

Still Waiting for the New Electronic Order

Written by Christopher May

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CHRISTOPHER MAY, AUG 11 2013

Nearly a decade ago I ruminated on the place open access publishing might have in political studies, and by extension International Relations.[1] In that article I suggested that the future of open access publishing was in the hands of the academic community. If we were prepared to take back the role of aggregated subjectivity that we as a community had subcontracted to journal publishers and their nominated editors, and if we started to more often cite work that appeared in open access journals, rather than proprietary journals, then the future of open access publishing in politics (and IR) was likely to be rosy. I will not repeat the analysis of journal publishing here, but will note that as a community the academy has always utilised academic publishers of journals as external guarantors of quality. This is to say, in a continuing history of self-distrust we have often been (collectively) suspicious of journals that have not been controlled through a commercial enterprise. Even when learned societies and professional associations have run journals, the actual management of the journal (including the submissions process) has been often handled by a commercial subcontractor. Thus, in 2005 I suggested change in these practices was up to us; the question I will reflect on here, is have we *actually* chosen to move our work into the realm of open access? Clearly, writing for *e-International Relations*, indicates that there are avenues by which such a move can be accomplished, but have we taken advantage of these possibilities for changing the way we communicate and disseminate our research and analysis?

Many Discussions, Less Action

My impression is there has been considerable discussion of the advantages of open access and in certain fields, of which medicine is still likely the most advanced, there has been a real move to argue that access should be open based on the clear social benefits that flow from wide dissemination of (in that case, health-related) research and analysis. Furthermore, many universities now use the e-prints system to facilitate wider access to unpublished conference or discussion papers and other pre-publication formats, while some publishers have also stated to allow open access after a certain date (referred to as *green* open access), or to allow e-prints archives to hold the original article rather than merely the meta-data. Alongside these developments, academia.edu [2] has encouraged the dissemination of publications of all sorts, from PDFs of original articles, chapters and reports, to discussion papers and draft chapters. This has of course complemented the SSRN network [3] in the United States which many scholars and researchers have used to disseminate a similar range of work to that now available via academia.edu. How does one judge these activities: taking my own example I have one article available on academia.edu that has been viewed over 1000 times in the last six months, but remains cited only 17 times according Google Scholar (which has a permissive notion of citation), with no extra citations since the viewings on academia.edu started to accelerate, although it may be too early to see this feed through.

Therefore, whether this activity has an impact is difficult to say; there have been a number of studies, mainly in the sciences that have sought to demonstrate there is significant citation advantage to publishing via open access, and thus one might presume an enhanced influence of work so published. Some of these studies have been relatively robust in that they have compared cases where authors have elected to allow open access (usually by paying a page fee) with articles in the same journal where the choice has been to continue with normal subscriber access.[4] Again, from my own experience, I published some work on digital rights management, first in an open access journal, *First Monday*, [5] then as a book published by a regular publisher. This may not be an entirely parallel case, but interestingly the open access article has (as of today) been cited 35 times, while the book, with largely similar

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(although expanded) content has been cited 21 times. As a little context, while my most cited item is a jointly authored article, not linked to my core work on IPRs, my other three most cited items (by some way) are all books, which might indicate that open access does confer some advantage (although a sample of authors of N=1 is not really going to make that 'killer' claim!), given that in this case it is the (open access) article that is more cited than the book.

This reflects the conclusion of one article, albeit from 2007, that suggested that mostly scholars and academics working in IR deployed books rather than other resources, with only 2% of citations to electronic journals (which even then may not be an exact proxy for open access).[6] Indeed, this and other studies have demonstrated that politics and international relations research (along with other social science and humanities subjects) are much more likely to cite books than other sources, and of course books remain (even in a time of e-books) much more closely linked to copyright mechanisms and proprietary publication. A brief examination of the *Directory of Open Access Journals* indicates that in 'political science' there are 207 open access journals. [7] These journals are hosted across the world and while the majority are in English there are a significant number in other languages. However, perhaps the more important question is whether the analysis, data and research conclusions published in these journals reach a wider audience, or are accessed by a more diverse population of readers than if the articles were included in 'normal' proprietary journals, or were the subject of books (our favoured resource).

Moving Towards Openness?

