

What's In, Who's Out: Issues in Capturing the History of a Technological Moment in History

By Robin Peek

Without the Internet there would be no Open Access (OA) movement. The movement, like social networks, was born digital. But how do you capture the history of a movement that, like a document, was born digital? How successful are traditional methodologies in capturing OA's past? My goal in this short paper is to identify the issues that I have encountered in my own research in order to assist others who may be considering a similar inquiry.

The OA movement is at first glance seems straightforward but in truth it is surprisingly complex. What stands out the most is that the movement was branded "OA" well over a decade after it began to truly develop. The Initiative arose from a small meeting convened in Budapest by the Open Society Institute on December 1-2, 2001. This was followed shortly thereafter by two similar meetings—one in Berlin and the other in Bethesda that also took up the cause of OA but with slight variations on the wording of the initiatives generated from each. To someone exploring OA for the first time, they might easily conclude that the OA movement began around 2002. Even individuals, who consider themselves to be active in the movement, have been known to make this assumption about its origins.

What is perhaps one of the greater challenges of conducting social research about OA is due to the social network culture that existed long before the phrase social networking entered contemporary parlance. Historically social movements could be credited with geographical places (i.e. Seneca Falls for the women's suffragette movement), an organizational (i.e. the American Cancer Society) or even a single individual (i.e. Martin Luther King) and any of which provides a sense of historical roots and boundaries. While these may change as a researcher more fully examines his/or her subject, they provide an key framework. As any sociological dictionary will attest to this framework, for example, "Whatever, the definitional difficulties, all communities, both real and symbolic, operate between boundaries and territories." (Jary and Jary (1991), p. 67)

The OA movement has defied such a framework, beginning as a scattered, grass roots, with its history crossing academic disciplines, geographic borders, and the print to digital barrier. The latter point is complicated by the issue that documents from the strictly print domain may have significantly contributed to the OA movement but lack any mention of OA itself, making it even more difficult to locate them. And despite the reality that the OA movement has had significant ramifications for scholarly publishing worldwide, it lacks any sense of an organizational home. The fact of the matter is that OA was a child of the network and that is where it still lives.

On Studying a Movement in Motion

Historical research divides itself between history in the descriptive, narrative form-usually classified as being based in the humanities-and the social sciences, where there are hybrids-such as interpretation and criticism. The later form can, but not always share methodological practices with sociological research, particularly in qualitative method practices. Such an example can be found in the study, which resulted in a book, *Everyone Here Spoke Sign Language: Hereditary Deafness on Martha's Vineyard* which both traced the history of deafness on the island to The history of the deaf society on Martha's Vineyard has fascinated scholars and resulted in the publication of the book: *Everyone Here Spoke Sign Language: Hereditary Deafness on Martha's Vineyard* ([compare prices](#)). This book traces Vineyard deafness to an area of Britain's Kent County called the Weald. In addition, these other resources are available: But in addition, the researcher provided in-depth interpretation of. ...through the remaining members of a society that was dying out on the island.

Researchers are naturally inclined to pursue topics they are interested in, and one could easily go much further and argue that it helps to be passionate about the subject. I did not come to this research as an outsider looking in; I came to the research as someone who had been advocate of the movement. In the preface to the Network Nation, Hiltz and Turoff acknowledge that their role as advocate had influenced their research:

"To a significant extent they have, in the language of anthological fieldwork, "gone native" ...It is quite clear from the tone of the book that there is a blurring between scientific objectivity and advocacy for this new form of communication. The authors admit to a degree of vested interest in their principal area of research, and the reader will have to weigh the content with content of this acquired biases. The authors admit to conclusions and projects that are yet unsupported by adequate experimentation. (Hiltz & Turoff, 1993, p. xxvi)

When undertaking this type of research, the researcher needs to be forthcoming regarding his or her place in the social structure and the political climate. My own roots in the movement begin in the 1980's when I managed a learning resource center in the health sciences at a community college that had, included in its charter, the obligation to extend its services to the public. From here I saw first hand the challenges that the public had in pursuing this type of content and the arrogance of publishing industry. Suffice it for this paper, my ideological views of the subject have been long established and I am a "known" person in the OA community-a double-edged sword.

