

The *Value* of Open Access in Anthropology and Beyond

Grégory Dallemagne, Víctor del Arco, Ainhoa Montoya and Marta Pérez

ABSTRACT: This commentary seeks to engage the issue of ‘impact’ in social anthropology by scrutinising the topic of open access. Drawing on the discussions that took place at the international conference ‘FAQs about Open Access: The Political Economy of Knowledge in Anthropology and Beyond’, held in October 2014 in Madrid, we suggest that addressing the topic of open access allows a two-fold goal. On one hand, it elucidates that public debates about open access rely on a rather minimalist notion of openness that does not yield an adequate understanding of what is at stake in those debates. On the other, we argue that expanding the notion of openness does not only allow us to revisit the debate concerning what we do as academics, how we do it and what its value is, but also to do so going beyond current notions of ‘impact’ and ‘public value’ underpinned by the principle of economic efficiency in a context of increasingly reduced research funds.

KEYWORDS: anthropology, collaboration, economic efficiency, impact, open access, public, value

In June 2013, as members of the Research Group in Anthropology with a Public Orientation,¹ we started to take an interest in the debates on open access that were part of the public agenda at a European level yet were having scarcely any repercussion in Spain, the context from which we write. At that moment we contemplated ‘open access yes, but how?’ and we asked ourselves if anthropology – as a discipline which has, since the last quarter of the twentieth century, reflected on the process of the production of knowledge as one of its hallmarks – had something specific to contribute to those debates. Using our conversations on this question as a starting point, we aim to offer in this brief commentary some pointers on the relationship the open-access debates have with the recent demand to justify the ‘impact’ and ‘value’ of research in social sciences and humanities. This reflection is part of the necessity we have identified to scrutinise and expand the notion of ‘open access’, and it builds upon the discussions maintained during

the conference ‘FAQs about Open Access: The Political Economy of Knowledge in Anthropology and Beyond’, which we convened in Medialab-Prado, Madrid, on 16 and 17 October 2014.

In a nutshell, the demand of those who support open access is that – taking advantage of the possibilities digital technologies offer nowadays – researchers publish the results of their research immediately and without financial or legal barriers to access, avoiding the high subscription costs which are imposed by commercial publishers (like Reed Elsevier, Thomson Reuters or Wiley Blackwell) that manage and distribute academic journals and that virtually prevent access to them from those who are not members of subscribed institutions. The promotion of open access in this sense is a moral claim that nevertheless, depending on how it is exercised, can end up reproducing and maintaining the publishing houses’ increasingly commercial business model (Jackson and Anderson 2014: 238).



Open access is not a new claim. It dates back to 2002, to the declarations of the *Budapest Open Access Initiative*² and to the *Berlin Declaration on Open Access to Knowledge in the Sciences and Humanities*,³ which was published a year later. At that moment in time, activist sectors outlined open access using the experience of open-code software as a reference, emphasising in this way the value of research being open and free of charge (Kelty 2014). Open access is nowadays presented to researchers and the institutions in which they work as an inevitable reality – although the required funding for the publishing process continues to be an important determining factor in the maintenance of the publications. Furthermore, in recent years, governments, academic institutions and funding agencies have required through legislations and state, and even regional, mandates that research financed by public funds must be in open access. Examples of these mandates are: the 2011 Law of Science and Technology of the Spanish State,⁴ the 2013 Argentinean law of Creation of Institutional Digital Repositories of Open Access,⁵ the recent open-access policy of important sponsors in the U.K. such as the Research Councils (RCUK) and the Wellcome Trust,⁶ and with less legally binding capacity, the European Commission's 2012 recommendations.⁷

As we mentioned earlier, the debates about open access have not had much prominence in the Spanish context. In Spain, the great majority of journals are linked to institutions – such as universities and other research centres with public or private capital (for example, the Spanish National Research Council) or to professional societies – and they practice open access since their origins or offer open access to their publications after an established period of time. This is also the case in the Latin-American context. While these experiences could seem in some way exemplary models to follow in Euro-American contexts that are considering a transition to open access, one must point out that Spanish journals are, more often than not, maintained with the scarcely visible work of young researchers and scholars who carry out this unpaid work for reasons that frequently relate to the meritocratic as much as to the client-based nature of Spanish academia.

