

CHAPTER 8

Openness Uncovered

Everything is post these days, as if we're all just a footnote to something earlier that was real enough to have a name of its own.

—Margaret Atwood

Introduction

While setting out the manner in which openness has been successful, this book has thus far presented it as a largely beneficial approach. While it does have many benefits, there are also problems and issues associated with an open approach. One of the consequences of many of the open education developments being conducted in an adversarial manner, with commercial interests such as publishers either resisting it or others attempting to claim it, is that advocates of open education often feel they are forced to ignore any potential issues, lest they are seized upon to discredit the whole approach. This may be analogous to climate change scientists who have been reluctant to voice concerns about specific pieces of data or interpretations, because any doubts will be used to undermine the overall message.

This is yet another consequence of there being a battle for openness. As with the disruption myth we saw in Chapter 6, it forces people

into extremes. Therefore, in this chapter, some of the criticisms and issues surrounding openness will be explored. Even after arguing for an open, intellectual commons, James Boyle (2008) stresses that, ‘It is not that openness is always right. It is not. ... Rather, it is that we need a balance between open and closed, owned and free, and we are systematically likely to get the balance wrong.’ Similarly, Dave Cormier (2009), who coined the term MOOC and is a proponent of open practice, warns, ‘Openness is not a panacea. It will not suddenly teach students or spread “good” education, nor is it free of cultural baggage.’ Both Boyle and Cormier are undoubtedly correct, and yet in the battle for openness, such critiques are often ignored. The danger of not addressing some of the issues around openness, however, is that they will be used to discredit the whole.

The Politics of Openness

In Chapter 2 I avoided giving a single definition of open education, because I wanted to admit degree and variation in practice. Whilst some areas, such as OERs, have a very clear definition, others such as open scholarship, represent a general approach and set of beliefs. Finding one definition would exclude some elements of the open education story that are interesting, hence the preference for a set of coalescing principles. This approach, however, does allow for vagueness in the term which potentially renders it meaningless, or subject to abuse.

In his thoughtful critique of open source publisher Tim O’Reilly, Morozov (2013) argues that this vagueness around the term has been deliberately constructed by O’Reilly to create good PR:

Few words in the English language pack as much ambiguity and sexiness as ‘open.’ And after O’Reilly’s bombastic interventions – ‘Open allows experimentation. Open

encourages competition. Open wins,' he once proclaimed in an essay – its luster has only intensified. Profiting from the term's ambiguity, O'Reilly and his collaborators likened the 'openness' of open source software to the 'openness' of the academic enterprise, markets, and free speech. 'Open' thus could mean virtually anything.

For Morozov, O'Reilly's co-option of the term allowed him to ally it to economics, which the market found more palatable, allowing O'Reilly and many in the software movement to 'look political while advancing an agenda that had very little to do with politics'. As we saw in Chapter 1, openwashing suggests that there is market capital now in proclaiming open credentials, and ambiguity around the term facilitates this.

In Chapter 2, I set out a brief history of openness in education, but even this has political connotations. Such accounts of open education usually have one of two starting points. The first option is to take the founding of the Open University. Lane (2009) contends, 'The discourse around the role of openness in higher education can be said to have seriously started with the inception of the United Kingdom Open University (UKOU) in 1969.' The second, alternative, starting point for history is that of the open source movement, which is what Wiley and Gurell (2009) use, while admitting, 'Histories are difficult to write for many reasons. One reason is the difficulty of determining where to begin telling the story – for there is never a true starting point to a tale woven of people, events and ideas.' The choice of starting point will have an influence on the type of interpretation of open education put forward: the OU-based one may suggest a university and student focused approach, whereas the open source one might indicate a more technological and licence driven perspective.

Peter and Diemann (2013) propose a longer historical perspective, highlighting aspects of open education in the Middle Ages with the founding of universities which ‘contained in them the idea of openness, albeit by no means comprehensive. This period highlights “open” as learner driven, resting on a growing curiosity and increasing awareness of educational opportunities.’ Open education can be traced through the 17th century with coffee-houses and then into the industrial revolution with schools and working clubs. Their overview of this broader history of openness is shown in **Figure 9**.

