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The battle for open-access information

A Melbourne-based PhD candidate's online open-access publishing forum is a boon for those wishing to access texts and transcripts free. But at what cost to the authors of some of these works?



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American artist and teacher Sean Dockray.

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Ten years ago, American artist and teacher Sean Dockray established a modest online archive of academic papers. It was called AAARG. But not for long. Its domain name changed along with its contents. An “A” was added, or an “R”. It was one way around the lawyers. Originally intended for those interested in critical or political theory, members began uploading texts important to them, or demanded by others, but almost always written by someone else. Dockray – and his site’s users – believed it was a way around the illiberal copyrighting of scholarly papers, and the dramatic costs imposed upon accessing official archives.



It was a “conversation platform”, Dockray said in an interview last year, “at different times it performs as a school, or a reading group, or a journal. AAARG was created with the intention of developing critical discourse outside of an institutional framework ... The project is a website where people share texts: usually PDFs, anything from a couple of inspiring pages to a book or a collection of essays. The people who use the site tend to be writers, artists, organisers, activists, curators, architects,

librarians, publishers, designers, philosophers, teachers, or students themselves. There is no moderation.”

“It’s odd that many on the left support working wages for the poor, but not the right of authors to

And it grew. Ten years later, the site boasts some 50,000 texts and almost as many members. It has been subject to cease-and-desist letters from publishers’ lawyers – not all of which have been adhered to – as it has been heralded by men and women in the Middle East and Africa who seem reliant upon the site for information. The site is essentially a radical commons: Dockray does not profit from it, and he’s not kidding about there being no moderation. From an hour of browsing I could find a good section of the contents of my personal bookshelves. All available free. “It certainly never produced anything new or original,” Dockray explained last year, “Rather, it actively explored and exploited the affordances of asynchronous, networked communication.”

earn a living from their work.”

Possibly you're a grateful member, or maybe your work features in its archive. But the odds are you've never heard of the website. Depending on who you speak to, the site is an "online platform that supports autodidactic activities" or it's a brazen act of piracy. Which perhaps is to present too dramatic a binary – there are those more nuanced in their defence and

opposition. Regardless, the site remains divisive – a dynamic and provocative expression of the open-access movement.

Sean Dockray is now a PhD candidate at the University of Melbourne. His proximity provides a peg to a journalist except for the fact that most functions of the web are indifferent to geography. "I do have editing privileges," Dockray tells me, "and contribute to writing the software that runs the website, but it is hosted by others, the server is administered by others, there are many site editors (who correct metadata, remove spam etc), and thousands of contributors, users invite other users. You know how torrents are supposed to be more resilient because they are distributed, not centralised? At a certain point, the 'administration' of AAAARG needed to do the same thing – to be distributed, not centralised."

The University of Melbourne refused to answer my questions, telling me: "As the website is not linked to the university, we have no comment."

Infamous act

In 2010, 24-year-old Aaron Swartz broke into the network of Massachusetts Institute of Technology. It was perhaps the most infamous – and tragic – act of the open-access movement. Swartz was – is – an icon of the web, a prodigious programmer and an architect of web-feed format RSS. He had also grown increasingly political. In 2010 he began secretly downloading the contents of scholarly journal JSTOR – a famous repository of millions of academic papers, all of which sit behind a considerable paywall. Swartz's intention was to publish them publicly. But authorities were watching. At the start of 2011 he was arrested, and indicted on multiple counts of fraud. In 2013 he committed suicide before coming to trial.

"Many of us support the principle of open access," says Professor Sean Cubitt, who once taught communications at Melbourne University and whose books have featured on Dockray's site. "Knowledge belongs to everyone, is the thought. Depriving people of important knowledge (for example, in health, engineering, development or political life) would be, in extreme cases, inhuman. The cost of access to the store of knowledge in the world's academic journals is extremely expensive (they use principles of blind/block purchasing made illegal in the US film industry in the 1940s, from at least some perspectives). They are closely guarded commercially – as in the terrible case of Aaron Swartz. The most draconian claim copyright in anything they

publish and charge very high fees for access.”

