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COMMENTARY

Communities, Commoning, Open Access and the Humanities: An Interview with Martin Paul Eve

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Leading open access publishing advocate and pioneer Professor Martin Paul Eve considers several topics in an interview with WPCC special issue editor Andrew Lockett. These include the merits of considering publishing in the context of commons theory and communing, digital platforms as creative and homogenous spaces, cosmolocalism, the work of intermediaries or boundary organisations and the differing needs of library communities. Eve is also asked to reflect on research culture, the academic prestige economy, the challenges facing the humanities, digital models in trade literature markets and current influences in terms of work in scholarly communications and recent academic literature. Central concerns that arise in the discussion are the importance of values and value for money in an environment shaped by increasing demands for policies determined by crude data monitoring that are less than fully thought through in terms of their impact and their implications for academics and their careers.

Keywords: academic publishing; scholarly communications; commoning; open access; humanities; platforms

Martin Paul Eve is Professor of Literature, Technology and Publishing at Birkbeck College, University of London. He is a leading figure in the world of open-access publishing policy through his work as a Plan S Ambassador and as co-founder of the Open Library of Humanities. He also leads the development of Janeway, an open source publishing platform developed at Birkbeck to support the goals of the Open Library of Humanities.

AL: Thank your agreeing to this discussion concerning 'Publishing the Internet and the Commons'.

Is the wider tradition and philosophy and theory of the commons something you think worth looking to for inspiration in scholarly publishing? I noted in Eve (2014) whilst there was extensive discussion of Creative Commons licences and mentions of Lawrence Lessig the immediate focus of your activities has generally been on practical solutions to scholarly communications dilemmas. Does it make sense to you to think of publishing in relation to the commons at a more theoretical or general level at all?

MPE: A lot has been written about the metaphor of 'the commons' in the OA world. It seems, on at least a superficial level, to be a useful analogy for what's going on in the digital space. However, as figures such as Sam Moore (2019) and Stuart Lawson (2019) have recently pointed out, it's a somewhat vague and imprecise historical analogy that buries the historical detail in favour of an idealised – and generalised – notion of 'the commons'. 'The commons', in other words, becomes a floating signifier onto which everyone projects their own take. Really, at its heart, though, much of the OA landscape looks more like the thirteenth-century enclosure in England, in which there was mass consolidation of previously common land into larger farms. Certainly, the produce of these newly enclosed spaces remains available to consume, without paying, but the *practices* of commoning, in which common-pool resources are shared, worked over together, and *communally governed* are not present in these new publication cultures, owned by large multinational corporations.

While you are right to note that most of my work is pragmatic, aimed at engendering change in the present, I am far from distant to the theoretical discussions and debates about OA and its historical analogies. I also think they *do* help us to focus our pragmatic efforts. For instance, in the above, if, again, we turn to the *actual* conditions of commoning and its properties, we do see an emphasis on governance and ownership. It becomes about communities and the commons, working out who has the right to exploit the common-pool resource.

This is all a long way of saying that if we pontificated on the theoretical elements forever, we would never see practical change. At the same time, the language that we use *matters* and historical analogy can teach us of pitfalls, perils, but also opportunities.

AL: Do you think there are long term publishing possibilities within say the related MLA Commons (n.d.) and Humanities Commons (n.d.) platforms that go beyond community-building, which are of course a great start?
MPE: The Humanities Commons platform (to which I have contributed code) has done a fantastic job of introducing many US scholars and those in the humanities to the concept of open dissemination. The US has, in some ways, been slower in its uptake of OA because of its highly decentralised systems of higher education and funding. In the UK, by contrast, the strong centralisation of government funding has provided both carrots and sticks to drive mandates (a hotly contested topic even among OA advocates, I acknowledge). So Humanities Commons, thanks to the fantastic work of Kathleen Fitzpatrick, Nicky Agate, and others, will probably be the first place that members of the MLA – one of the largest scholarly societies in the humanities disciplines – will encounter open dissemination. There will surely be anxieties around copyright – many scholars are still very wary of jeopardising their publication chances/relationships with presses if they inadvertently violate their publication agreements – but it is wonderful to see green OA getting such a prominent subject-based approach.