This longer historical perspective has some illuminating lessons for the current debate. The authors conclude that, ‘Historical forms of openness caution us against assuming that particular configurations will prevail, or that social aspects should be assumed as desired by default. ... After a period of open movements many times there have been slight but important shifts from “pure” openness towards “pretended” openness, i.e., some aspects have been modified to offer more control for producers and other stakeholders.’

This illustrates that openness has always been perceived as problematic, and one of its principle difficulties is that it operates against an individual’s and, more significantly, an organisation’s need to control. Where there are issues of control, there is undoubtedly a political aspect. Peters and Britez (2008) are blunt about this in their book on open education, opening with the statement, ‘Open education involves a commitment to openness and is therefore inevitably a political and social project.’ It is possible to argue, as the open source community do, that openness is simply the most efficient way to operate, and there is some truth in that, for instance the argument for learning objects and OERs makes this case. But even if that is so, a degree of politics follows.

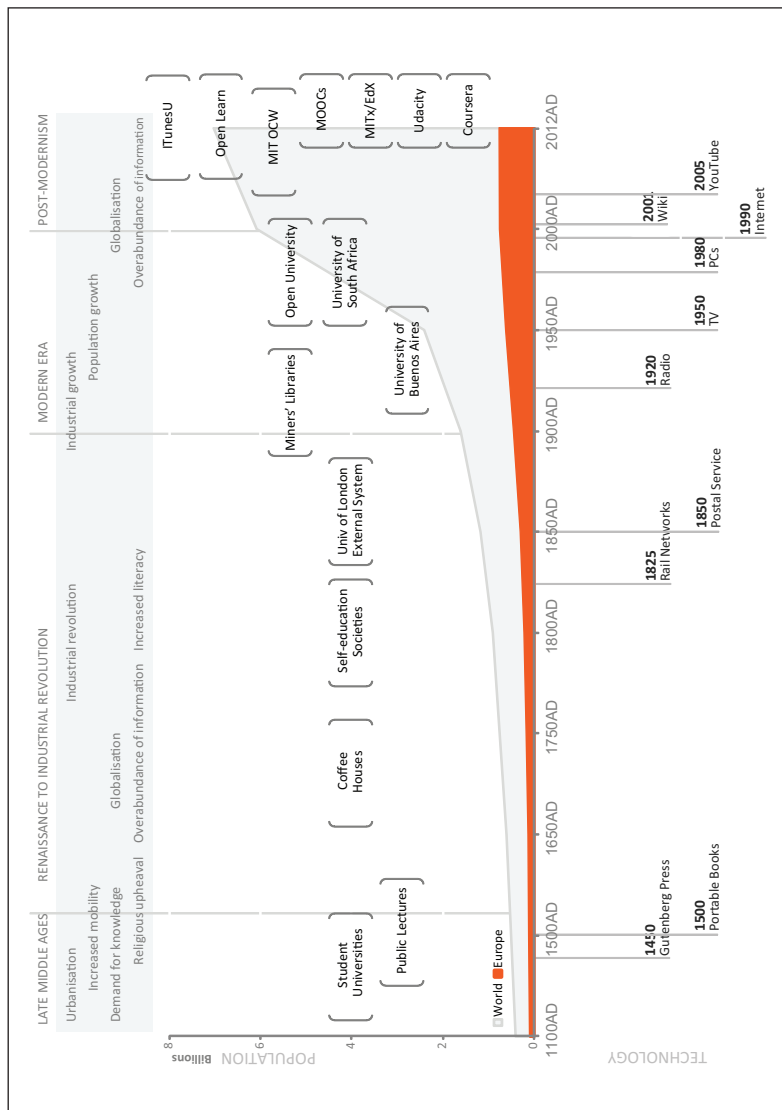


Figure 9: A history of Openness.

Source: Peter & Deimann, 2013. Published under a CC-BY license.