Our interest in organising a conference was born from this comparison of contexts. We sought to create a forum for discussion about how to make open access to academic research a sustainable and non-discriminatory reality and about what the existing experiences could add to the open-access publishing traditions in the Spanish and Latin American contexts. We chose anthropology as a starting point, on

one hand because it is the discipline from which we work, and on the other because the anthropological tradition of the last decades offers some keys to critical reflection on the issue of open access. Given that in many respects the context of anthropology does not differ from that of social sciences and humanities in general, we decided to include professionals from different disciplines in the discussion, as well as publishers and library administrators.

The Problems/Limits of a Minimalist Notion of Openness

It became clear during the conference that the concept of openness that prevails among activists for open access in the academic circles, and in the governments and institutions that have recently come to promote open access tends towards minimalism.⁸ This minimalist concept is limited to prescribing the need to make academic research results available online for free. It does not allow researchers to visualise, raise the issue and resolve or address three fundamental elements that intervene in the matter of open access: the existing barriers other than financial ones, the current role granted to academic publication, and the reduction of 'the public' to a mere recipient.

The subscription or article download costs of an academic journal that works with 'paywalls' undoubtedly make it difficult – if not impossible for many – to access academic articles. However, there are additional barriers that continue to exist with the minimalist notion of openness that dominates in the public debates about open access. As many anthropologists pointed out in their reactions to an article by Daniel Miller (2012) about this subject in the journal HAU, as well as participants in the conference, the oftentimes esoteric prose, the style of writing and the academic standards – in what refers to, for example, the presentation of ideas and the reasoning – and the predominance of the English language are insurmountable obstacles for many potential readers. Therefore, the free-of-charge online availability of academic articles does not guarantee per se a better accessibility.

The existence of all these additional barriers leads us to the following question: who is 'the public' of our research and on the basis of this, what does it mean to open access in an effective way. Specifically, this implies questioning ourselves about how we write, with whom, for whom and what formats and standards we use. More importantly, it leads us to question our relationship with the subjects we are doing research with, both in the publishing phase (which is what concerns us here) and in the broader sense of the process of knowledge production. Unfortunately, these are not themes which form part of the open-access public de-

bate, although they are essential if we want to evaluate the ‘impact’ and ‘public value’ of research in the social sciences and humanities, especially when funding agencies are starting to demand a ‘co-production of knowledge’ with the ‘beneficiaries’ of the research they fund, and defining these terms according to the interests of governmental and business agendas.⁹

The absence of this kind of question is largely due to the way the academia works nowadays, and the role and value the practice of publishing receives, which is different from the public dissemination of knowledge and is becoming an increasingly commercial activity (Eve 2014). During the conference there were many participants who pointed out that scholarly publishing is currently in the grip of vertiginous production rhythms, evaluation criteria and value measures which focus on quantity over quality, on the symbolic capital of the journal in which an article is published or on the impact indexes calculated by peer citation. Of course, this situation differs from one country to another, with contexts like the Spanish one awarding special relevance to the metrics supplied by impact indexes (these criteria are essential for the National Agency of Evaluation of Quality and Accreditation, ANECA, to certify academic staff). Others, like the Research Excellence Framework (REF) in the United Kingdom, while valuing quality on par with quantity, still impose quantitative criteria on scholarly production when evaluating research, the results of which determine the allocation of public funds to university institutions.¹⁰

The notion of impact that emerges from these contexts is reduced to peer reviews or peer readings and citations, and it exerts a significant pressure on the younger generations, who find themselves in an increasingly precarious and reduced labour market and feel under pressure to accept the publishing logic if they wish to obtain a place in an academic institution (the often cited ‘publish or perish’ dictum).¹¹ In this endless race to accumulate published articles and symbolic capital, the original meaning of ‘publish’ has been left aside. ‘Publish’, which comes from the Latin *publicare*, implies ‘to make public property, to place at the disposal of the community, to make public, to make generally known, to exhibit publicly’ (*The Oxford English Dictionary*).