AL: You recently discussed the platformatization of open access in a piece on threat infrastructures (Eve, 2020). Given the regulatory environment do you see openings for the creation of 'good' or ethically-oriented community publishing platforms that might work for individual authors for individual projects?
MPE: Well, yes, of course! I run one, the Open Library of Humanities.

That said, I'm not quite sure how to address the part of this question about individual authors and individual projects. This seems to have the feel of asking about tailored experimental publishing practices – which is an interesting angle. Often, when we talk of digital publishing possibilities, people exhibit a type of what I call 'abundance thinking' (Eve, 2017), in which they believe that the digital world offers us unlimited publishing possibilities for

unique expression. The type of practice to which I'm here referring is: 'this article could have an interactive timeline', or similar pronouncements.

The problem is that the more experimental the article – or the more unique features that it exhibits – the more *labour* is required underneath the hood to power the work. There are also additional costs and challenges of digital preservation. It is virtually impossible to guarantee, over a decadal timespan, that executable articles will continue to run. I suspect someone else has formulated it better, but it seems to me that there is an inverse proportionality between preservability and uniqueness.

Platforms, then, are designed as homogenising spaces – they are built to give a uniformity to the material that appears within their bounds. This at once flattens works and erases the volatile uniqueness of items that appear within, even while it ameliorates the labour demands and preservation challenges. So, for me, platformization is in some ways the opposite of the individuation of publishing expression. This is not to say that all platforms are bad or evil, merely to note that their very function is to homogenise workflows, experience, and expression.

AL: One mantra in commons literatures is DGML 'Design Global-Manufacture Local' and so-called *cosmolocalism* (for example Bauwens, Kostakis, Pazaitis, 2019). Would you say this is a relevant approach to consider for something as widely distributed in audiences as academic publishing? Do you think diverse national research cultures and subject specialities can, at a design level be brought together to present a lasting workable alternative to big publishing or tech corporations in a sort of global 'digital cooperativism'?

MPE: This is a good question. I have an edited collection that was published (open access) from MIT Press in October 2020 (Eve and Gray, 2020). This book contains many essays from scholars and researchers from outside the Anglophone academy, as well as critiques from those within. These figures consistently note the competing demands made of them by research assessment cultures. Namely, that research on local issues does not find itself valued in global (read: prestigious) research venues. For instance, Roh, Inefuku, and Drabinski (2020: 43) note that 'a 2013 study of economics papers found that only 1.5 percent of economics articles in top-tier journal articles were about countries other than the United States'.

Further, we need to be careful that newly designed initiatives – that are supposedly shaped with local concerns in mind – are not colonial-style exports that impose unifying western paradigms on local cultures. As Thomas Hervé Mboa Nkoudou (2020: 32) puts it, there is a risk of a form of 'epistemic alienation', which 'is symptomatized by epistemicide: destruction of local epistemologies that are replaced, in this case, by a Western paradigm'.

As well as the difficulties of ensuring that global design paradigms do not impose unwanted ways of working on local cultures, there is also the challenge that these platforms can look as though they are simply put in place to allow the wealthier nations to profit off less-prosperous countries. Denisse Albornoz, Angela Okune, and Leslie Chan (2020: 69) put this well when they note that '"Openness" in this context was seen as a tool that enabled nonlocal researchers to yet again benefit from San knowledge without necessarily addressing local community interests or challenges'.

I've meandered, here, a little from the question, but the basic gist is that I have some wariness around this idea that we can 'design global' and 'manufacture local'. I think that scholarly communications solutions need to be designed for the communities that they serve, while also being open to engagement from unexpected quarters – an openness to global audiences, perhaps.

