


Food Sovereignty as a model for scholar-led open access publishing

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*As large commercial publishers adapt their business models to profit from an increasingly open access (OA) scholarly publishing landscape, there has been an increased focus on alternate scholar-led and diamond forms of open access. **Andrea E. Pia and Filippo Zerilli**, argue that to effectively compete and outcompete traditional publishers and bibliometrics, scholar-led publications can learn from the slow food and food sovereignty movements that have constructed co-operative systems for quality assessment that bypass the commercial mainstream.*

Open Access is radically changing how researchers disseminate and access research outputs and OA principles are now widely accepted across public and private research institutions, academies, and regulatory bodies. Yet, academics responsible for journals are increasingly dissatisfied with the terms of this open access. To cite one example, in February 2020 over 20 academics resigned from a Wiley law journal due to questions of ownership and decision-making for the journal. Moreover, there is growing disquiet in the way that public research funding is tied to standards, metrics, information-based analytics and decision tools developed by commercial actors. Open Access principles are also being appropriated and retooled to increase revenues. This 'captive market' is made possible by largely unchallenged bibliometric methods and ideologies against which the reputation of journals, the quality of research outputs, and the standings of authors are made measurable.

At present, to qualify and be credentialised as a scholarly journal, the articles and their citations by other scholars and the peer review systems of a journal must both meet bibliometric standards. Both of these instruments support a narrow definition of scholarship and its various audiences; overlook key properties of knowledge production (failure and experimentation); and make the commercial capture of scientific research more likely. In recent years alternative metrics (altmetrics), incorporating various critiques of peer review – from the least to the most scathing – have inspired experiments around ways of quantifying (and certifying) the value that science has for society. These tools propose new measures of an article's relevance, but even here, quality remains delegated to peer review, although made more transparent.



What worries us, is that even proposals for transgressing the perimeters that commercial publishers have drawn around the communication of science tend to reproduce these models. For example, DOAJ, a community-curated online directory that indexes high-quality, open-access, peer-reviewed journals, demands that OA journals be targeted primarily to researchers and practitioners and that only humanities and art journals should consider adopting other forms of quality control, such as editorial review. Attempts to make research more open, can therefore entail a further enclosing of scholarly communication through the creation of checklists of compliant and non-compliant journals, in a way that limits the potential for fair and accessible research in the social sciences.

Artisanal open access

In this context, “artisanal”, scholar-led Diamond OA journals (which levy no fees to either readers or authors) struggle to be recognised for the “food for thought” they produce. Often making a substantial contribution to their respective fields, these journals remain poorly financed and are plagued by discoverability and preservation issues. The values upon which they are founded are often at loggerheads with the profit-oriented goals of commercial publishers. For instance, instead of lobbying to be included in mainstream bibliographic databases, we, as editors of scholar-led journals, aspire to work together cooperatively in the context of a mutual aid framework that could outcompete commercial publishers. However, to do so, the scholar-led publishing community we envision should explore the possibility of alternative ranking and certification models for non-commercial OA academic journals. Libraria, an open access initiative committed to helping scholarly societies and publishers adopt open access publishing models, are helping us explore these alternative models through its Cooperate-for-Open program. We are committed to doing so, while insisting that not all social scientific “impact” can or should be calculated or regulated for quantitative capture.

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The idea of working in a more cooperative framework, governed by mutual trust between readers, reviewers, and other scholar-publishers, draws, paradoxically, from commercial ventures and initiatives well known in the “food sovereignty” movement in Italy and beyond. These movements are a response to a corporate food industry that has evolved into a market monopsony, which harms workers and consumers; a process we today see taking place within the commercial publishing industry. Here we are thinking of social movements and international organisations such as *Slow Food*, the *Triple “A” movement* (Artisans, Agriculturalists, Artists), and *Genuino Clandestino* (an informal network of small-scale Italian producers challenging the corporate-friendly licensing system of European agribusiness). We argue that these three examples offer an inspiring model of “editorial sovereignty” for independent scholar-led OA journals.

Alt-Altmetrics

These grassroots initiatives have developed an alternative system of product certification that reframes “quality” as their key social and political goal. In the context of scholarly communication, this might centre around issues of *accessibility, creativity, integrity, and autonomy*. We ask: To what extent do food sovereignty initiatives help the OA community imagine new ways of recognizing the value of editorial work? Can we begin envisioning a different publishing ecology where “editorial sovereignty” becomes both an ordering principle for academics and the key to a truly open form of scholarship? Can academic libraries and other funders help us transform scholarly communication into a more open and democratic process?

For brevity, we limit ourselves to two examples of how the Italian food sovereignty movement inspires our vision of an OA scholarship that is genuinely alternative to mainstream commercial endeavours: namely, participatory guarantee and the re-socialisation of the production cycle.

Participatory guarantees crystallise quality around publication standards essential to scholar-led publishing such as diversity, community, accessibility, fairness, and sustainability

A participatory guarantee system (PGS) brings together organic food producers, who usually share expertise, know-how, a common (physical) environment, and a market for their products, in a participatory forum with the power to inspect, audit, and provide counsel to the venture under examination. Within a PGS, the choice and definition of standards applied, as well as the development and implementation of certification procedures and decisions, are negotiated and agreed upon in these fora. This system, pioneered by Genuino Clandestino, has in recent years become pivotal in building smallholders’ trust in the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements, thus lowering the barrier to entry to organic farming for traditionally underserved groups. Insofar as Diamond OA journals could also be seen to independently produce high-

quality, ethically-sound goods that may nonetheless fail to reach potential consumers, we envision the repurposing of the PGS as a way of replacing impact factors and other similar forms of credentialing Diamond OA journals with a participatory process that dispenses with the need for third parties. Participatory guarantees crystallise quality around publication standards essential to scholar-led publishing such as diversity, community, accessibility, fairness, and sustainability, which could be operationalised by and for publications in particular disciplinary contexts.

Second, food sovereignty initiatives suggest ways to redefine the relationship between scientific outlets and their audience. Whereas, commercial publishers target high citation counts as a means of extracting maximum revenue from libraries, scholar-led Diamond OA journals have a greater interest in understanding and communicating their findings with the general public, as well as with their research collaborators. OA should be about more than barriers to author participation in publishing; in the social sciences, OA should also consider the accessibility of the material to a wider audience.

The *slow food* and *Triple A* initiatives have over the years promoted “festivals” bringing together producers and consumers in intentional communities that could both boost the quality of the food produced as well as spread the ethics underpinning its very production. This process of re-socialisation, we argue, should be undertaken by independent OA journals as good practice complementary to peer review. We envision the promotion of non-commercial journals in “festivals of science” where readers can learn more about how social scientific research is done, articles reviewed and edited, and data ethically stored and managed. These festivals should bring both reviewers and the reviewed together in a process of “peer-engaged review” where better science is co-produced alongside better forms of evaluation. What is at stake here is also a transition, however fraught, from open access to open scholarship. Raising the profile of Diamond OA journals may represent concerned scholars’ last, best chance to rebalance a scholarly communication system that is at risk of losing both academic trust and public legitimacy.

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