

Open Access: A Comedy of Manners

What follows is bitching. But it's not aimless.

You are reading these words on a blog, or perhaps in some text copied from a blog, because I, the author, am a proponent of free, open-access content. In our era, the most trafficked battleground between free and commodified content is music, but just here I am interested in scholarship. Compared to the artist, the scholar or the journalist is in a much worse ethical position to make commodifying claims over their work. Scholars have, after all, spent centuries defending access to factual knowledge as an essential and vital part of civilization and progress, whereas art, as no less than Shaw tells us, is “perfectly useless.” Access to art in general is a human need, but access to any *particular* song or novel or sculpture is (arguably still) a luxury. On the other hand, access to scholarship is also a human need, and this necessarily implies access to *all* available research. Science is an evolving totality; the second-best information is never a substitute for the best information. If a researcher discovers a vaccine for AIDS tomorrow, the vast bulk of human moral sentiment is that she *must* share that discovery: we do not feel the same way about a poet and his latest sestina.

In the face of this ancient rhetoric, the arguments in favor of artificially restricting access to scholarship seem almost incredibly weak. e-journals and the indexes to those journals have a whole host of login restrictions, moving walls, proprietary back-content, and so forth. Even sitting here tonight, in the middle of a fabulously wealthy inter-collegiate library complex, fraudulent using various logins to gain access to four different indices of e-journals, I am constantly being stymied. I am, for instance, repetitively being shown portions of articles that I am not permitted to read in full-text. To avoid shelling out hundreds of dollars, I must resort to absurdly inefficient shun-pike strategies: calling people who I know to have a print copy and asking them to scan it for me, and so forth. I feel like I am trying to buy crack: in fact, I am helping create the syllabus for a course at a prestigious liberal arts college.

The tortured justification for this obstructionism is that it *helps scholarship*, by providing a market incentive for people to publish journals and for online services to index them. This neoliberal argument is gaining ground as many journals are increasingly becoming the inventory of Blackwell and similar corporations. But little else in academia, libraries especially, conforms to direct market incentives. Universities are vast exercises in internal redistribution. No one is proposing that the Eastern Religions faculty should find a way to recover costs on translating the next scroll from Pali. Moreover, the *actual cost* of publishing an article online is well nigh zero....I am, for instance, doing so tonight, at no cost to myself and without advertising.

In reality, of course, the economy that drives scholarship is not financial, but is notional: it is an economy of reputation. The [absurdly inflated prices](#) of print journals are simply an entrenched means of bolstering reputation; conspicuous consumption in the classic sense. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* is clearly a locus of great scholarship, because it costs \$430 per article, whereas the *Open Behavioral Science Journal* costs nothing, and therefore is for hacks. And among the many dysfunctions of this system is that it churns out dross. Everyone must publish to gain career advancement, whether or not they are having any ideas. And so a myriad of conventional journals exist, very much like degree mills, in order to provide the space for those publications. All of which contributes nothing to human knowledge, except that it is ever-more-difficult to do a comprehensive literature review.

In the last few years, a wave of new models have appeared, models that both re-invigorate the stale and faltering idea of peer review, and simultaneously destroy both the profit mechanism and the access barriers on commodified scholarship. The most direct challengers to traditional scholarly publication are arXiv and Plos-One, along with open archives such as the Digital Library of the Commons, where the recent Nobel laureate Ostrom has published much of her work. Wikipedia and other wikis play a similar role as challengers to the mechanics of publication. Automated reputation systems like Digg and Reddit present vast improvements on the mechanics of traditional peer review (and similar systems have been used for scholarship, as in the experimental journal *Philica*) Finally, blogs and personal web pages, along with search engines, provide the mechanism for self-publication into indexed media in a way that has previously been restrictively expensive.

I'm all in favor of these experiments. That's why I prefer blogging to publishing in commercial or proprietary formats (though I've done that on a few occasions). It's also why I used to publish in the above-mentioned *Philica*, an experimental open-access open-peer-review journal. *Philica* allows authors to post an article as if it were a pre-print, and then be reviewed anonymously by other scholars, using a weighted ranking method. In comparison to the technical problems manifested in traditional peer-review journals, and the ethical

problems of commodified scholarship, these experiments seem to me unquestionably superior. I have no doubts on that score. I did, however, have considerable doubts about my own motivations. Most scholars do not perceive their work as being commodified, or their peer review process as broken and nepotistic, precisely because they are inside the walls of the academy, looking out. Perhaps my fascination with the alternatives was simply an obstinate outsider status? On that score, I had a lot of doubts.

But no more. One of the articles I posted on *Philica* back in early 2007 has become—for me—an object lesson in the current dynamics around open access. The article was called [Educational Antidisestablishmentarianism](#), and it was essentially a review of the literature critical of unschooling and free schools. Unfortunately, *Philica's* interface ate the formatting, so it was and is a bit daunting to read. Such are the risks of alternative institutions.

Now, my interest in writing that piece had to do with yet another, much larger, experiment in open-access content: Wikipedia. I was annoyed at the fact that the Wikipedia article on unschooling described “common criticisms” of unschooling that were not referenced to any notable source: my impression was that they were not common criticisms at all, they were simply one editor's personal criticisms. Some further words about this might be in order...novelties and esoterica, including counter-institutions like unschooling (or *Philica*, or indeed Wikipedia!) are often beneath the notice of reputable defenders of the orthodoxy. It may seem very clear to wikipedia editors that decapitation porn is considered horrifyingly offensive, or that the hollow-earth theory is discredited by modern science. In fact, it is far more accurate to say that decapitation porn isn't considered at all, and modern science has nothing to say about hollow-earth theories. Wikipedia's editorial standards require criticisms to be cited to a “reputable source,” a local term of art defined at some length in their standards. So if someone of note has gone on record saying that decapitation porn is the ultimate depravity of our decadent age, fine. But the editors are not supposed to assume that this is the case.

