
INTERVIEW WITH PETER SUBER

Seeking to expand and explore the intellectual and creative foundations of journals like NeoAmericanist, Executive Editor Steve NA recently contacted and interviewed Open Access advocate Peter Suber. Dr. Suber is the Open Access Project Director at Public Knowledge, a public-interest advocacy group in Washington D.C. focusing on information policy. He's also a Research Professor of Philosophy at Earlham College and Senior Researcher at the Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources Coalition (SPARC). He has a Ph.D. in philosophy and a J.D. from Northwestern University. He is the author of the SPARC Open Access Newsletter and editor of the Open Access News weblog. He was the principal drafter of the Budapest Open Access Initiative, and sits on the Steering Committee of the Scientific Information Working Group of the U.N. World Summit on the Information Society, the Publishing Working Group of Science Commons, the Advisory Board of American Library association Information Commons, and the Board of Governors of the International Consortium for the Advancement of Academic Publishing. *Lingua Franca* magazine named him one of "Academia's 20 Most Wired Faculty" in 1999. He has been active in promoting open access for many years through his research, speaking, and writing.

NeoAmericanist: Could you briefly describe the open access OA (Open Access) movement?

Suber: Basically, the OA movement is the worldwide campaign to provide open access to peer-reviewed journal articles and their preprints. For this purpose, OA literature is digital, online, free of charge, and free of most copyright and licensing restrictions. There are two primary ways to deliver OA, through journals (which provide peer review) and archives or repositories (which don't). The two approaches are complementary and are both spreading in every country and every discipline. OA is not about bypassing copyright or peer review, since we use both. It's about taking advantage of something very new—the internet—and something very old—the tradition of scholars writing journal articles without payment.

NA: When did you first become involved with OA?

Suber: In the mid-1990s I started providing OA to my own publications at my own web site. Almost immediately I started receiving more serious email from serious readers than I'd ever received when these publications were merely in print. I've noticed the same pattern with other OA activists: there are lots of good policy arguments for OA, but the real conversion experience comes after you provide OA to your own work and see the signs of rising impact. That's when you realize that OA isn't just a geeky way to play with new technology. It's a superior way to fulfill the purposes of scholarship and publication.

NA: Does the idea of OA threaten the legitimacy and integrity of scholarship for readers? How is academic integrity to be maintained through such free available resources?

Suber: We maintain the integrity of OA scholarship in exactly the same way that we do for non-OA scholarship, through peer review. If you submit your work to an OA journal, it undergoes peer review just as it would at a conventional journal. If you submit your work to a conventional journal and have it peer-reviewed there, then you can deposit the refereed result in an OA repository. OA removes the barrier

of price, not the filter of quality control.

NA: Assuming that readers receive the direct benefit of OA, by having access to free and credible scholarship, what are the benefits to academic authors?

Suber: The chief benefits are a greatly enlarged audience and increased impact. The potential audience for OA literature is literally thousands of times larger than the subscription base of the most widely-subscribed journals. It's not surprising that as the audience grows, so does the number of citations. Steve Lawrence was the first to document the fact that OA increases citation impact, which he did for computer science in 1991. Since then, the effect has been systematically studied in other disciplines, in both the sciences and humanities, and his conclusion has been confirmed in every one. OA increases citation impact between 50 and 250% compared to non-OA papers in the same journals. Steve Hitchcock maintains a bibliography of the studies, <<http://opcit.eprints.org/oacitation-biblio.html>>.

NA: How about the relationship between enforcing intellectual property rights and the originality or creativity of scholarship? Does such a link exist? Does OA necessarily challenge copyright or other rights? Or, might it even serve to empower individual academic authors at the expense of publishers?

Suber: The legal basis for OA to new work is the consent of the copyright holder. OA doesn't require the infringement of copyrights or even the reform of copyright law. For that reason it should never be considered the scholarly version of file swapping. Scholars and scientists may be paid for their books, but they aren't paid for their journal articles and haven't been since the first journals were launched 350 years ago. As authors of journal articles, therefore, they are very differently situated from musicians and movie-makers. They have everything to gain and nothing to lose by consenting to OA. As long as we have copyright-holder consent to OA, there's no infringement.

As for creativity, there's a common argument that copyright is a necessary incentive to keep creative people creating. If that argument works, it works in domains where creators are paid for their work, like fiction and music. In those domains, enforcing the temporary monopoly of copyright can secure or increase a creator's revenue. But for scholarly journal articles the argument simply doesn't apply. Scholars are not paid for their journal articles and don't expect to be paid. Their incentives for writing them have nothing to do with royalties and everything to do with the prestige, citations, and impact that advance their careers. Where copyright operates as an incentive, it is by limiting the circulation of published work to paying customers. But limiting the circulation of scholarly journal articles to paying customers actually harms authors. It reduces their impact without increasing their revenue. Similarly, if the copyright-as-incentive argument works, it works in domains where creators keep their copyright and use it for their own benefit. But most scholarly authors of journal articles transfer their rights to publishers who use them to limit access to paying customers—again, a truncation of the audience that harms authors. Since scholars are not protected by copyright—their publishers are—copyright does nothing to increase their willingness to publish. Copyright may still help the copyright holder, but in scholarship the pattern has been that it helps publishers at the expense of authors.

