Combining academic tradition with 21st-century technology

The Republic of Letters 2.0

Back in the 17th century, thousands of academics, writers, and intellectuals established a knowledge-exchange network that became known as the Republic of Letters. The intensive activity of sending one another tens of thousands of letters, along with published papers and pamphlets (the printing press having relatively recently been invented) produced in their collective consciousness a trans-national learned community, or metaphorical Republic. Visualizing this network of communication nowadays, it is hard to avoid the impression that the Republic was a prototype of today's Internet.

I mention this as a proof that academic research is deeply rooted in a longstanding need for the free exchange of knowledge using the latest means of communication, but also because the Internet now provides us with an opportunity to take the ideals of the Republic to new levels. Looking at Polish academia, it is easy to forget this. Generally speaking, the latest forms of communication are not used to any great extent, nor with any great enthusiasm, by Polish academics. This is principally because, for many researchers, the exchange of knowledge is no longer seen as something valuable in itself – instead, the main object of their work is for it to be assessed positively. The problem also lies, however, in the whole system of research.

Online versions of academic journals are, of course, becoming available, and digital libraries are also being established. This, though, is all happening very slowly, and the general impression is that publishers are behaving like springtime sunbathers on a beach, timidly dipping their toes into water that is still too cold for them. Printed publications remain the standard yardstick of quality and academic reputation. The situation varies from discipline to discipline, but even the most important papers, unless they are published in foreign journals, are often unavailable online – except on "unofficial" file-sharing sites such as Chomikuj.pl.

This situation is, of course, at odds with the contemporary worldwide Open Access movement: the main tenet (which is not revolutionary from the viewpoint of academic tradition) is that research results should be freely available, without any legal, technical, or financial obstacles. Moreover, Open Access models developed over the last decade demonstrate that they can co-exist with other forms of academic publication. Intuitively, though, it is clear that the large, commercial organizations which were so necessary for academic research in the 20th century are becoming increasingly irrelevant in the Internet age. Worse still, by treating these new models as competition, they are blocking their development.

In Poland, awareness of these new models has greatly increased in recent years. The hitherto virtually unknown concept of Open Access currently features in many discussions on reforming academic research, and Minister of Science and Higher Education Barbara Kudrycka has recently made the landmark declaration that her ministry intends to promote the principle. For now, though, this is just a declaration, and while there are an increasing number of Open Access journals, such open repositories are still very few in number and limited in size.

For many reasons, the situation urgently needs to be addressed. Poland as a country is a "net importer" of knowledge, so it lies in her interest to ensure as easy and as cheap access to it as possible. This would also have measurable benefits in terms of assessing research quality, detecting plagiarism, and ensuring effective public spending.

The European Union in its Horizon 2020 initiative has expressed even stronger support for Open Access than the Polish government, so it is almost certain that new standards will ultimately be introduced in Poland, but this will happen slowly. It might be said, of course, that academics should take matters into their own hands, and indeed it is clear that there is a growing momentum for change: a petition calling for greater openness in research has collected over thirteen thousand signatures this year; openness is one of the demands of the "Citizens of Science" movement; and an informal coalition has recently been established between the University of Warsaw and the Jagiellonian University in Kraków. Such change, however, will be difficult and slow without institutional support. In this context, the recent announcements from the Ministry of Science and Higher Education are encouraging, but it is essential for the idea of Open Access to be backed by the most important academic institutions. It is unfortunate, therefore, that such a respected organization as the Foundation for Polish Science has taken up an ambivalent position on this issue. Clearly, the Polish Academy of Sciences has a vital role to play here.

In all of this, new technology is less important than new institutional regulations. To my knowledge, an official Open Access policy has only been adopted by two institutions in Poland – the PAS Institute of Biochemistry and the UW Institute of Polish Culture – which is far too few.

Another reason to officially implement an Open Access policy as soon as possible is that it has, in reality, already been informally adopted by the new generation of researchers and students. Their modern-day "Republic of Letters," however, is based on Internet piracy – heaps of research results are available in a kind of "grey zone", or even on the black market. I have heard many young academics openly admitting that their doctoral theses would not have been written without an abundant supply of pirated PDF files.

These young scholars intuitively understand the new models of communication, and know how to use them in the service of academic research. All that is needed is to free them of the ballast of 20th-century institutions, habits and patterns of publication. It should not be necessary, after all, to draw comparisons with either the 17th-century Republic of Letters, or the clandestine "underground literature" tradition in Communist-era Eastern Europe.

What is needed is a new model of academic exchange, using modern forms of electronic communication, which will ensure open access to knowledge

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