This can be a set of assumed beliefs, in democracy, altruism, sharing or a general liberal perspective, or more directly, it can be political lobbying, for instance, to introduce open textbooks into a country or a region.

The political dimension of openness is perhaps best embodied in the story of Aaron Schwartz. A young programmer and online activist, Schwartz downloaded 19 million academic articles from the JSTOR database while at MIT, in order to make them freely available. He was indicted and charged with wire fraud and violation of the Computer Fraud and Abuse Act, which could have led to a penalty of US\$1 million in fines plus 35 years in prison. Schwartz committed suicide in January 2013. The case is a complicated one, as Schwartz did not distribute the articles and was not charged under copyright laws, but the severity of the potential punishment (although whether it would have ever been enforced is debatable) reinforces the claim that there are matters of real value being contested in the battle for openness. For some Schwartz is hero; for others he was 'reckless' (Aaronovitch 2013). Probably neither of these views is justified, but what this sad story does highlight is some of the issues that arise when open culture clashes with traditional practices. The relationship between the individual and their institution (some have criticised MIT for not protecting Schwartz), the adequacy of the law in dealing with these issues and the potential to easily distribute vast amounts of copyrighted material are all issues which will come up again. Schwartz's act can only be interpreted as a political one, however, and directly related to the issue of openness.

There have been explicitly political criticisms of aspects of open education. For instance MOOCs have been seen as exploiting academic labour (Zevin 2012) and of having a neoliberal agenda (Hall 2013). The Silicon Valley narrative can itself be seen as

embodying a form of neoliberal capitalism, and so there should be no surprise that MOOCs can be seen from the same perspective. For others, the open education movement is not being radical enough in its reconceptualization of the role of universities. Winn (2012) asks, 'Is Open Education being used as a method of compensating for a decline in the welfare state? Is government advocacy of OER a way of tackling resource scarcity in an expanding system of higher education?' Winn and others favour a more social interpretation of openness, which draws on some of the historical trends mentioned above as well as the strong ethical basis of Stallman's free software movement. In this interpretation, open education leads to a cooperative university, which is 'a free association of people who come together to collectively produce knowledge. It is also a political project' (Winn 2013).

Even if one ignores such politically explicit aspects of open education, there is an unintentional (or maybe intentional) form of cultural imperialism associated with exporting the open education beliefs which are inextricably aligned with open education resources. Cormier (2009) suggests that OER can be viewed as a means of exporting an educational model. The power of a global institutional brand, such as MIT, combined with free (as in cost), makes it difficult for local providers to compete, both in terms of cost and voice. As Cormier puts it, 'How are local professors, debating the relative value of their curriculum against the standardizing power of a major university, going to be able to forward their own ideas?'

As with many of the criticisms in this chapter, there are arguments against this and means of mitigating against it, such as through localised projects, so it is not a reason in itself to hold against open education, but it should be acknowledged that a political dimension is present and alternatives may exist.

Problems with Openness

The previous section was concerned with philosophical or political reservations about open education. In this section some of the more specific problems associated with an open approach will be raised. This will not be an exhaustive list of such issues, but rather a representative one, with the intention of highlighting some of the problems that arise as a direct consequence of openness.

One of the most worrying problems associated with open education is that it isn't reaching the people it needs to, or claims to. As we have seen, much of the rhetoric for both OERs and MOOCs stresses the democratising nature of open approaches. While anecdotes are often used to back up this claim, the evidence does not support it. There seems to be a clear trend that the majority of users of open education material are those who are experienced learners already. For example a survey of users of the OU's OpenLearn OER repository found that it is often used by well-educated, well-qualified, employed informal and formal learners. For example, 26% of respondents indicated that they have undergraduate qualifications and a further 20% that they have postgraduate qualifications (Perryman, Law & Law 2013). Similarly the OpenCourseWare Consortium conducted a survey of users and found that nearly half were students currently undergoing secondary or university-level education, 22% were working professionals and 8% were teachers or faculty members (OCWC 2013). MOOCs exhibit similar learner demographics, with a study by Edinburgh University on the people using their six Coursera-based MOOCs showing that 70% of participants were qualified to undergraduate level or above (Edinburgh MOOC group 2013). Christensen et al. (2013) also found that across 32 MOOCs, learners tended to be young, white, educated, employed males.