Scholars have not been deterred from writing new journal articles by the custom of giving away their work without payment. Nor have they been deterred by the custom of transferring copyright to publishers.

On the contrary, they are eager to publish their work even on these onerous terms. This doesn't show that scholars are foolish. It shows how different they are from other kinds of creators. They write for impact, not for money. That's why they don't need the incentive of copyright protection. It's why the OA movement doesn't need to violate or reform copyright law. And it's why scholars tend to be enthusiastic about OA as soon as they hear about it.

Finally, let me tie up a loose end. I said that OA to new work depends on the copyright-holder's consent and that most scholars transfer copyright in their journal articles to publishers who limit circulation to paying customers. To be more precise, most journals are still not OA and still demand that authors transfer copyright. That's the sense in which they limit circulation. But one achievement of the OA movement is that about 70% of non-OA journals now allow authors to deposit their work on OA repositories. Hence, when authors take advantage of this opportunity, the work is OA with the copyright-holder's consent.

NA: While the cost of many print and other fee-based journals can restrict access to scholarship, free networks and journals also require funding for their creation and maintenance. Certainly the internet provides the possibility for reducing some costs, but overall who do you believe should be responsible for funding such OA initiatives? What roles should our public institutions play, or individual private donors?

Suber: In general, the cost of OA dissemination should be regarded as part of the cost of research. One reason is that it's so inexpensive. Another is that research isn't complete until it's communicated. Research funding agencies increasingly agree with this point of view. The Wellcome Trust is the largest private funder of medical research in the UK and it requires OA to all the results of Wellcome-funded research, and of course it gladly pays the costs. The articles are still peer-reviewed and accepted or rejected by independent journals. But if accepted, then Wellcome requires its grantees to deposit digital copies in an OA repository. The National Institutes of Health is the world's largest funder of medical research and it encourages its grantees to do the same. There are promising movements afoot to convert this encouragement to a requirement. The eight Research Councils in the UK are about to mandate OA to all publicly-funded research in the UK. (Their policy may be public before this interview comes out.)

The OA movement has never denied that producing OA literature costs money. We simply want to pay the bills without charging readers and thereby creating access barriers. Broadcast television and radio are good examples of mature industries that provide their content free of charge to users because they've found other ways to pay the bills. There are many business models for OA journals and repositories, but they're all variations on this theme.

NA: Where do you see initiatives that focus specifically on the scholarship and establishing of networks among students (such as NeoAmericanist and others) fitting into the OA movement?

Suber: I used to maintain an online list of student journals like NeoAmericanist but for my own field, philosophy. I was pleasantly surprised by how many there were (over 40) and by the fact that almost all of them were OA. There must be equivalents in nearly every field. I know that these journals were well-known at my school, but I really have no idea how well known they are to students at large.

Students should consider publishing in student journals, OA or not, because showcasing their work

can give them a leg up with employers or graduate schools. Students should also know about the professional OA journals in their field and how to search OA repositories across all fields. Even if they don't often need to consult journal literature for assignments, it's good to know how to do it, especially for the day when they won't have access to all the subsidized content through the university library. Graduate students and those planning to become professional researchers should know about OA if only to increase the audience and impact of their own work. All students should know about OA in order to understand its benefits and take this understanding with them into their jobs in universities, laboratories, libraries, foundations, journals, publishers, learned societies, foundations, and governments. We will need their knowledge and support to finish the job started by the present generation.

Students should know about FreeCulture.org, the student wing of the worldwide free culture movement, which embraces OA research as well as open-source software and copyright reform.

If OA isn't as hot with students as open-source software or file-swapping, it's because scholarly journal articles don't play as large a role in their lives. But students should know that there's also an OA textbook movement. Those that are interested should look up the California Open Source Textbook Project, CommonText, Free High School Science Texts, Freeload Press, Libertas Academica OA textbooks, Medical Approaches, MedRounds Publications, next\text, Open Textbook Project, Textbook Revolution, and Wikibooks.

NA: Do you believe that OA serves to blur the lines of academic disciplines allowing for greater interdisciplinary exchange? Is this a positive development? If so, might OA be considered more important in a field such as American Studies, which incorporates the more traditional studies of English, History, Philosophy, Political Science, Sociology, Technology and the Media, among many others?