AL: This is probably not the space for a lengthy discussion of the work of the open infrastructures project COPIM (n.d.) but now that work on the packages has advanced, has the research thrown up any surprises for you in relation to earlier expectations, any new vistas?
MPE: I think that, for me, one of the most interesting challenges on my work packages has been trying to meet some very contradictory needs of library communities. This is usually an attempt to balance a need for simplicity (i.e. 'we don't want to have to choose from hundreds of options') against flexibility and metrics (i.e. 'we need to be able to show value for money and to make sure that we are purchasing the things that offer the best local relevance').

I should also say that one of the wonderful things about COPIM is that I get to work alongside some of the brightest global minds in the OA books world in order to build the things that we know are missing. It's an honour and a privilege to be working beside likeminded people who have dedicated much of their lives to transforming the scholarly communications systems and to think that we are actually building the missing pieces of the puzzle.

AL: One of UWP's recent titles (Birkinbine, 2020) discussed the FOSS (free and open-source software) movement and its interactions with the corporations. It highlighted the idea of boundary organisations interfacing between particular open communities and between them and corporate entities interested in working with them. In the context of scholarly communications, which of the existing proliferating organisations and bodies do you think has the most potential to intervene in this type of space or between academics, publishers and libraries? Is the software experience important here? Have we the institutions fit for purpose in respect of journals and books?
MPE: This is a tricky one. Lots of organisations are cropping up that *purport* to fulfil this role. There's an increasing number of intermediaries, for instance, who offer services to promote people's articles once they are published. I've had three people write to me in the past month asking about such a service and whether it's legitimate. So the issue of trust crops up here.

It's quite hard to talk about this in general terms, so I'll keep this answer short. I do, though, like the work of OASPA (the Open Access Scholarly Publishers Association). Certainly, it's a broad church, but they are doing good things to promote the open research movement.

AL: I've been struck by numerous interventions recently on the topic of publishing focusing on ethics, an ethos of care and values. What sorts of existing initiatives have inspired your work at the Open Library of Humanities, COPIM and elsewhere (if any) and where do you think attention should be focused next as a priority?
MPE: I think this links to my earlier comments on the commons and its histories. Lots of people say that they don't care whether a publisher is for profit vs. not for profit, or scholar-owned/led vs. corporately owned etc. Instead, they often turn to a focus on value for money. This, in my view, is a dire mistake that is rooted in the influential, yet to my mind malign, thinking of Milton Friedman, who once argued that the only social obligation of business is to make a profit for its shareholders (Friedman, 1970).

This type of thinking is what has caused massive climate change. Governments have been unable to pass legislation due to the lobbying of large multinational corporations, pursuing their sole interest in making profits, while harming the planet irreparably. Of course, when corporations do exhibit ethical traits, it remains often in this service of profits.

But here's the thing: as long as people pursue value for money as their criterion and say 'to me, it doesn't matter whether an organisation is for-profit or not', there will never be a true *fix* for the mess of scholarly communications. Unless governance of publishers is controlled by those with the same goals as the communities they supposedly serve – and not the service

of profit – we will never see effective change. Unless organisations are *designed* to solve the problems that their communities want – and not just to make money – we'll continue to go around in circles.

AL: Thinking of the Chris Anderson idea of the 'Long Tail' (Anderson, 2006) which was immediately seized upon in several creative industries including publishing … no tail is perhaps longer than the rear end of research articles or monograph manuscripts in the humanities. Do you still retain much of that turn of the century faith in technology to support the sustainable publishing of niche topic monographs and specialist journals in some form or other? Is too much published anyway … ?
MPE: The 'death of the monograph' is a persistent topic in academic publishing. Yet, while the number of copies sold per title consistently declines over time, there's still a huge volume of output every year (Crossick, 2015). I suppose I wonder whether the COVID crisis for library budgets – which will hit in the not-too-distant future – will be the domino that finally topples the stack.

