Same Old Story: how we’re replicating systems of power in open publishing

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If all we do is recreate the existing publishing system with an open license on the output, we’ve missed a huge opportunity.
This is a conversation.
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(It was also supposed to be a panel.)
What’s the problem?

- Open publishing systems are replicating the problems of legacy publishing. The power of publishing is largely still controlled by and accessible to a small set of hands.
- Who can publish and how is still restricted, even if the outputs are open.
- BUT Systems that have been invisible/naturalised are visible in unprecedented ways.
- If we don’t actively work to avoid it, we risk losing a unique opportunity to rebuild something immensely more inclusive, more dynamic and more impactful for more people.
Who am I to talk about it?

- Low risk to me of submitting & presenting on this topic
- Responsibility to use my privilege to raise these issues
- Open publishing is where I live and what I contribute most to the open movement, so it is on me to make change
- BUT, again, this is a conversation. I’m not an expert, I’m not a leader on this topic, I know there is so much I don’t know. I want to hear from you and continue to develop my understanding of the issues we’re facing
How is it happening?

- **Gatekeeping**
  - Who decides what is worth publishing?
  - What criteria are they using to make those decisions?
  - What else influences who is let in the door?

- **Peer review**
  - What kind of knowledge is validated?
  - Who is a ‘peer’?
  - How else could quality/worthiness be determined?

- **Text-centric idea of publishing**
  - How do we account for and value other kinds of creation?
  - What’s possible now with digital technologies that hasn’t been in the 500 year history of print publishing?
How is it happening?

- **Measures of Success**
  - Who decides what successful publishing looks like?
  - How is it measured? (Tenure requirements, impact factor, sales etc.)

- **Ownership**
  - Who owns the platforms/infrastructure?
  - Who owns the data?
  - Who owns the means of production?

- **Invisible Labour & Gender Dynamics**
  - Who can participate?
  - How are they rewarded?
  - Who are the thought leaders? Who is operationalising?

- **“Black Box” effect**
  - Who are we dependent on?
  - Where does the expertise live and who has access to it?
Why is it happening?

- Systems of power are very good at replicating themselves because the people who create, benefit from & perpetuate them have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo, and have the power to inhibit change.
- In other words, if we’re committed to a redistribution of power, that means some people will lose their power, and most of us don’t want that to happen.
- Open movement dominated by the kinds of people who have been able to do the non-sanctioned work & take the risks.
- It is an easier job to take what exists and make small changes in service of a more narrow definition of access.
- We’re not prepared for nuanced, difficult conversations.
Why is it important to do things differently?

- If you’re here, you know that the creation & dissemination of knowledge is incredibly important.
- Equitable access to knowledge means a better world, where more people can live safe, healthy, fulfilled lives.
- Publishing is the documented history & body of human knowledge - we are already missing so much because publishing has excluded so many, and we can’t make the same mistake again → Whose Knowledge?
How do we go about changing it?

- Rethink & reconsider what publishing is/does in relation to knowledge creation & distribution
- Need to think critically about all parts of the legacy system and decide consciously what to keep, what to adapt and what to reject
- Challenge the systems that influence publishing: tenure & promotion processes, copyright, capitalism etc.
- Find, support and participate in projects & communities working on alternative models
- Make sure everyone is building the table, not just being invited to it
- Look at your own work and where it intersects with publishing systems. Recognise where power is in play and be critical of it. What do you see? What can you do?
What are the challenges?

- Risk is not evenly distributed and this work is risky.
- Structures/practices are deeply ingrained and very hard to change. The status quo is stable, while the creation/building work we need to do is unstable.
- Systems of power often co-opt and subsume movements that challenge them (e.g. mainstreaming of subcultures).
- Many of the tools available to us, even the language we use, have emerged out of this system (the master’s tools), e.g. quantifying value - how do we measure success of open by legacy standards?
- Still need to navigate and survive in a capitalist, patriarchal, white supremacist society - how do we reconcile trying to live our ethics with also benefiting from the system we want to overthrow?
Who’s already doing the work?

(A very small handful of examples)
Because creation is always collaborative...

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