OPEN MINDS TOWARDS OPEN ACCESS
An interview with Ian Watson, Bifröst University in Iceland
Solveig Thorsteinsdottir

Ian Watson is assistant professor of social science at Bifröst University in Iceland, editor of the Bifröst Journal of Social Science, and also manages the library at the Reykjavík Academy, an association of Icelandic researchers and scholars. We asked him to talk a little about his views on open access.

Why did you start advocating OA?

It happened by accident in 2008 -- our university rector had started an open, online journal which at first was organized very informally -- just some papers put up on a website. After a few months, the university realized they needed to find someone to devote a few hours a week to managing the journal. I had heard about something called Open Journal Systems which I thought could work as a software platform. It was free and I knew how to install it. Based on that, I was asked to take over the journal.

Once I had set up OJS and was actually running the journal, I was impressed with the low cost and overhead involved, as well as with the number of downloads for each article. We were getting nice-looking scholarship out at low cost and in a way that maximized the number of readers. As I started to read and learn more about OA, I realized that this approach was basically in everyone's interest and I started to find kindred minds elsewhere in the Icelandic academic and library community.

What has happened as a result of your work?

Most fundamentally, there are articles and knowledge out there, all publicly accessible, which are there because the university has let me promote an OA policy for the journal. Otherwise they'd be buried in library stacks somewhere and no one would read them. More broadly, the effort that all of us in the Icelandic OA community have put into advocacy has at least stimulated debate and at best changed minds. Most people here seem to agree on the merits of open access, and there are more and more open access periodicals in Iceland. At least one of these was inspired by the journal I edit.

At the same time, we're way behind the other Nordic and European countries in official support for open access. The university administrations and research funders have been very slow to actually take concrete steps to promote open access. For example, an employee of the main research funding body here in Iceland gave a very positive speech about open access at our last OA conference, but nothing about this funding body's actual policies or procedures has changed in favor of OA. I don't really know why, although neglect seems a more likely explanation than deliberate distaste for OA. I think the way forward was already clear in 2007 or 2008. Several years of scholarship that might have been available to the public under a more forward-thinking policy have been lost.

What do you think will happen in the future?

There are some positive signs, such as the increasing number of OA journals in Iceland, slow progress in official support from the Ministry of Education, and plans to create an OA policy from the University of Iceland. However, Iceland is a country where ISBNs on books were almost unknown well into the 1990s, over 20 years after they had become routine in the rest of Scandinavia. My experience is that this is a comparatively conservative, isolated society and that key decision-makers here do not always manage to keep up with changes elsewhere in the world. Also, I see that some scholars here don't really care that much if nobody reads their work, as long as it was funded, makes for a good line on their CV, and ideally appears in a journal with a long history and reputation so that they feel that they've made it into the "club." I can't completely blame them if these things matter more to them than the public interest. The transition to OA is an example of a multiplayer prisoner's dilemma and it involves collectively rewiring the incentive structure of academic publishing. I hope that we won't deny ourselves the fiscal and intellectual benefits that come through OA, but I am always prepared for the worst, too.

I think the biggest effect of OA in Iceland could actually be in monograph publishing. I am shocked at the number of people here who have written a manuscript about something relatively obscure and then, seemingly without considering any other options, have gone and had 300 offset copies printed, which they then feel under pressure to sell. The book sells poorly, and the author never gives it away for free

because they are sensitive about not having recouped their large investment in printing costs. The net result is that very few people encounter the author's ideas and a whole lot of copies of the book sit somewhere in storage. If the author had just found a good place on the Internet where the book could be downloaded freely, they wouldn't have lost any money on printing, they would have found a larger readership, and the people who wanted a printed copy could have gotten one through a print-on-demand service. The larger readership might have brought other side benefits to the author as well. I have been trying to snare authors during the writing stage and encourage them to go this route, but most don't recognize that it would be in their interest and have a somewhat foggy understanding of how publishing works. People are just used to the old way of thinking and they are also attached to the physical token, the "book," rather than realizing that books are just one potential vehicle for the information, which is what you're really trying to communicate.

What do you see as the main advantages of OA?

Besides what I've said above, I think that OA has the potential to get a lot of scholarship out there and accessible that would otherwise not get published. Lots of people write good stuff that the gatekeepers in scholarly publishing have previously declined to put out because it doesn't pay well enough.

With the OA business model, sales don't matter. Length doesn't really matter either. As long as there is money to cover editorial time, publishers can make decisions based on the sincerity of the author and the merit of their work.

Do you see any disadvantages/problems?

Well, I just brought up the issue of "money to cover editorial time." There is still a cost of bringing an article to its readership under OA, even if it's much less than under the old model. Just as authors put time and money into researching and writing a text, they have to get used to the fact that reviewing, editing, and laying out the text takes peoples' time and money too. It used to be that authors didn't experience any of these costs and kind of tended to imagine that they didn't exist. These days, after these tasks are done, the cost of distributing an OA article is basically zero. We have to get authors used to bearing this (rather small) cost of bringing their work to that stage. Of course, it's often not the authors personally, but rather a research grant, an institution, or a journal itself (through subsidies) that pays this extra cost. In this way of looking at it, OA is basically about getting universities to shift money from library purchasing budgets into financial support for the editorial, peer review, and content management process.

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