Lane (2012) argues that it is not yet possible to measure how OERs are truly widening either formal or informal engagement in higher education but also suggests that most OERs are better suited to learners who are confident and experienced. Bossu, Bull and Brown (2012) indicate that, in the Australian context, those who most need access to higher education typically lack access to technology and, therefore, to OER. Liyanagunawardena, Williams and Adams (2013) express similar concerns regarding the potential of MOOCs to democratise education in developing countries, citing access to technologies, language and computer literacy as barriers, which may result in MOOCs serving only the privileged in developing countries.

Combined with accusations that MOOC providers are focusing on recruiting only elite universities (Rivard 2013), this certainly undermines the democratisation claim. Not only might open education not be reaching some of the target groups it aims for, but it could be exacerbating the situation. If independent study through MOOCs or OERs becomes a recognised desirable component on an individual's CV, then access to these may, ironically, increase the digital divide with experienced learners acquiring the benefits they offer.

Two drivers may mitigate against this scenario. The first is that these initial findings represent early stages in an adoption curve. It might be expected that experienced learners with high levels of connectivity would be amongst the first cohorts of a new development. As they become more accepted as part of the mainstream, then we would expect to see their uptake in broader society, in much the same way that Facebook moved from being a site used by a technological elite to a tool for the mass population.

The second driver is that global projects are taking much of the open ethos and applying it in a local context. For instance, the

TESSA project developed OERs for teacher education in Sub-Saharan Africa, with local contributors developing the material. The Latin project is developing open textbooks for Latin America using local professors and authors, thus combating both the problems of cost and relevancy. Similarly, Siyavula in South Africa have developed open textbooks which are distributed nationally to all schools in key subjects. There are OER projects in most major countries, as the model of openness is seen as a means of addressing specific local needs.

Some of the response to these concerns, then, is that it is a developing picture, and it is unrealistic to expect an immediate resolution to problems of access that have plagued traditional education for a long time. The open education movement is being adapted and modified to meet the demands of local contexts. However, the learner profile is a concern, and the experience of open universities over the past 40 years has been that open entry students require a good deal of support. The ‘build it and they will come’ philosophy of some open education projects is unlikely to be sufficient in overcoming the barriers to participation for many learners. This emphasises the importance of maintaining a diversity of interpretations of openness and avoiding the simplistic ‘open = free’ definition, as open entry to learning may require different models of support.

A related aspect is the relatively low rates of reuse and adaptation of open content. Much is made of the 4 Rs of Reuse which we encountered in Chapter 2, but in reality only the first of these (the right to reuse something) is widely implemented. The others, revise, remix and redistribute, remain something of a minority interest. For instance, the OpenLearn team found that reversioning was rare, and users tended to take and deploy units wholesale. They found that repurposing material

was avoided as a result of four main obstacles (McAndrew et al. 2009):

1. that it was not anyone's current role to remix and reuse;
2. the content provided on the site was of high quality and so discouraged alteration;
3. there were few examples showing the method and value of remixing;
4. the use of unfamiliar formats (such as XML) meant that users were uncertain how to proceed.

This suggests a mixture of cultural issues, such as a lack of defined roles, and technical ones acted as barriers to repurposing. As with the flipped learning network mentioned in Chapter 4, there was a disparity between teachers using others' material and then going on to share their own (De Los Arcos 2014). The picture may be changing, however. OpenStax statistics (from Jan 2014) show 361 derived versions of their textbooks from a total of 1,116 (OpenStax 2014). Some of these are different adaptations of the same module, so some modules are more likely to be repurposed than others, but it indicates a higher degree of adaptive reuse than we have seen in most OER projects. It may be that the familiar context of the OER in this case, a textbook rather than an elearning unit, overcomes some of the cultural and practice barriers, and the provision of easy tools for adaptation is similarly a factor.