Cubitt tells me that for academics like him, sites such as AAAAARG are actually beneficial. “No permission was sought [to publish my books], but I wasn’t unhappy, especially with an old book that had more or less disappeared but was rediscovered by another generation. In some respects (but only some) academic authors’ trade is in reputation: we get little income from publishing. Citation indexes – numerical accounts of how many times you are quoted – is becoming an important part of research audits and is significant in applications for jobs and promotions, so we gain indirectly from the additional circulation.”

A former colleague of Cubitt’s, Associate Professor Mark Davis, is the author of the acclaimed *Gangland: Cultural Elites and the New Generationalism*. He is also a founding board member of Open Humanities Press, a scholarly “open-access publishing collective”. Davis tells me: “This is a complex issue and there is scandal in the way that some media companies/sectors operate, not least academic publishers who overcharge wildly for journals etc. For that reason I do support open-access publishing of work where authors choose to do so, in particular academic research which has already been ‘paid for’ through the salaries of those producing it, and should be available for the benefit of all. But it is up to the author, not the consumer, to provide the materials.”

Scholarly archives

You don’t have to look far for information accessible only to the wealthy. Court documents are cynically priced to be affordable only to institutions, namely the legal firms and media organisations that daily require them. One can sit freely in court and watch proceedings, but to acquire the official record can cost thousands of dollars. A few years ago, my research required a transcript of a murder trial. It cost almost \$3500, for which I had to seek a loan. Its price was a magnitude greater than the administrative labour involved in its release, and requests for a justification of the cost were ignored. I have heard more than once of a practice of defence lawyers – who receive these documents at no cost – “leaving transcripts on photocopiers”, a euphemism for making them secretly available to the prosecution.

But if there’s a ground zero for the open-access movement, it is scholarly archives. In 2008, a few years before his JSTOR operation, Swartz posted what he called his “Guerilla Open Access Manifesto”. It was a call to arms. It read, in part: “Information is power. But like all power, there are those who want to keep it for themselves. The world’s entire scientific and cultural heritage, published over centuries in books and journals, is increasingly being digitised and locked up by a handful of private corporations ... Forcing academics to pay money to read the work of their colleagues? Scanning entire libraries but only allowing the folks at Google to read them?”

Providing scientific articles to those at elite universities in the First World, but not to children in the Global South? It's outrageous and unacceptable."

Dockray agrees. "If you're looking for where my commitments lie," he tells me, "they are closest to Aaron [Swartz]. I know students who have underfunded or inefficient libraries, people who live in cities where libraries are being shut down, where certain types of books aren't available, and I've visited students, artists and independent scholars in cities like São Paulo, Medellín, Cairo, Zagreb and Mumbai, who depend on the internet for access to the tools of their trades. People in different places, different political climates and different financial situations all have different reasons for sharing texts with one another."

But it's a curious refraction of Marx that aggressively challenges the ownership of information, but has little to say about its production. The guerilla solutions to cartels have been theft – or liberation, depending on who you speak to. But these models – if that's the right word for something so determinedly amorphous – fixate merely upon the consumption of culture. In this brave new world where everything is free, who will write the books?

The broader problem, then, is that AAAAARG proposes an anarchist solution in a capitalist world, to which the tech savant may reply that today's web is rewardingly protean, endlessly reimagining itself and finding ways around "the system". "When people say or write the name [AAAAARG] they have done it in all kinds of different ways," Dockray said last year, "adding (or subtracting) As, Rs, Gs, and sometimes Hs. It's had different names over time, usually adding on As as the site has had to keep moving." Part of the "moving" Dockray speaks of is the periodic alteration of the site's domain name once it has become subject to a takedown notice.

But there are varying conditions of cultural production. A tenured academic may write papers within the comfort of sinecure. It matters less to him than other authors if his work is read. He is both freed and cloistered by the absence of commercial imperatives, his work encouraged by a world where a university's prestige is not measured by the quality of its teaching but by the quantity of research it publishes. An academic freed from commercial considerations may seem intuitively beneficial, but it also encourages indulgent esoterica.