In less extreme cases, this nuance can do real damage to the facts. I remember, for instance, a controversy that occurred three years ago around the relationship of hurricanes to global warming. If you'll recall, 2005 had been a very bad hurricane season. At the beginning of the 2006 season, an op-ed piece circulated on the internet and in some newspapers, intending to pre-empt “liberal climatology” groups linking hurricanes with global warming. (I'm afraid I can't find this piece in my files, as I've just moved...so much for citations...) Subsequently the author was challenged by some actual climatologists, who alleged that there were no major groups, and very few authors, willing to go into print suggesting any such link. For climate conservatives, it was *self-evident* that liberals had a particular discourse, but in fact this discourse did not exist, or was confined to marginal voices.

Such, I felt, was the case with the unschooling article. There were a list of “common criticisms” of unschooling, many of which I felt sure were not actually that common, since most educators are not aware of unschooling to begin with. The citations for those criticisms were absent, or misquoted, or quoted to non-reputable sources such as offhand comments in a blog. All of which seems trivial enough. But wikipedia—though it is highly experimental—has enough scholarly charisma that it forms the basis of citation for many, many other sources on the internet. Downstream articles about Unschooling, like this one at [Education Bug](#), wind up citing the wikipedia article categorically to justify the claims about unschooling that are themselves not cited appropriately or accurately.

Miffed, I decided to do a comprehensive survey of the literature so that, in principle, someone could cite these claims correctly: “According to Mitchell (2007), the major critics of unschooling said blah blah blah...” And I did. It's not a great piece of scholarship; more of a laundry list than anything else, but it did fill a gap in the literature.

However, this didn't achieve the immediate effect that I had in mind. The hamartia of experiments like *Philica* is that there is no incentive for anyone to review articles. Many articles, over time, are never reviewed: they are not “accepted” or “rejected,” promoted or demoted in *Philica's* local reputation system. They just sit there, as unmentioned as the hollow-earth theory. Such was the case with *Educational Antidisestablishmentarianism*, and so...being un-peer-reviewed, even in the alternative sense that *Philica* allows...it could not be used as a source for the Wikipedia article, as I had hoped.

But it was getting read. And in 2009, two authors from the Chinese National University of Defense Technology, Wenting Wang and Rui Hou, cut-and-pasted four paragraphs of my article into their article *Deschooling or Schooling?* Theirs was a soft version of plagiarism: they mention my name, they just don't mention that their text is a quotation, rather than a summary. They submitted this article to a Canadian Journal,

International Education Studies, published by the Canadian Center of Science and Education (CCSE). It describes itself as “a peer-reviewed journal...in the fields of education, training and educational administration.” It is electronically accessible, free to download, and released on a Creative Commons Attribution license. In other words, while it uses a traditional peer review system, it embraces some of the principles of scholarly openness. *Deschooling or Schooling?* was printed in February, 2009 (Volume 2, #1, pp. 70-75)

Plagiarism as it is understood in the West is a scarlet-letter intellectual crime: the sort of thing that gets dragged out of library stacks decades later for the purpose of character assassination. To take a tellingly strange example, when Condoleeza Rice wanted to convince Americans that Sadaam was evil and untrustworthy, one of her talking points was accusing him of plagiarism (NYT Jan 23, 2003). But “the highest form of flattery” seems to be viewed as something more of a peccadillo in the East, and perhaps even carries connotations of respect. At one liberal arts school I know of, the dean of students notes that upwards of 90% of all reported plagiarism cases are coming from Asian students. So I do not want to cast too many stones at Wang and Hou, lest they bounce off the walls between our cultures.

But the CCSE's role in this story cannot be waved away as an intercultural misunderstanding. Not only was *Deschooling or Schooling?* a rather obvious cut-and-paste job, but it calmly cites at least two sources that are non-scholarly: my own article, and—much more obviously—Wikipedia. Yet all of this slid past CCSE's peer reviewers, if indeed there actually are any. And in the end, Wang and Hou had an article for their CVs vetted by the respectable, old-fashioned process of peer review, unsullied by newfangled experiments like *Philica*. And perhaps in an unconscious expression of that disdain, they did not bother to review *Educational Antidistestablishmentarianism* using *Philica's* system, which would have taken them all of ten minutes.

I wrote what I felt was a rather polite letter to CCSE, asking them to explain this. They didn't: I've never heard back, nor have they published any sort of errata or apology. They have, however *removed* the article, without any explanation to the reader: Vol 2, #1 [skips](#) from page 69 to page 76. As far as I know, the print copy of the article I have in my files is the only one left: and the only evidence that *International Education Studies* saw fit to print an obviously plagiarized work, or that the authors in question were caught lifting passages from dubious amateurs such as myself. I doubt this typical protocol; certainly it falls far short of basic best-practices for journalism. But the lack of commentary is Orwellian.

And it gives me a certain kind of clarity. As Marx and Bugs said, *this means war*. For me, at least, any personal doubts about the integrity of my motives as an outsider scholar have been extinguished by this whole sequence of events. The old guard is technically incompetent and is rationing access to information, yes, yes. But they are also cannibalizing the products of alternative scholarship to keep their journals glutted, and *they cannot even acknowledge it*, burying the evidence when it is pointed out to them.

Hell with that. I am shaking the dust off my shoes for good and all. *Schooling or Deschooling?* Deschooling. Damn. I am, much more firmly now, a disestablishmentarian.