Open access represents a significant potential to transform the present vicious circle of publishing as a goal to survive or stand out in the academic context. However, it being reduced to the idea of making research results available online for free makes it resonate with the requisite to justify the public funding a researcher has obtained rather than with the concern of ‘making research available to the public’. In this re-

gard, the notion of open access that is being handled in public debates is akin to what the anthropologist Marilyn Strathern (2000) and other authors have identified as a tendency in academia (reflecting other domains) towards ‘audit cultures’, that are founded and legitimised on the intersection of financial and moral components, specifically on the principles of economic efficiency and good practice. These principles seem to underlie the funding agencies’ growing demand for ‘impact’ and ‘public value’ in social sciences and humanities research – a demand that is rooted in the increased reduction of research funding as a part of wider cuts in social-expenditure policy in various sectors, including education and research (this is at least the context of a large part of the Euro–North American academia).

We considered then what a wider notion of open access would imply, based on a conceptualisation that was less stringent with the idea of openness and would permit the visibility of the three aspects to which we have referred (the existence of barriers other than financial; the role and value of academic publishing; and the restriction of ‘the public’ to an academic audience). Among other things, this would imply, as we identified in the conference, that we would have to work with a notion of open access that was not simply an ‘end’ unto itself but also an ‘opportunity’ (or a ‘way or means’ as Christopher Kelty expressed in his presentation during the conference) to expand the debate around what it means to ‘publish/make public’ and open the access in an effective way.

Expanding Open Access

By contemplating the notion of open access as an ‘opportunity’ or ‘means’, we can reconsider the need to place the results of our research ‘at the disposal of the community’, as well as taking advantage of the emphasis publicly placed on the need of opening academic work to highlight two issues: on one hand the need to ask ourselves who composes that public, community or audience with whom we share or must share said results and on the other hand the decoupling that exists in many cases between the academic institutions and other actors or producers of knowledge. In other words, the debates about open access contain the possible conditions to, in the first instance, elevate and highlight the question of for what and for whom we write and consequently attribute another value to the labour of publishing. In second place, by extrapolating the consideration to the research process (and asking ourselves for what and for whom/with whom do we conduct research), said debates present the conditions of possibility to favour experimentation

with forms of collaboration in the publishing work but also during the broader research process.

'For what and for whom we write?' is not a new question – especially in anthropology, a discipline that since the 1980s has analysed the construction we, social scientists (specifically ethnographers), make of the texts resulting from our research and how these texts reflect the bases which historically have built a researcher's authority. The work of Clifford and Marcus (1986) is regarded as pioneering in this line of thought.¹² We consider that the open-access debates represent an opportunity to revisit the proposals at the base of these previous works, that is to say the possibility of social scientists taking into account once more the politics and poetics of the production of written work as well as knowledge.

In this sense, and taking advantage of the opportunity provided by the theme of open access – understood in its broad meaning – to revisit these debates, we must seriously consider the existence of multiple audiences, not all of them academic, and the fundamental role they can play. Considering the impact or public value of what we write means, among other things, to take into account the barriers that exist in that which we produce – and in the channels through which we disseminate our work – to address that great variety of audiences. Furthermore, the thought of opening the access to ever-larger audiences must include the consideration of the communication we establish with the subjects with whom we conduct our research, not as mere audience or mere informants but as partners, without undermining peer conversation and communication as part of our job. This also implies innovating in writing formats, with temporalities in greater accordance to interventions in the public sphere, and even thinking of alternative formats to writing as a means of communicating.¹³ Of course, given the current mechanisms of accreditation and valuation of our work that relegate or exclude alternative formats to the academic article and the monograph, it seems difficult or a loss of time and efforts for those who wish to make an academic career to prioritise or even conceive the idea of sharing their research through alternative channels and formats.

