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MERJ

Editorial

The Affordances of Open Access in the Age of Online Scholarship

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Welcome to the very first fully Open Access issue of the *Media Education Research Journal*. Articles are now available for anyone to read, free of charge, and in perpetuity with a Digital Object Identifier (DOI). There are no Article Processing Charges (APCs) either, so authors (or their institutions) do not need to pay to publish.

This pivot to Open Access (OA) came at a time when there were lots of other 'pivots' occurring – not least the one to online learning during the pandemic. The pandemic was not a direct contributory factor to *MERJ's* change in status, but (without ignoring the crisis and misery it precipitated) it did create a sense of possibility – it forced us to explore the affordances of the online world and, subsequently, has encouraged us to address the function and purpose of particular activities, acknowledging that some are not worse, and may even be better, online.

MERJ has been, until this point, a print-only publication, which has meant that the scholarship within it has only been accessible to those with a subscription and access to a physical copy. The accompanying website (merj.info) functioned as a 'shop window' for the print publication, but now its potential as a publishing platform is being fully utilised. The shift online was made possible by a change in the ownership of its publisher, and credit should be given to Auteur Publishing (now an imprint of Liverpool University Press) for nurturing the journal since its inception in 2010.

The arguments for OA are compelling and made most forcefully by scholars in the field, such as Peter Suber and Martin Eve. I'd like to run through some of the main arguments, relating them to *MERJ*, before providing a brief appraisal of this issue.

Open Access sounds like a simple concept, but in reality there are several versions, each involving slightly different configurations of rights and money. Suber (2016, pp.26-28) differentiates between "gratis OA" and "libre OA", for example – the former permitting free access, but no use beyond fair use, and the latter allowing one or more uses beyond fair use. Even libre OA, then, may come in different varieties. Suber's answer to this is to use licences, such as the suite of Creative Commons licences which provide a range of levels of rights to copy, reuse and distribute. When authors publish in a journal and agree to the terms of one of these licences they do not lose their own rights, but they grant others specific rights to use and distribute their work. *MERJ* now publishes work under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution licence which allows sharing and adaptation of the material as long as credit is given to the author – "the most accommodating of licences offered" (Creative Commons, 2017).

This kind of licence might be inappropriate for commercial work (novels and plays, for example) when the authors depend upon their output to generate royalty income, but scholarly publishing is different. Suber explains, eloquently, exactly how academic authorship is different:

> Scholars had always written cutting-edge, peer-reviewed journal articles for impact, not for money. Journals did not pay them for their articles, and yet scholars were eager to write new ones and give them to publishers, relinquishing both rights and revenue. They were keenly aware of the intangible benefits of publication, such as advancing knowledge and advancing their careers, and recognized that those incentives were more fitting for research articles, and far stronger, than royalties could ever be. (2016, p.xiv)

So, the rewards for academic writing are less tangible (that is, not directly linked to financial gain) and therefore the motives are a mixture of a desire to create and disseminate new knowledge, and the desire for credit and career progression that may result from this.

We all recognise that there are some anomalies in the academic journal industry; one crudely drawn version is of academics providing free content, reviewers and editors providing free labour, and journals selling the content back to them via university library subscriptions. In the online age it could also be argued that production and distribution are also 'free' given the software that enables us to create and disseminate scholarly work on domestic computers.

There are, of course, hidden costs behind this simple sketch, and hidden ways of being remunerated. I work in a university where editorship of a journal is included in my hours for academic citizenship. The university also provides a server on which the journal is hosted and provides access to publishing software. My time is not without cost. Neither is the time of those who contribute scholarly work, who may benefit from research time built into an annual workload. Suber again:

> Despite the fact that those exercising editorial judgment usually donate their labor, performing peer review still has costs – distributing files to referees, monitoring who has what, tracking progress, nagging dawdlers, collecting comments and sharing them with the right people, facilitating communication, distinguishing versions, collecting data, and so on. Increasingly these non-editorial tasks are being automated by software, including free and open-source software. (2016, p. 31)

Online publishing is much cheaper than print publishing, and it makes Open Access possible; as Suber says, "OA was physically and economically impossible in the age of print, even if the copyright holder wanted it" (2016, p.41).

MERJ now makes full use of all of the available opportunities to eliminate all costs of access and all costs of publishing. We hope that this will make the valuable scholarship in *MERJ* available to everyone who might benefit from it. We also trust that no-one will be deterred from publishing in *MERJ* for financial reasons. Some OA journals fund their production processes through Article Processing Charges (APCs) whereby the author (or author's institution if they have one) pays a fee to publish. APCs tend to be in the region of $2,000 - $3,000. Josh Schimel (2019) argues that such fees are legitimate for large journals run like businesses, but they are undoubtedly an impediment, especially for Early Career Researchers, independent academics and those in institutions where such sums cannot be casually spent on publishing a single article. As Gareth Johnson points out, this can inhibit not just publishing, but also the perception of Open Access in general: "Where [funds] are lacking, some scholars might be denied the chance to publish in their organ of choice, thus in turn souring perceptions of OA practices" (2018, p.6). *MERJ* does not require APCs in order to cover the costs of production – a decision based primarily on a principle that it should not be necessary to pay to publish scholarly work, but also made possible by the scale of publication. We do not receive 2,000 submissions a year as in Schimel's example, although if we did, perhaps some economies of scale might obtain?