Being a known person definitely has its advantages. With over a decade of experience behind me I have access to individuals who otherwise may not be willing to be forthcoming to an outsider. Which, in turn, explains the major disadvantage, the "opposing" side will only speak to you through their public

relations personnel or through written transcripts that have been vetted (and sanitized) by lawyers. Documents or testimony that has been presented to governing entities, such as the U.S. Congress, are also tightly held making the presentation of a balanced view impossible.

Why This Moment for Open Access?

About four years I began a dialogue with advocates of the OA movement to discuss their interest and willingness in recording the OA history. The movement was gaining significant momentum at that time, but it was also becoming apparent to me that the history was starting to fade away. Over time it became clear to me that it would be appropriate to take on some of the role of an archivist because so much of the "discussion" was taking place on the Internet. In one instance, a key document was released to the Internet and then quickly withdrawn when a petition rose to challenge it.

But other history was lost for more mundane reasons-it was simply deleted. Early on, as I was beginning my research, I was told in an interview that I would probably not be able to verify some historical matters because the records were simply gone. Lacking an organizational home, the OA movement has lacked a central archival repository. The records are not only scattered, but their possible historical relevance is often lost to the keeper of the records.

I understand this better now, after fifteen interviews. Forward thinkers are not inclined to look backwards. Or, as one respondent noted, "People are too busy trying to make OA happen than to ponder how it got here." This has turned out to be validated in my interviews, as it was much easier to engage in a dialogue about where things were going, then on the road past traveled.

Another issue that I encountered is that these are very busy people and dedicating an extended time to an interview is difficult. But as I proceeded in the interviews I began to realize that instead of open-ended oral interviews, it was more productive to ask specific and focused questions by email. And at this point in my research I am finding this approach to be more effective in many cases. However, I should note, that this is not to suggest that this is a survey method. Any question(s) has to relate to the persons historical role and, while this has not happened to me yet, I suspect that the respondent would know if the interviewer had adequately prepared the question and would lose interest in participating if the question(s) were deemed not relevant.

For the most part though, OA has been unique enough of an individual experience that the past can still be recalled, sometimes with great clarity. As Zukboff (1998) observed that during the introduction of information technology a "window of opportunity" is created where people are "ripe with questions and insights regarding the distinct quality of their experience" (p. 13). Similarly Dunlop noted "people and organizations today [emphasis in original] are making social choices about how to organize with computerized systems--systems that

can alter social life as powerfully as automobiles had altered social life by the 1950's (Dunlop & Kling, 1987, p. xv.)

Recollections, however, are not always positive ones. I was told repeatedly that comments about individuals were off the record or simply could not be discussed "while the principals were still alive." In either off-the-record or in non-interview situations, it became apparent that while there were simmering issues that existed between individuals, making them more public would be a distraction. Despite some apparent divisions, these individuals seem particularly keen to keep the focus on making OA happen.

Returning to an earlier point about boundaries of communities, the connection is clearly task focused. Wall's asserts (1993) that there is a division between communities [the author's language] that are either "relationship focused" or "task focused." The bonds between these diverse individuals who have senior level positions in disciplines ranging from biology to philosophy are kept whole by coOmmunications on the Internet. But it would be deceptive to equate this group as a social networking group because there is an informal gating structure. One outstanding feature a member must have is proof of performance. By this I mean that a person's work must in some way demonstrate a contribution to OA, even if he or she might not be considered in the OA movement. Which brings up another problem of boundary setting-who is in and who is not.

If a person was to declare, "I am a supporter of Open Access, I want to join." There is no "group" to join. There is no professional society that asks for dues and creates a "membership." No elections are called for an organizational president and no committee issues assorted awards. A situation that has a certain irony is found in that while the OA movement focuses on "traditional publishers" as its nemesis, many academic and scholarly societies have strained relationships with OA. The dynamics of this relationship can't be discussed in the confines of this short paper, however their overall function cannot be overlooked for a researcher examining OA.

Grey Literature or Grey Communication?