And yet academia is just one circumstance of production – books are written in others. In wealth and penury; for love or money; for large publishers and small. Most young authors will receive small advances – they'll barely cover expenses for research-intensive works, let alone their labour – and so it is hoped that royalties might generate a modest float for the next project. The authors aren't being fleeced; it's a reflection of an atrophied industry. So it is dismaying to some young authors – I include myself in this – that the more giddy revolutionaries might propose wholesale theft as an alternative.

"I am extremely critical of the anti-copyright movement," Davis tells me. "To state the obvious,

most anti-copyright activists have never had to rely on [lending rights] payments or royalties to pay rent. More than that, it has always struck me as odd that many on the left support working wages for the poor, but not the right of authors to earn a living from their work, which is one of the things copyright facilitates. And that they are evidently happy for authors – one of the lowest paid of all professions – to be collateral damage in a ‘battle’ with large corporations which they imagine ‘own’ lots of copyright, when corporations tend to license, not own, rights; license that is granted by said authors so they can earn a living. In short, I think the anti-copyright movement is naive and misguided, even if, on the whole, well meaning.”

As an anarchistic expression, AAAAARG does not distinguish the conditions in which its available texts are created. Dockray does not politically curate the site. In other words, it functions as a commons. You can find obscure academic papers, classic works and the debut novels of young authors. You could find the subsidised papers of cultural theorists, as you could download the work of the materially vulnerable. It’s all there. To an anarchist, we apparently have equal claim to it all.

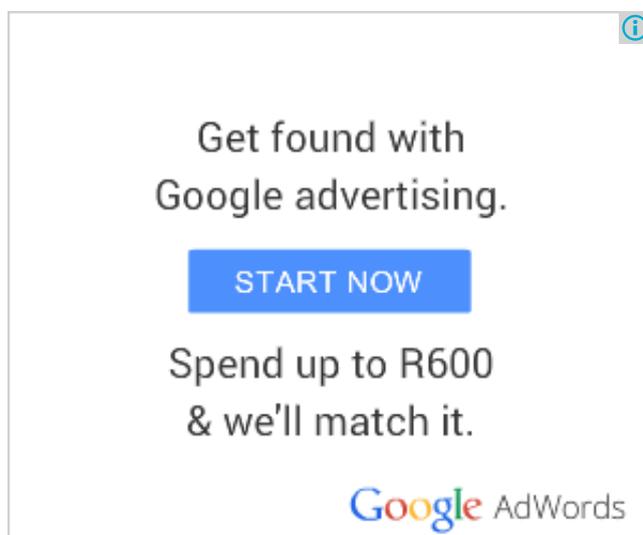
Idealism at work

There is something that Dockray shares with Swartz. Shares, in fact, with all the open-access movement, and it’s admirable. Idealism. Dockray told me: “There is now the technology to realise a dream that many have had of universal access to knowledge.”

Idealism gets a bad rap, dismissed as ignorance or callowness. And god knows it can be. But sometimes it’s a function of supreme talent or clarity. The problem with idealism is that it’s easily self-infatuated – and you can develop a dead ear for its consequences. As open access has been inattentive to questions of production, WikiLeaks had disregarded the costs of unredacted information – exposed informants. The open-access movement is certainly distinct from projects of radical transparency, but they are like cousins in their anarchistic visions of the web. And each, in their fervour, has amassed collateral damage.

This isn’t to be read as a wholesale dismissal of WikiLeaks or Edward Snowden’s leaking – Snowden usefully revealed dramatic and clandestine overreach. It is to suggest that little is perfect, and we develop virulent intolerance once we’ve joined an ideological tribe. “The anti-copyright left needs to think a lot more about the issues in my view,” Davis tells me. “Attacking authors will not destabilise large corporations who do indeed extract a premium where they can (though this is much less true than it used to be. In the digital world margins are wafer thin). In embracing a neoliberal emphasis on the logics of consumption (and consumer-led price-setting – viz: ‘free’) and allying this with sociopolitical ‘freedom’, and by neglecting the politics of production, the anti-copyright left are in my view buying into the very corporate capitalism they seek to contest. This is where the left shades over into empty libertarianism.”

Jacobin disgust with the status quo, and a Panglossian optimism for the web's potential, isn't sufficient to reconcile the flaws of the movement. ●



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