Some may perceive cost to be a proxy for quality – how can something 'free' be 'good'? I'd suggest that the quality of an academic journal depends upon the quality of its peer review process and the quality of its peer reviewers. Suber reassures us that

> Peer review does not depend on the price or medium of a journal. Nor does the value, rigor, or integrity of peer review. One reason we know that peer review at OA journals can be as rigorous and honest as peer review in conventional journals is that it can use the same procedures, the same standards, and even the same people (editors and referees) as conventional journals. (2016, pp.30-31)

We are fortunate to have such a committed and experienced editorial board for *MERJ*, many of whom have been with the journal for a long time. We are also fortunate to have many other reviewers – academics in the field of media education research – who are also willing to dedicate their time and expertise to reviewing submissions. *MERJ* has, therefore, acquired credibility in its field which, although disengaged now from economic capital, constitutes a degree of 'symbolic capital'. Martin Eve presents a fascinating discussion of such cultural and symbolic capital in academic publishing, which investigates "sites of symbolic economic interchange for both cultural and material capital" (2014, p. 43-85).

We acknowledge, however, that peer review is not a perfect system and, itself, may sometimes be a proxy for quality. One of the advantages of having independence is that we are free to consider alternatives to the traditional process of double blind peer review, whilst maintaining rigour. Again, it will be useful to focus on the purpose and function of the review process. David Gauntlett in an early issue of this journal speculated:

> I never understand why the publishing of academic papers could not entirely be put over to a 'publish, then filter' model, where everything is published online and is then subsequently rated for quality. Journal publishers argue that they are essential and irreplaceable gatekeepers of quality. But that's not true. Academic authors would not want to humiliate themselves, so would only publish items online when they thought that they were satisfactory. After that moment, formalised online rating systems as well as the everyday more informal transactions that have become familiar – people sharing links to articles that they like, with their peers – would take over to sort the good stuff from the bad, as well as making it all freely accessible. (Readman et al., 2011, p.119)

The academic world is characterised by a set of assumptions about the nature of value, quality and reliability, many of which we have inherited and perpetuate without interrogating, sometimes because there seems to be too much at stake. But we exist at a time when profound questions are being asked about the nature of knowledge and knowledge production – performative social science, practice-based research and autoethnography, for example, all require a reorientation, a different way of thinking about what it is possible to know and how we might discover and express this new knowledge. At such a time it is also exciting to consider the alternatives to traditional models of dissemination and quality.

Issue 10.1&2

This issue is a 'combined' rather than 'double' issue. Our Spring publication date was a casualty of the transition period and, inevitably, there were some Covid-related ripples too. The combination of issues 1 and 2 is primarily an expedient to preserve the integrity of volume numbers – so volume 11 is published in 2022. But even as I write this, and reflect upon my enthusiasm for 'exciting alternatives' above, I acknowledge that issues and volumes are a legacy of print publication conventions, which are perhaps irrelevant now. We have already dispensed with mirrored pages and continuous page numbering, perhaps volumes and issues are next? For now, however, given their usefulness for retrieval, and given the existing archive, we'll retain them.

There is a real international quality to this issue, with articles from Sweden, Bangladesh, Finland, Canada and England. They include pieces on the relationship between higher education and industry, such as those by Jude Genilo, and Funke Oyebanjo, Lucy Brown and Rosamund Davies. The former examines how young Bangladeshi students imagine careers in journalism and how this has an impact on their motivations to study it; the latter evaluates an educational intervention involving industry professionals in order to elicit awareness of unconscious bias. There is also a very timely piece by Helen Lui about the impact of TikTok on young participants' willingness to be complicit in the reception and production of racist memes. We have two pieces which focus on literacy: Linus Andersson develops the notion of the 'gnostic impulse' in media and information literacy, and Sergei Glotov and Sirkku Kotilainen examine 'intercultural film literacy', arguing for the benefits of film studies in generating intercultural understanding. Our excellent book reviews in this issue come from Robert Munro and Stuart Poyntz respectively – they make it clear why recent publications by Deirdre O'Neill and Matteo Stocchetti deserve our attention (the latter, incidentally, is an Open Access publication). And, finally, I must confess to having a particular fondness for Carol Arcus and Chelsea Attwell's piece in which they describe and analyse 'learning walks' with young children. By translating Marshall McLuhan's notion of 'figure and ground' into a set of tangible environmental experiences and questions, they show how children can begin to become aware of the 'water' they swim in, to use David Foster Wallace's image (2009) or, to use their own metaphor, to see the wood *and* the trees.

Thank you to all our contributors and reviewers, and welcome to our new readers.

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