These issues are of course timely; the Canadian Political Science Association organised a major review of open access in 2012, concluding that political studies (and International Relations) are not as compatible with open access publishing models as some more science related (and scientific) disciplines. Thus, while recommending an increased sensitivity to open access models and approaches, and the need to examine the potential for self-archiving and e-prints-like solutions, there was no 'silver bullet' to widening open access for political studies.[8] Moreover, quite apart from the facts that we (as academics) have for a long time not really trusted ourselves to deliver an authoritative research resource, the open access model of publication may also involve a further cost to the academy; elsewhere I have called this the 'winner-takes-all' issue for research.[9] Without, the albeit often complained about proprietary journals (and their mechanisms of editing and peer review), the difficulty may be that like other 'markets' for knowledge, success breeds success leading to clustering (here of citations). On one hand we might argue that this merely reflects the perceived quality of the knowledge good (in this case, analysis or data), but on the other this might become an impediment for new researchers seeking to gain coverage and exposure for their work. With no authoritative journal publication to sift and judge work (from researchers without an already established reputation) and our seeming and continuing reticence to accord open access work the same weight, it may be that citations will become, in a parallel to buyers' reports on e-bay and other on-line platforms, the easy way of according worth to work, and one can see how this would then become self-reinforcing.

So what can we make of open access for research? We know that Research Councils UK has encouraged researchers to find open access routes to publication of results, and has incentivised this through the grant making process, although they have recently removed article process charges (i.e. pay to publish models of open access) from the allowable expenses for research grants (now to be paid from institutional block grants).[10] While RCUK prefers unrestricted open access (often referred to as *Gold* access) it is no longer always willing to fund such openness, and thus is seeking to recognise delayed open access (*Green* access) as legitimately open access. Indeed, delayed open access is one clear compromise that has emerged between the demands for open access and the desire to continue to work with proprietary publishers and their journals.

However, much research into politics and international relations does not receive such funding, and perhaps more importantly the groups that political and international relations research might potentially beneficially reach are not well organised (and not able to demand access through lobbying). Moreover, given the issues raised above, it is often not clear how readers might judge the quality and/or value of what is available on-line, given the academy practically lacks confidence in open access. We can of course link authority to position, and for academics perhaps the blog-sphere is the way that open access leanings can be balanced off against the continuing appeal of proprietary publication. Indeed, a multi-channel strategy for communication of analysis, utilising scholarly publication

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where appropriate (for career management, perhaps), blogging for updating potential coverage (communicating the current relevance of specific research) and a willingness to utilise the various forms of media (through the use of press offices and contact) may end up delivering much of what open access advocates might like to see from a change in publishing practices. However, as I have stressed, the potential of change lies with us, with our publication and citation practices and with our willingness (or otherwise) to step away from proprietary journals to communicate our work. Conversely, it may be that through pragmatic practice, and the use of multi-channel communication most of the advantages we might seek to gain via open access in politics and international relations can be gained without a complete remaking of the system of publication.

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1 Christopher May (2005) 'The academy's new electronic order? Open source journals and publishing political science' *European Political Science* Vol.4: 14-24 – available at: http://www.academia.edu/1937837/the_academys_new_electronic_order_open_source_journals_and_publishing_political_science

2 <http://www.academia.edu/>

3 <http://www.ssrn.com/>

4 These studies are usefully summarised in an appendix of Alma Swan (2010) 'The Open Access Citation Advantage: Studies and results to date' University of Southampton e-prints – available at: http://eprints.soton.ac.uk/268516/2/Citation_advantage_paper.pdf

5 See: <http://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/1097>

6 Zhang, Li (2007) 'Citation analysis for collection development: A study of international relations journal literature' *Library Collections, Acquisitions, & Technical Services* 31: 195-207.

7 See: <http://www.doaj.org/doaj?func=subject&cpld=47&uiLanguage=en>

8 Draft report held by author – as yet full report does not seem to have been made available. The British International Studies Association seems to have adopted a watching brief rather than offer its own position on open access – see: http://www.bisa.ac.uk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=260&catid=45&Itemid=196

9 See: May, Christopher (2010) "Openness in Academic Publication: the Question of Trust, Authority and Reliability," *Prometheus: Critical Studies in Innovation*, Vol. 28, No.1, 91-94

10 See: <http://www.rcuk.ac.uk/research/Pages/outputs.aspx>

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