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Debunking unwarranted defenses of the *status quo* in the humanities and social sciences

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A hot topic of research in scientometrics is whether there is a citation advantage for open access articles. A number of pieces addressing this question have been recently published, several of which in this journal (e.g., Sotudeh et al. 2015; Wang et al. 2015). In this article I will comment on one recent contribution by philosopher Wray (2016), which reports no citation advantage for author-pays open access journals in the Humanities and Social Sciences (henceforth, HSS). What makes Wray's paper particularly interesting is that, besides analyzing the nature and size of the alleged effect, he also goes on to draw some further normative conclusions. Specifically, he puts forth an argument to the effect that, in light of his reported findings, scholars in the HSS should avoid paying fees to publish open access. In his own words, "social scientists and scholars in the humanities should save their money and resist the temptation to buy into the Author-Pay Open Access Publishing model". Further, according to Wray, researchers ought to favor traditional publishing models, which might have become quite unsatisfactory in the natural, physical and health sciences, but which are still serviceable in the HSS. More precisely, as Wray puts it, "the traditional publishing model seems to serve social scientists and scholars in the humanities well". Notably, the argument has general relevance, as it bears on recent discussions on whether open access publishing could or should experience in the HSS the same success experienced in the life, health and natural sciences (cf. Eve 2014).

First of all, I will briefly introduce Wray's argument, which seems to run like this. It is quite clear that researchers aim at maximizing their research's impact. Further, Wray reasons that scholars should then pay to publish open access only if so doing led to a clear advantage in terms of impact. Yet, there is evidence that in the HSS there is no advantage in terms of impact for research published in open access journals. Therefore, scholars in the

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HSS should not pay to publish their research open access and should rather choose more traditional subscription-based models.

I have no qualms here about the data discussed by Wray and I will, at least for the sake of the argument, grant that the citation advantage reported in the natural sciences cannot be found in HSS. Still, I think that there are some problems with Wray's recommendations to researchers in HSS, as he seems to misconstrue or to fail to acknowledge some key issues at the center of the debate over open access. Flagging the problems with such paper will hopefully help researchers in the HSS to make better-informed decisions when choosing where to submit their research outputs. In what follows, I will point to three problems with Wray's argument.

The objection from the broader view on impact

The first objection comes here in the form of a dilemma. To appreciate this, first consider that the term *impact* can actually be used to mean different things in different contexts. In science policy it had been typically assumed that society benefits most from a science that pursues research at a high level. The indicators that have been traditionally used in scientometrics, e.g. citation counts, have been taken to measure the impact of research on science itself. However, more recently, it has been discussed how impact might also be interpreted broadly, to include societal impact, namely how research benefits society. Whilst citations allow a determination as to whether research is being pursued at the highest level on average or not, they might not be informative of its impact at a societal level. One possibility for measuring societal impact is seen in moving beyond citations, considering both usage metrics and altmetrics, where the latter provide potentially relevant information on the impact of scientific outputs (e.g. the number of times a publication has been tweeted, shared on Facebook, or read in Mendeley) (for a discussion of the relationship between usage metrics and altmetrics see Glänzel and Gorraiz 2015).

Now, when Wray refers to impact, he can refer to it in a broad sense (impact on society as well) or in a narrow one (impact on science). If he means that researchers care or should care about impact in a narrow sense (i.e. impact of scientific outputs on science itself), his evidence about the numbers of citations might actually capture this conceptualization of impact, but at the same time this sense of impact might not exhaust all that researchers actually care or should care about. On the other hand, if Wray means to refer to impact as broadly construed, then the premise that researchers aim at maximizing impact might be more plausible, but Wray's evidence based on citations is not really adequate to address the question as to whether open access articles have greater impact. Further—and more complete—studies would then be needed to address such question (see Wang et al. 2015).

The objection from the costs of the *status quo*

The second problem is that Wray argues that researchers in HSS should pay to publish open access only if this led to a clear advantage in terms of impact. But Wray's recommendations fail to acknowledge the costs of the *status quo* and further potential advantages of open access publishing.

In fact, the case for open access typically rests on the consideration that several traditional publishers have used their position as monopoly providers to charge unreasonable prices. Further, it is generally stressed that such pricing policies do not sit well with the interests of scholars and their universities. And it is in light of these considerations that scholars like Eve (2014) have mounted a case in favor of open access publishing in the HSS. Whilst it might be that the expenses in the HSS represent a small portion of the crisis if compared to the health, life and natural sciences, it can be argued that the rise is manifested proportionately in HSS journals. It is also worth noting that this has arguably resulted in especially difficult conditions in countries that are not wealthy, where in order to do research one might then need to face critical conditions.

Discussing the costs of the *status quo* model in HSS in detail goes far beyond the scope of this piece. But I hope that what I have said here can at least help understand the recent rise of open access journals in the HSS and the reasons behind it. For instance, on the website of the philosophy open access journal *Philosophers' Imprint* we read that:

> There is a possible future in which academic libraries no longer spend millions of dollars purchasing, binding, housing, and repairing printed journals, because they have assumed the role of publishers, cooperatively disseminating the results of academic research for free, via the Internet. Each library could bear the cost of publishing some of the world's scholarly output, since it would be spared the cost of buying its own copy of any scholarship published in this way. The results of academic research would then be available without cost to all users of the Internet, including students and teachers in developing countries, as well as members of the general public.[1]

The objection from the "*tertium datur*"

Further, Wray argues that, since the author pays model does not offer advantages in terms of citations, scholars in the HSS should stick with the traditional reader pays publishing model. But this inference is unwarranted as these are not the only two combinations of publishing and business models on offer. Hence, showing the problems of one model is not sufficient to claim the success of one alternative. More evidence or further reasoning should have been offered to vindicate the conclusion.

It is actually somewhat surprising that we find no discussion of how open access publishing in the humanities is often free of charge. On the one hand, Wray does spend quite some time discussing how "there are alternative models to the so-called Gold Open Access model, that is, the Author-Pay model. There is what is referred to as ''Green Open Access".'' Still, what is not discussed in Wray's paper is that there is now a trend to have open access journals that do not require publishing fees in the HSS. This oversight is especially remarkable, as Wray discusses philosophy journals in his piece, writing that:

> Importantly, the fees associated with the Author-Pay Open Access model are often quite steep. The Springer journal Synthese, a leading journal in philosophy, for example charges US$3000 or €2200 to publish Open Access. And the Springer journal Social Indicators Research, a social science journal, has the same fees (see http://www.springer.com/gp/open-access/springer-open-choice).

[1] http://www.philosophersimprint.org/about.html.

But in the very field of philosophy there are respected journals that are open access and yet do not charge any publication fees.[2] As Wray points out, the HSS might be rather different from other fields, and these combinations of publishing and business models of open access are not popular in the natural, life or health sciences.

Once again, I am not committed to defending any particular model here. For instance, one might want to argue that open access journals with no article processing charges are actually unsustainable, as editorial service and article production entail non-trivial costs that need to be recovered. Such journals would for instance risk failing to safely store articles or to provide other services typically provided by other publishers. Still, I hope that mentioning these problems with Wray's paper will convince the reader that the implications of his study are certainly less clear than he hoped for.

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[2] For a list, see https://feministphilosophers.wordpress.com/2016/01/03/oa-journals-with-peer-review/.