

## ISSUE NO. 4

# Opening Out from Open Access: Writing and Publishing in Response to Neoliberalism

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Writing a short piece such as this doesn't only focus the mind (quick, what's my point? what am I trying to say?), it also directs it toward the process of writing. Right now, in this period we're calling academic capitalism (or the neoliberalisation of life, the university and everything) there is, for me, nothing much more important than directing our attention to the process, forms, formats and registers of academic writing. Writing and publishing, or rather, the nexus of writing, publishing and marketization are at the core of academic capitalism. Output is quantified, audited, metricized and individualized in a highly differentiated, competitive and increasingly corporate environment that in experiential terms at least, is unsustainable (Gill 2010). In the newly privatized UK Higher Education (HE) sector, the obligation to produce auditable output for the Research Excellence Framework (REF) is perhaps the self-regulatory mechanism governing entrepreneurial academic subjects. In as far as open access is about making scholarly output free to use and open to re-use, it might seem perverse to put it in the same context as the REF. However, I'm arguing that it is indeed necessary to do so since the open access debate is not merely ideologically polarized and asymmetric (dominated by a top-down, policy-driven economic agenda oriented toward research as innovation) it is also fuelled by a technocratic rational consensus that effectively negates such asymmetry, de-politicizing and delimiting what can be said and done with respect to writing and publishing.

Along with copyright and ownership, the question of access is currently enrolled in a reform agenda<sup>[1]</sup> that relies on a progressive, deterministic view of technology. Put simply, such an agenda states that policy and legislation concerning copyright, ownership and access is out of date, out of step with new, digital technology and must therefore catch up. An ontology of the digital as copying, re-use and sharing only serves to reinforce the message and further obscure ongoing, underlying processes of privatization and marketization in the education and creative sectors. The reform of access is not merely a fig leaf for, but a means of recruitment to neoliberalisation in as far as it unifies the top-down and grassroots, bottom-up agendas through a consensus about the need to catch up and keep up with new technology. A model of access that is broken and must therefore be fixed becomes the common or center ground that absorbs the potential politics of an open access movement and dissolves it alongside other sources of antagonism (Mouffe 2005) connected with scholarly research, writing

and publication (such as peer review, citation and practices of free labor that are differentiated, not least according to gender and career stage development). By opening out from the debate on open access we might, I suggest, re-politicize scholarly writing and publishing and reposition it as a response to, rather than only a mechanism of neoliberalism. Academic capitalism may therefore be seen to be giving rise to at least one form of academic activism.

I would characterize this one form of academic activism in terms of an emerging ethics of scholarly publishing, a concern with power and difference in academic life and a possible return to inventiveness and interventionism that runs counter to the emphasis on research as innovation.

One way of opening out from open access would be to recognize the extent to which questions of access and ethics have become conflated. Separating them might enable us to avoid false dichotomies (open/closed; publicly owned/privately owned) and think more in terms of publishing processes and relations rather than objects such as books that might or might not be in transition “from” analogue “to” digital formats. What are the ethical implications of the increasingly closed circuit in which the readers of academic books are likely to be the authors of academic books who, with the prospect of new digital first academic presses could also be the publishers of academic books? Such presses would, I think, want to avoid open access as a business model that relies entirely on APCs (article or author processing charges) or a combination of institutional funding and grants. An ethical business model might include a model of payment to, rather than from authors; a pricing scale from free and open to fair pricing for hybrid or artifact books and a decision-making process that reflects the increasingly close relations between authors, readers and publishers by, for example, recognizing postgraduate students and early career academics as a key constituent of academic publishing.

Rooted in the Fembot feminist collective, this journal, Ada (open access, non-APC) strives to remain attuned to gender, race and career-stage differences in relation to academic free labor, peer review and citation practices. In as far as it constitutes a challenge to the neoliberal agenda it does so, in my view, not by regarding itself as a tool of opposition in a fight over access but by recognizing its limitations and contaminations (as an under-resourced project that relies on the very forms of free labor that are of concern to it); by opening out questions of access in relation to ethics (which has more to do with internal and external sets of relations) and, for me very

importantly by opening and striving to keep open the politics of knowledge and communication in a context in which these are being closed down. Experimentation and invention are part of this agenda, as is a willingness to reflect on modes and methods of communication and knowledge production across a range of disciplines.

Experimenting with academic writing and publishing is a form of political intervention, a direct engagement with the underlying issues of privatization and marketization in academia. It is not only the UK government that is bent on opening the market in HE, increasing competition between public and privately funded research and using open access as a mechanism for allowing industry to cream off research in the public sector while allegedly low impact or “non-utility” output across the arts, humanities and social sciences is controlled and diminished. Along with the review of peer review or repurposing of metrics, we must reinterpret utility, as I think we’ve been trying to do, outside of the most blunt, economic terms, and encourage, proliferate and promote the kind of work that isn’t deemed to be auditable. Better still, we can direct our writing and publishing in such a way that it exposes the fault lines of auditability, accountability and measurement, messing up the distinction that never really was between theory and practice, the essay form and article, the pamphlet and the book.

## References

1. Gill, R. (2010) ‘Breaking the silence: the hidden injuries of the neoliberal university’, in R. Ryan-Flood and R. Gill (eds) *Secrecy and Silence in the Research Process*, London and New York: Routledge
2. Mouffe, C. (2005) *The Democratic Paradox*, London and New York: Verso

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**Footnotes** ( returns to text)

1. In the UK, this reform agenda is currently led by the Hargreaves review of copyright and the Finch group report on open access:

**<http://www.ipo.gov.uk/ipreview-finalreport.pdf>**

(<http://www.ipo.gov.uk/ipreview-finalreport.pdf>)

**<http://www.researchinfonet.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/Finch-Group-report-FINAL-VERSION.pdf>** (<http://www.researchinfonet.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/Finch-Group-report-FINAL-VERSION.pdf>)

 **PEER REVIEWED**

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Sarah Kember is a writer and academic. Her work incorporates new media, photography and feminist cultural approaches to science and technology. She is Professor of New Technologies of Communication at Goldsmiths, University of London. Publications include a novel and a short story *The Optical Effects of Lightning* (Wild Wolf Publishing, 2011) and 'The Mysterious Case of Mr Charles D. Levy' (Ether Books, 2010). Experimental work includes an edited open access electronic book entitled *Astrobiology and the Search for Life on Mars* (Open Humanities Press, 2011) and 'Media, Mars and Metamorphosis' (Culture Machine, Vol. 11). Her latest monograph (with Joanna Zylińska) is *Life After New Media: Mediation as a Vital Process* (MIT Press, 2012). She co-edits the journals of *Photographies* and *Feminist Theory*. Previous publications include: *Virtual Anxiety. Photography, New Technologies and Subjectivity* (Manchester University Press, 1998); *Cyberfeminism and Artificial Life* (Routledge, 2003) and the co-edited volume *Inventive Life. Towards the New Vitalism* (Sage, 2006). Sarah is currently involved in a funded research project looking at digital transformations in the publishing industry.

## **2 THOUGHTS ON "OPENING OUT FROM OPEN ACCESS: WRITING AND PUBLISHING IN RESPONSE TO NEOLIBERALISM"**

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