. In establishing a new alternative to approach reality and truth, the scientific revolution also sowed revolutionary seeds that were quickly disseminated by newly invented print objects, such as scientific journals .

We can now jump to the end of Peter Suber's first sentence : "…in the age of the internet": it is indeed the presence of the internet that opened up new revolutionary possibilities for scientific publishing. But let us remember that a revolution corresponds to a shift in power.

Scientists and scholars quickly sought to take advantage of the internet around 1990. They generally wanted to communicate better and faster. As a result, they also began to converge on Open Access solutions.

In listing the advantages of Open Access, Peter Suber brings out characteristics that correspond to the non-contentious meaning of "revolutionary" (and he does not use the word). However, the publishers' resistance to Open Access is not easily understood from this non-confrontational perspective. Only the quest for power can account for their fierce reactions and their intense lobbying efforts, both in Washington and Brussels.

In his Code 2.0, Lawrence Lessig brings out the concept of "architecture of control". In the print world, the architecture of control rests on the difficulty of copying while laws continue to prohibit copying and costs are covered by turning documents onto commodities. The copying machine began to weaken this structure, but the rise of the internet removed almost all obstacles to copying, including time and cost. To preserve their role (and revenues), publishers felt that the architecture of control inherent in the print world had to be adapted to the digital world. Key elements of the new architecture of control include centralized servers protected by passwords and licensing schemes rather than outright

sales. Moreover, publishers want their copy of the scientific or scholarly article to be the reference copy, the only copy that can be cited.

Why do authors submit manuscripts to publishers although they restrict their dissemination so much? Simply because the architecture of control also includes the branding capacity of journals. Based on the average number of citations per article over a two-year period, a quantified index called the "impact factor" has been developed. It purports to measure the visibility of journals as seen through citation behavior. In turn, visibility is related to quality. Finally, the alleged quality of the journal is equally distributed over all of its authors. In this questionable and indirect chain of reasoning, journals claim the capacity to brand authors. Administrators of universities and their proxy bodies, for example tenure and promotion committees, have bought into this reasoning, largely because it facilitates the evaluation work and decreases the possibilities of divisive arguments. So have juries working for a research granting agency. The net result is that authors have no choice but to submit to this curious game.

Open Access does not frontally attack the situation just described. Some of its supporters are even careful to chart a path around it. However, Open Access is not an end in itself; it is merely a symptom of deeper processes linked to the growing role of digitization in our civilization. It is digitization that brings about opportunities for profound shifts in power. Open Access simply defines a battle front that refers to the challenges being thrown at the architectures of control supported by publishers. Like a litmus test, the quest for Open Access reveals an architecture of control on the wane.

To conclude, the deeper phenomenon behind Open Access has to do with the internet itself. The networked, distributed structure of the TCP/IP protocols harbors an architecture of control of its own which challenges other modes of control. These challenges emerge in various fields, for example free software and the distributed production of knowledge as in Wikipedia. It also reveals itself in the ways in which scientists and scholars want to work and recover full control over the mores of their tribe.
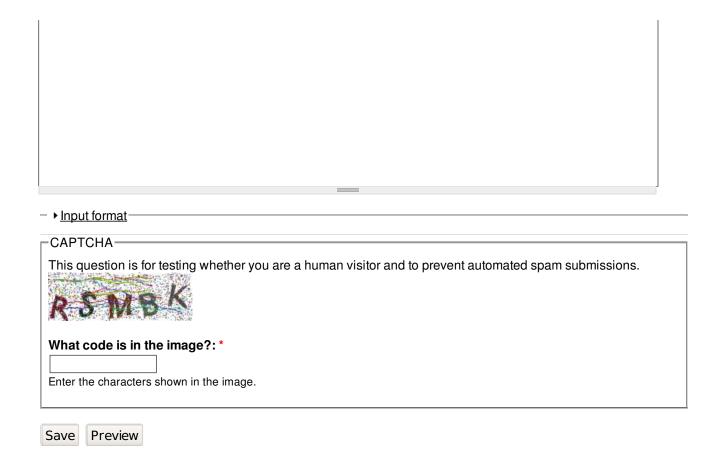
In short, Open Access is a wonderful observation platform to study how an old architecture of control unravels and a new one emerges. For this reason, it is important not only in itself, but also as a way to question the unfolding of the digital age and to meditate on its future.

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