I do believe that technology offers *some* form of cost-saving labour. But it's not huge in academic publishing as it currently stands. This is because, for better or worse, the cost structures of academic presses have not received revisionary attention. For instance, the acquisitions models of US university presses, in which a commissioning editor seeks out work for a highly curated list, is *extremely* expensive, compared to a new cost structure of open submissions (Maron et al., 2016). So until the cost structures of academic presses are examined in detail – and changed – the technology is not going to save us.

I think, also, that it may be true that too much is published – but how can we tell, in advance, what ought not to be? I say that, but I would be furious if it were *my* work that was turned down on the basis of quantitative economics. And this is all without getting into the tricky challenges of discoverability and information overload that come with this proliferation …

AL: Within the wider political and higher education climate, how concerned are you for the fate of the humanities in terms of the priorities of universities worldwide? Tactically do you think there is ground to concede for the humanities in general or alternatively would now be the time to go on the offensive before further erosion comes along? How can the humanities be protected and advanced? (Big question, I know).
MPE: Obviously, as a professor of literature, I believe in the humanities disciplines, although I am less keen than others to ascribe to them redemptive potential. The myth of the humanities subjects as the sole fosterers of critical thinking – as though the sciences don't! – is clearly an overly defensive stance that doesn't bear out. It's also clear to me that successive right-wing politicians have often gone through humanities education (PPE at Oxford for instance) but then act in ways that humanities professors decry, defunding our disciplines. Hence, I am sceptical.

That said, the study of our cultures, artforms, histories, and social practices is vitally important if we are to understand – and enjoy – our world. The humanities disciplines can teach us to appreciate art, to conceptualise our current moment in historical terms, and to shape arguments in coherent ways. It is thanks to the efforts of scientists and modern medicine that I am able to live, as I have a series of extremely debilitating medical conditions. (I should also note that most of my scientist friends are extremely cultured, erudite individuals, highly versed in cultural histories and with appreciation for art.) It is, though, thanks to my training

in the humanities disciplines and my engagement with fiction, for instance, that I have a good *reason* to live and to enjoy those interactions.

The humanities disciplines are certainly perpetually under threat. Australia is the latest country to enact punitive measures against those who wish to study artworks, rather than becoming computer scientists etc. As though one day people sit down and think: 'I will choose to study English rather than pure mathematics'. It is hateful and hurtful that, in the one life we are given, politicians should choose to make it hard for people to study the subjects that they enjoy in the ill-founded supposed service of an economic proposition. We then end up resorting to defences of the humanities around employability, skills etc. And we need to. But it's so tiresome that we have to end up back at this spot.

I suppose I am worried, then, about what politicians want for the humanities. But I'm not worried when I see the large numbers of people who wish to study our subjects, *despite the perpetual disincentives put up by politicians*. On the ground, these subjects are what people want to study. And why, I would like to know, should anyone be able to take that away from them?

AL: In many channels you have been eloquent about the distorting effects of prestige on effective academic publishing and equality of access. In many respects this tends to favour incumbents of all sorts in publishing and institutions more widely and it can hardly be said the wider context of multiple university league tables etc. creates the perfect backdrop either. What tactics do you think might be effective in weaning the academy off the 'drug of prestige' when it comes to publishing and be directed more towards common equitable and educational purposes?
MPE: The problem is that prestige is an economy. It is scarce, hard to get hold of, and, therefore, valuable. (When my university, Birkbeck, was established with the goal of widening participation – and dismantling the prestige economy of the university system – our founder was told that he was 'sowing the seeds of the devil'.) But prestige is also prone to the Matthew Effect, where the rich merely get richer. The pursuit of scarce excellence and its proxy of prestige leads to dire perverse incentives (Moore et al., 2017).

I do not have a good answer as to how we get off the prestige drug. Certainly, initiatives like DORA (Declaration on Research Assessment) that encourage article-level, rather than journal-level, evaluation are helpful. But uptake is low and signing the declaration is different to actually implementing it on the ground.