Moving on to other issues, a wider notion of open access also contains the conditions of possibility to contemplate opening the access to knowledge in terms of 'collaboration'. Lafuente et al. (2013: 20–22) explain the isolation of university institutions from the social world of which they are a part as a historical reaction of these producers of knowledge to isolate their scientific activities from the interference of the church and other public powers. In order to create a commu-

nity independent from these powers, an intellectual heritage and a specific language were generated – generally unintelligible for those not versed in the matter – as well as access systems in which peer evaluation was fundamental to form part of the community and to construct the authority of its members. Even though going back to the genesis of scientific activity may seem excessive, we can, as the authors point out, currently identify elements that continue to isolate universities and other producers of knowledge from the rest of the citizens and actors, including those sectors that are also producers of knowledge (although in many occasions they lack the authority the university institution confers to knowledge, dressing it as 'expert').

Consequently, a real interest in opening knowledge that is produced in university institutions has to take into account the possibilities of collaboration with other actors, from the subjects with whom we conduct research to other producers of knowledge.¹⁴ In this regard, both in the publication that preceded the conference and in the actual conference on which this commentary is based, Alberto Corsín (2014) suggested a distinction between providing open access to anthropology – where, as we have insisted before, the public debates about open access are founded – and making an 'open-source anthropology'. An 'open-source anthropology' suggests a more ample sense of openness in regard to how it is formulated when you limit the debate to accessing academic publications. Corsín argues that an open-source anthropology implies openness at an epistemic and methodological level, even transforming the presence of the ethnographer and his tools into 'collaboration infrastructure'.¹⁵ As an example of open-source anthropology, Corsín explains his collaboration with Adolfo Estalella and the architect associations Basurama and Zuloark, with whom they have designed a proposal of valuation and public visibility of unregulated open-access urban knowledge.¹⁶

Other experiences presented during the conference and which we could identify as contributions to an open-source anthropology are the experiment of collaboration conducted by Tomás Sánchez-Criado and the proposals of authorship/collective publishing put forward by Dariuz Jemielniak. Sánchez-Criado (2014) suggests the challenge of developing an anthropology in which both the research questions and methodology of investigation are negotiated and designed with the subjects with whom we work. In his investigation of technologies of care and independent life, Sánchez-Criado takes the proposal of the possibilities of collaborating with the subjects whom we study even further, by proposing different formats of publishing

or even what he calls ‘experimental devices’. This is illustrated in his investigation in the design of a portable chair with wheels that allowed its users to identify inaccessible spaces according to their level of mobility.¹⁷ This type of collaboration can in turn allow us to think of the research outputs of our enquiries in radically different terms.

Based on his previous ethnographic research on Wikipedia, as well as his contribution to the editing of the online encyclopaedia’s numerous entries over the years, Jemielniak (2014) suggested during the conference the consideration of publishing via crowdsourcing or making collective reviews as options to rethink what ‘opening’ the access to knowledge means in the context of the publishing process and to a wider extent in academic work. Of course, it is difficult for these forms of collaboration to be widespread given the aforementioned pressing need to accumulate symbolic capital to obtain an academic job or to promote oneself in it, a necessity imposed by the current systems that evaluate academic activity.

Ultimately, these experiences and proposals provide concrete examples of how one can think in terms of ‘research impact’ and ‘public value’ in ways that differ from the official systems of evaluation and accreditation in scientific research. We are convinced that an effort to identify current projects in which these ideas of ‘impact’ and ‘public value’ emerge from the negotiation and interaction with subjects would reveal the existence of diverse initiatives in this field, initiatives that are located on the margins of the academic world. While it is true that the questions and discussions surrounding the ‘impact’ and/or ‘value’ of social sciences and humanities are beginning to find a place in the funding and evaluation bodies (as evidenced in the recent UK REF exercise introducing impact case studies), the motivations that underlie these are the efficient allocation of increasingly reduced funds for social sciences and humanities and the promotion of increasingly commercial notions of value/utility/profit.¹⁸ In this context, maybe the most important implication to widen the debate on open access in the terms described in this commentary is that it may foster discussions about the ‘public value’ of social sciences that are not guided by (or focused on) the issue of economic efficiency and the allocation of ever-more scarce resources for research.