All of this may not be significant; there will always be more straightforward reuse than adaptation, simply because the former is easier. Just as there are more YouTube consumers than producers, creating and sharing back content takes a greater commitment. However, for many open education practices to flourish, there needs to be a degree of community creation. I have made the distinction previously between big (i.e., institutional) and little

(i.e., individual) OER (Weller 2012), but the same may be said of open scholarship, open access publishing and MOOCs. In part, this is an argument for sustainability; such approaches work well over a long period when they don't rely on large, centrally funded projects to deliver them, and instead they become a by-product of everyday practice. It is also an argument for ownership, which relates more specifically to the battle for open. If MOOCs are only developed through high-end productions featuring superstar academics, or if OERs are only delivered from large projects out of elite institutions and these are simply accepted wholesale, then academia does not take ownership of any of the issues or opportunities they offer. They remain a practice of others imposed upon the education sector, rather than one owned by it.

One other problem of open education is not lack of engagement, but over-zealous implementation. As discussed above, open education is undoubtedly a political movement, and as with any such movement, there are hardliners in its midst. These are often well intentioned and take a stance on openness that does not permit any of the reinterpretation of the term we see with openwashing. However, as with the open source movement, this can lead to a form of openness Stalinism, where people are outed for not being open enough. Ultimately this is alienating for many academics who don't want to be forced into open practice through fear or bullying. Openness can quickly become a stick with which to beat people, and the danger of this mindset is that openness is reduced to a narrow checklist. Perhaps the most exciting aspect of open practice is that it allows for experimentation and diversity, and it would be a false victory to replace one monopoly of behaviour with a new one.

Openness and access to a global network brings with it a new set of moral considerations. Openness can be used to justify

behaviour. For example, is it acceptable to broadcast a quote or video of someone saying something offensive without their knowledge? Does a claim to openness justify public criticism of a lecturer? Many of these issues go beyond education, as society struggles to understand what it means for everyone to have access to a global network, when the consequences of actions became greatly amplified, as the Aaron Schwartz case reminds us. The ‘Twitter storm’ where an initial misdemeanour gains global attention and attracts a mob mentality is now commonplace. Often the original act is one that is genuinely offensive, such as the story of Justine Sacco who posted a racist joke before heading to South Africa and found herself dismissed from her job while in flight. While what she posted was undoubtedly crass, Wadhwa (2013) argues, ‘At no point in history has it been so easy to destroy your entire life so quickly in so few words.’ And while Sacco’s indiscretion may have been genuinely distasteful, other cases occur through misunderstanding, as in the case of the teenage girl who joked that the world was 2,014 years old on New Year’s Eve and received abuse, and even death threats from those who failed to appreciate the humour (Zimmerman 2014).

While Sacco and other Twitter morality outrages are based on unpleasant tweets, they are often no more offensive than the type of conversation one overhears in any public space. Someone won’t have their life ruined for saying such things on a train or in a cafe, but if a television broadcaster said such things we would rightly be outraged by them. And this may indicate the difference we are now facing with our communication and our reactions – we are applying broadcast morality to personal communication.

There is sound advice for online behaviour, such as, ‘treat everything you say online as broadcast’, but any expression of humour or opinion may lead to a Twitter storm if it gets misconstrued.

The global, uncontrollable nature of such events puts the relationship between the individual academic and their institution under a new type of strain. Similarly, for academics who work in potentially sensitive subject areas, such as Middle-Eastern politics, climate change or evolutionary psychology, then pressure to be open and establish an online identity may subject them to particular groups with strong interests.