Grey literature has traditionally had a place in most historical examinations, but in the past these items were usually stored in box until encountered by the researcher at a later date. This grey literature, which could contained items such as unpublished papers or correspondence and the like, could well survive for years, untouched in an attic or more official storage facility. But for a movement born and breed digitally safe havens are exceptionally few. The record of OA is translated into a mountain of grey matter and was far more likely to have occurred in email, online petitions, electronic mailing lists, and web sites (both personal and organizational) than in formal documents. Social networking sites, such as blogs have entered into the mix as well.

I have come to equate this digital situation as the equivalent of documents scattered around the world that have not yet even made it into the box to be stored in the attic. Frequently, these materials are illusive to locate, at the very least because OA was not a term that existed at the time the documents were created. Moreover, even today the use of the term OA is still not universally referenced, often for political purposes. The Alliance of Taxpayer Access, which has played an important and advocational role in raising the attention of the United States Congress on OA related matters, also minimizes the use of the term OA. And the likelihood is that this alliance of societies, such as the American Diabetes Association, and the web site which serves as the virtual glue that presents the face of the alliance to the world will itself fade away.

Not surprisingly, the individuals who have participated in the OA movement (even if they may or may not classify themselves as part of the movement per se) were not merely inclined, but practically driven to bring the discussion and the documentation online. However the problem that occurs, from a research perspective, if that the type of information that traditional hard copy records offers, I found that a respondent may have a more difficult time recalling events, dates, or participants. And two people recalling the same event may offer significantly different recollections, which, when lacking verification can lead to an incorrect or a confused timeline of events.

Reconstructing a Virtual History

I undertook this research because I have a unique background within the OA movement because I was educated as a social historian in my latter years of my own doctoral studies. So it was not surprising that when it was clear that the OA movement itself seemed worthy of documentation, I would be the one who would take up the inquiry. But I would remiss to also note that one concern I had, and still have as I move through the research, is that the first generation who led the movement were passing on. This is not unique; such a realization has led to many historical examinations.

The reason I choose to take up this short paper was to share my insights into what I have learned from the process thus far. I have not completed this research, in no small measure because I have felt the need to regroup and refocus my efforts. Whereas in traditional research (in a less digital age) a respondent in an interview may well go the filing cabinet and extract a key piece of correspondent or other such document that not only triggers their own memory but can serve to document a chain of events. File cabinets, it seems, may force its user to only keep the most important works and, when space runs out, compels them to review documents again.

In a digital environment this is far less the case, perhaps even worse, it is even easier to assume that someone else is taking care of the document. As I discovered, and keep rediscovering, when an important document is no longer where it "should be" on the web, a call out to the logical people who may have the

document is usually, but not always, fruitful. In one case, a "friend of a friend of a friend" still had the document but if the friend had not recalled some key words, she would not have easily retrieved from her own hard drive as the actual file name had little bearing to the file content.

Despite these challenges I have concluded that I need these documents, or at least as many as I can reasonably locate, to help refine the OA history. Upon personal reflection, I better understand the problem. I am not certain that it would be easy to interview me because I share many of the same qualities as those who are part of this study. As I have hit the ceiling of my own email quotas, I have wiped out correspondence. And without something to trigger my own memory I have a difficult time recalling events that happened over a decade ago.

Could these qualities be the result of the fact that, at this point in the research, I have been interacting with senior academics? Outside of examination of scholarly communication or teaching/instruction, there has not been much research about academics. Berquist (1992), for example, suggested that "the collegial culture nurtures the 'lone wolf,' the "eccentric" and the socially oblivious "absent-minded professor" (p. 43). Similarly, Finkelsten notes "if the findings of research on college and university faculty suggest anything, it is that faculty are as different from each other as they are from the population at large" (1984, p. 225).

But one thing stands out in my mind, and should be noted, that there was much less interest on the "I" and far more interest on the "OA." I would go so far to say that many individuals who would well be considered leaders in the "OA movement" are uncomfortable with that label, particularly as events are still unfolding.

In closing, historical examinations of network-driven social spaces are more nuanced and multi-faceted than they seem on the surface. A researcher must think more creatively and think more expansively, and explore approaches outside traditional methods, to more accurately reflect the events that occur in network-driven environments.

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