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Grégory Dallemagne is ABD PhD candidate at the Department of Social Anthropology, Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, and Scientific Collaborator at the Laboratory for a Prospective Anthropology, UCLouvain. He holds an MSc in International Studies from the University of Montreal, Canada. E-mail: gregory.dallemagne@gmail.com

Víctor del Arco is PhD candidate in Social Anthropology at Universidad Autónoma de Madrid and holds an MA in Social Anthropology from the same university. E-mail: victor.arco@uam.es

Ainhoa Montoya is Early Career Lecturer at the Institute of Latin American Studies, University of London, and associate fellow of FLACSO-España. She holds PhD and MPhil degrees in Social Anthropology from Manchester and Cambridge. She is editor of the open-access journal Anthropology Matters. E-mail: ainhoa.montoya@sas.ac.uk

Marta Pérez is ABD PhD candidate at the Department of Social Anthropology, Universidad Autónoma de Madrid. She holds an MA in International Affairs from The New School, New York. E-mail: marta.perez@fulbrightmail.org

Notes

1. This research group was born in the 1990s at the Department of Social Anthropology and Spanish Philosophical Thought, Universidad Autónoma de Madrid.
2. Available at <http://www.budapestopenaccessinitiative.org/read>.
3. Available at <http://openaccess.mpg.de/Berlin-Declaration>
4. Article 37 of said law states that researchers who obtain public funding have to upload their post prints within twelve months from publishing their article. For more information see <http://www.boe.es/boe/dias/2011/06/02/pdfs/BOE-A-2011-9617.pdf>
5. This law obliges institutions that have received public funding to create open-access repositories to de-

- posit their scientific production. For more information see <http://repositorios.mincyt.gob.ar/recursos.php>
6. In the U.K. in 2013, the Research Councils incorporated the policy of requiring the funded research results to be in open access and they began to offer the possibility of including funds to cover the article processing charge (APC) within applications for grants. Not long after, the Wellcome Trust, one of the largest funding agencies of biomedical research in the U.K. emulated this policy.
 7. The recommendations promote the practice of open access of the results of publicly funded research and specifically research funded by European Union programmes. For more information see <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32012H0417&rid=1>
 8. While we are focusing on the approach to open access that is predominant, we also have to recognise that different visions, notions and interests exist in critical academic sectors (see, for example, Jackson and Anderson 2014).
 9. This is the case, for example, of the competitive process through which the U.K.'s research councils currently allocate their funds.
 10. The REF determines the number of articles that have to be handed in for peer reviews according to which each department in the U.K. is graded, based on the quality of the articles handed in as one of the main criteria.
 11. For an interesting article about the current transformations of the academic labour market, see Alexandre Afonso's blog entry 'How Academia Resembles a Drug Gang': <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2013/12/11/how-academia-resembles-a-drug-gang/>
 12. There were nevertheless authors who prior to the *Writing Culture* debate had already experimented with writing formats and styles (see for instance Behar and Gordon 1995).
 13. An interesting example in this regard is the *Ebola Response Anthropology Platform*, which can be accessed at <http://www.ebola-anthropology.net>
 14. Of course, this is a long-standing concern that has taken several forms throughout time. Works and experiences preceding or coeval with the *Writing Culture* debate, many of them beyond the field of anthropology, went even further than experimenting with texts; these initiatives explored new methodological and/or epistemic possibilities (Fals-Borda and Rahman 1991; Greenwood and Levin 1998; Hale 2008; Lassiter 2008; Malo 2004).
 15. In this text we have adhered to collaboration experiences described during the conference. However, we think it is necessary to emphasise other contemporary efforts along these lines. See, for example, Ávila and Malo 2009; Bannerji 1993; Colectivo Ippolita; Martínez et al. 2014.
 16. For more details of the project visit <http://ciudad-escuela.org>
 17. More information on this project can be found at <https://entornoalasilla.wordpress.com>.
 18. See <http://savageminds.org/2011/07/13/making-the-funding-cut-the-nsf-anthropology-and-the-value-of-social-science/>

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