A further issue to consider with relation to openness is that of cost. Individuals often *overestimate* the time it takes to engage with tools such as blogs and social networking. While establishing an online identity does take some time, there is a period of investment, which has benefits once an identity has been established. Online networks can act as effective information filters, respondents to specific queries, research groupings for formal projects and dissemination routes, making it a time-saving practice. However, the cost of other aspects of openness may be *underestimated*. One example is that of open data. It may seem fairly trivial to release data for a particular project – whether this is through the project's own website, attached to a relevant publication or in a central repository. For many projects, in the hard sciences especially, this is the case – publicly sharing data from a collection of geology samples for instance. But as soon as human subjects are involved, data sharing becomes more complex. While it is easy to anonymise data, it turns out that deanonymisation is also not as difficult as one might imagine. In order to make any data that deals with people open, whether it is surveys, data records or interviews, researchers either need their consent to make it available as it is (a video interview for example), or they need to anonymise it. This involves removing identifiers such as name or student ID number. However, other pieces of data which are required for the data to be useful for researchers are also sufficient to allow for

reidentification. In the US a person's date of birth, gender and zip code has been found to be unique for between 61% (Golle 2006) and 87% (Sweeney 2000) of the population. So to release this data requires considerable effort to make it truly anonymisable, and in order to do so, the reduction in the data quality may make releasing it worthless. Ohm (2009) concludes, 'Data can be either useful or perfectly anonymous but never both.'

These examples are used to illustrate that openness brings with it its own set of problems. One reaction to these types of challenges is often to withdraw, but that is to hand control over to others and for education and academics to be removed from the society in which they exist. Establishing the type of credible online identity discussed in the previous chapter is one element of this, but it will also require understanding and support from the institutions who have a relationship with those individuals.

Conclusions

As well as these issues, previous chapters of this book have raised other problems with the open approach, including:

- The Gold route for open access leading to unequal publishing opportunities
- Forcing students to adopt open behaviours that they may be uncomfortable with
- The low completion rates of MOOCs
- A route that permits increased commercialisation of education
- The long-term sustainability of OER projects

Each of the issues raised in this overview arises because of the open nature of the practice, and in addition there will be other

related issues which impinge upon open education, such as the costs associated with higher education. This highlights that open education, as well as offering solutions to some issues, brings with it a new set of concerns, which need to be addressed. The severity and impact of these problems is not clear. Some may be attributed to open education still being relatively new, and changes in practice take time to establish themselves. Awareness of online resources has greatly increased over the past decade, although often it is confined to popular sites such as YouTube, iTunes U, and TED talks. This is likely to continue over the next decade, and reusing content will become more of an accepted part of practice. Similarly, awareness of rights and the desire to remix will increase, simply because of a growing general awareness in society. The use of social media and everyday acts of sharing photos and videos already means it is a far more commonplace practice than it was even five years ago.

Institutional awareness of open practice has increased dramatically, and here some credit must be given to the role that MOOCs have played in this. MOOCs have dramatically increased the level of attention to open practice, which always carries with it some negative results as well as the positive.

This chapter illustrates that we should not think of openness as a simple checklist, but in allowing a broader definition the opportunities for misuse increase, either for commercial reason, as in openwashing, or to justify questionable behaviour. One way of thinking about open educational practice is what Kelty (2008) terms 'recursive publics', which he defines as, 'a public that is constituted by a shared concern for maintaining the means of association through which they come together as a public.' This concept was used to examine how free software computer hackers cooperate and behave in a highly functional community,

without recourse to a clearly defined manifesto or constitution. Kelty argues that they are operating in the public domain, and at the same time that is altering their own behaviour, so an evolving definition of what it means to be a hacker is being developed. The core values of these hackers hold them together, but they are simultaneously creating the context within which they operate. As Winn (2013) suggests, this notion can be applied to open education also, which is both ‘in and against’ a particular context. As we saw in the previous chapter on identity, open scholars can be seen as defining themselves both within their current discipline and institution, but also acting in contrast to many of those practices. This needn’t be a confrontational ‘against’, but rather one of highlighting relevant contrast. Open access publishing is not against publishing, after all, but it defines itself by highlighting crucial elements of difference. This concept of defining open practice as being simultaneously within and against current educational practice gives rise to much of the tension that has been identified in previous chapters. In the next chapter we will look at a method of framing these tensions and considering an individual or institution’s ability to deal with them.