Suber: Digital scholarship blurs these lines, whether it's OA or non-OA. Even if we can browse or search digital scholarship by discipline, the default is usually to search it by keywords, which cross disciplinary boundaries. This helps users find relevant work they would never have found if they used traditional discipline-based indices. Contrary to many people's original expectation, online research increases serendipitous discovery.

NA: You have mentioned previously in interviews that the humanities and social sciences have been lagging behind the pure sciences in the movement. Does this continue to be the case?

Suber: Yes. All fields are making progress toward OA, but the humanities and social sciences are moving more slowly than the natural sciences. There are many reasons for this. The main one is that the natural sciences are better funded than the humanities and the funding is available to subsidize OA. Another is that journal prices are higher in the sciences, on average about 10 times higher. That raises the urgency of finding a viable alternative to the subscription system and helps recruit allies to do so. Another is that by far the largest part of taxpayer-funded research is in the sciences, and by far the most compelling OA argument for policy-makers is that there ought to be public access to publicly-funded research. There are also some subtle reasons, such as the differences in disciplinary cultures. For example, online preprint exchanges have caught on in nearly every scientific field but in very few of the humanities. Moreover, in the sciences, young faculty have to publish journal articles to get tenure, while in the humanities they have

to publish books. Because books can generate royalties and journal articles never do, the logic of OA applies much better to journal articles than to books.

NA: With the increase of scholarship and the establishment of academic networks online, might intellectual interaction become less personal? Will technological innovations/initiatives such as OA complement existing forms of exchange, such as seminars, conferences, and lecture series or might they serve to supplant them?

Suber: Seminars, conferences, and lecture series don't really compete with journals. If subscription-based access to journal articles gives way to OA, seminars and conferences shouldn't be affected at all. But we are finding that OA knits together online communities much more effectively than conventional publication does. With OA, it's easier to find other people working on the same problems or topics, and easier to launch discussion lists and new forms of sharing and collaboration. Sharing deepens community and community deepens sharing. I've co-authored pieces with scholars I know well but have never met face to face. If OA does affect conferences, it will be by sharing the proceedings with people who couldn't attend and by enhancing the value of face-to-face meetings. As an example of the second, I've often met people at conferences whom I've known "virtually" for years, or who know my work. It's much less like meeting a stranger than an old friend.

NA: Could you describe some of the current and future challenges to OA and scholarly publishing in general?

Suber: One of the most important is to get more governments to commit to the principle that there must be OA to taxpayer-funded research. There's widespread support for this principle, but so far only two governments have made the commitment, while many others are watching to learn from their experience. Another challenge is to get more universities to launch OA institutional repositories and adopt effective policies to get their faculty to deposit copies of their journal articles in them. There are over 500 OA repositories worldwide, but only five of them hosted by universities that mandating deposit. Finally, after all our progress we still see the same myths and misunderstandings in circulation—that OA bypasses peer review, that OA violates copyright, that OA proponents don't realize that publishing costs money, and half a dozen others. Fortunately, when we can get the attention of publishing scholars and make the case directly to them, they're easy to persuade. They see the logic and the benefits immediately. What's hard is to get their attention and to get our message to them unfiltered by publishers and professional associations that often misunderstand or have an interest in sending a different message.

NA: What projects and/or initiatives are you currently involved in at the moment?

Suber: I update Open Access News, my blog, every day, and write monthly OA analysis in my newsletter (the SPARC Open Access Newsletter). I also write for journals and news media and speak at conferences, though I have to cut back. I educate legislators and agency officials in Washington about OA in order to build support for stronger OA policies at the federal level. I work with international organizations on treaties to facilitate access to knowledge and consult with formal OA initiatives, like Science Commons,

and informal groups of activists on strategies for launching new initiatives or working to influence OA policy in their country. While OA has great momentum, it still far from the default method of sharing research and there's a lot of work to be done.

FOR MORE DETAILS ON PETER SUBER YOU CAN VISIT HIS HOME PAGE

<<http://www.earlham.edu/~peters/>>.

OR FOR MORE ON THE OPEN ACCESS MOVEMENT SEE:

Open Access Overview

<<http://www.earlham.edu/~peters/fos/overview.htm>>

(my introduction to OA for those who are new to the concept)

Open Access News blog

<<http://www.earlham.edu/~peters/fos/fosblog.html>>

(my blog, updated daily)

SPARC Open Access Newsletter

<http://www.earlham.edu/~peters/fos/newsletter/archive.htm>

(my newsletter, published monthly)

Writings on Open Access

<http://www.earlham.edu/~peters/fos/oawritings.htm>

(my articles on OA)

Timeline of the open access movement

<http://www.earlham.edu/~peters/fos/timeline.htm>

(my chronology of the landmark events)

What you can do to help the cause of open access

<http://www.earlham.edu/~peters/fos/do.htm>