The other ridiculous thing is that organisations that are supposed to be the press representation of the university sector – the Times Higher Education and Guardian league tables, for instance, in the UK – consistently trot out rankings that are, to be blunt, in my view: bullshit. In my opinion, they manufacture esteem indicators and then use these to perpetuate prestige. I mean, imagine thinking that it's a good idea to evaluate a university based on its entry requirements! That just shows that if you take in good students, you turn out students who get good grades. But what about those who take in students who had a weaker academic history – offering them a second chance – and then end up awarding them degrees of a high-standard that are validated by other institutions (as are all degrees in the UK)? Surely the *latter* is actually a better university? Not in most league tables' views. Another good one is 'spend per student' – as though poorer universities will ever be able to compete against universities that rank as the largest landowners in our country.

AL: On the one hand open access justifies itself via larger audiences but further research is being undertaken on research and reading habits that is of interest to libraries and research managers and policymakers. And there are concerns both of overkill in this area and the misuse of rankings and metrics in oversimplified ways. In terms of the data monitoring of scholarly outputs where do you think a line might be best drawn?

MPE: The main problem we face at the moment at the Open Library of Humanities is that the sheer volume of requests for data and evidence are overwhelming and take up a lot of our time. It's got to the point where I only semi-jokingly suggest that we need a full-time 'transparency officer' to handle the demands for metrics. On the other hand, it is useful to know, say, that OA books are more widely used and cited (Emery, Mithu, Morka and Pyne, 2017).

AL: Recently COPIM colleague Samuel Moore noted in an article how 'publishers are attempting an ontological shift to position the individual, quantifiable researcher, rather than the published content, at the centre of the scholarly communication universe' (Moore, 2020) with the endgame being 'data extraction' monopolies. As something of an industry insider, this seems to me, exactly on the money. Would you agree with Moore's assessment and how do you think this will affect our publishing ecology long term?
MPE: Sam is, as ever, sharp here. Elsevier, the world's largest academic publisher, now brands itself as 'An Information Analytics Company'. (And it's hilarious the degree to which its representatives have been told to parrot this line in all official communications and representation of the company.) The stakes seem to me, here, to be an increase in competition between researchers, with personal brand and associated metricised data to be the core basis on which we are appraised and ranked.

AL: As a scholar of literature I'm interested to know whether you think the world of trade fiction publishing – through the use of technology or via some forms of political developments – is ever likely to tilt towards a commons ethos (as opposed to an old fashioned state aid approach) as a way of countering control by big imprints and retailers and supporting a wider talent pool of authors? Could you see that happening at all?
MPE: Contemporary authors such as China Miéville have long been proponents of new, non-sales models for supporting authorship in the service of free or open dissemination. However, it's a very different economic kettle of fish than to scholarly communications. As in all fields of artistic endeavour, how we support work that does not have such a broad popular appeal – but that may nonetheless have cultural value – is a core concern. I am less worried about these works being open (although I would love it for everyone in the world to be able to afford all the fiction they might desire) than I am about scholarly knowledge dissemination being openly accessible.

AL: Spotify for books (despite predictions of such) has not really happened despite the rise and rise of subscription models elsewhere. Why do you think that is? Is literature different to other media in respect of the structures of 'platform capitalism'?
MPE: Spotify is a terrible enough model for music! It pays artists incredibly poorly and leads to a culture where its CEO says it is 'not enough' for artists to release albums 'every 3-4 years'. Why we would want a model like this – that remunerates everyone except the platform badly, that drives an increased demand for productivity, and that is not open access – in publishing is beyond me.

AL: What publications are on Martin Eve's current top scholarly books and articles playlist? (Five publications maximum please!)
MPE: A tricky one! Recent things I have (re)read and enjoyed:

- Star, Susan Leigh (1999). The Ethnography of Infrastructure. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 43(3): 377–91. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177/00027649921955326

- Fitzpatrick, Kathleen. (2019). *Generous Thinking: The University and the Public Good.* Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press. See https://generousthinking.hcommons.org
- Tenen, Dennis. (2017). *Plain Text: The Poetics of Computation.* Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

AL: Thank you!

Competing Interests

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