The Democratisation Myth: Open Access and the Solidification of Epistemic Injustices (Preprint Mai 2020)

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Abstract: Open access (OA) is considered to solve an accessibility problem in scholarly communication. But this accessibility is restricted to consumption of Western knowledge. Epistemic injustices inhering in the scholarly communication of a global production of knowledge remain unchanged. This underscores that the commercial and “big deal” OA dominating Europe and North America has little revolutionary potential to democratise knowledge. Western academia, driven by politics of progressive neoliberalism, can even reinforce its hegemonic power by solidifying and legitimating the contemporary hierarchies of scholarly communication through OA. I approach the accessibility problem dialectically to arrive at a critique of the commercial large-scale implementations of OA. I propose a threefold conceptualisation of epistemic injustices comprising of testimonial injustice, hermeneutical injustice, and epistemic objectification. As these injustices prevail, the notion of a democratisation of knowledge through OA is but another form of technological determinism that neglects the intricacies of culture and hegemonial order.

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1 Introduction

Discourses and practices around open access to scholarly publications (OA) in Western academia often treat a narrow notion of accessibility as a pressing problem and, in return, offer wider readership access as a solution. Many scholarly communication experts unite in advocacy for more widespread implementation of OA, demanding more investments and change of practices to make the results of Western scholarship more accessible. A notion of more accessibility can already be found in Merton’s sociology of science where he, decades before OA was conceptualised, raised a normative argument for universal access to the products of scholarship (Merton, 1973). Ever since, Merton’s argument has been taken up by OA advocates arguing for the relevance of universal access to knowledge (Bowman and Keene, 2018; Tennant et al., 2020a). The early formal OA manifestos comprise of such a focus on granting access and, by so doing, democratising knowledge (Budapest, 2002; Bethesda, 2003; Berlin, 2003). Strong advocates such as Suber (2005, 2009, 2016), Willinsky (2006), or Tennant et al. (2016) echo these principles. By focussing on such accessibility, discourses have become blinded for the wider realm of accessibility: who is allowed to publish where, for what reasons, and what are their non-materialist premises (requiring non-redistributional but cultural considerations).

I argue that OA and the narrow accessibility problem it is set to solve are ill-equipped: they do not lead to positive social change or a democratisation of knowledge but reinforce the Western knowledge hegemony. Indeed, the implementation of OA in Western academia demonstrates how it solidifies inequities in scholarly communication: it largely manifests the proprietary communication structures of established publishers and shows no change regarding epistemic injustices. Moreover, that OA is signified as a normative good disguises that it, in fact, solidifies these inequities. There is growing evidence that, by building on the narrow accessibility problem, agents pushing for large-scale OA initiatives in Western academia such as national OA deals, or for more OA even in commercialised form (exemplified in the UK: Finch, 2012; or Germany: Projekt DEAL, 2019), are not interested in democratising knowledge but seek to retain owning and governing the means of communication. These modes of ownership and governance are fundamental constraints on a democratisation of knowledge in a global perspective. This globalisation is, then, but a westernisation—an expansion of Western ideals instead of an inclusive engagement of local particularities in a global context—driven by the imperatives of rankings and the rhetoric of Western quality. The resulting disadvantages are epistemic injustices.

The concept of epistemic injustice is crucial for understanding the shortcoming of OA regarding a democratisation of knowledge. It provides a theory for forms of injustice that a minority social
group faces because either their testimony is doubted, or their experiences do not find corresponding representation in the hermeneutical resources of the majority. Epistemic injustices are a central problem in scholarly communication and the illusion of a *real openness* of OA disguises that its current modes of implementation reinforce these injustices.

Conceptions of this issue are yet underdeveloped: there are some approaches to it in the context of a democratisation of knowledge; but their authors miss to elaborate a comprehensive concept. Implied but not at all explicated is the mutual sharing of knowledge in one of the founding documents of OA which states that this publishing mode is supposed to “share the learning of the rich with the poor and the poor with the rich” (*Budapest Open Access Initiative*, 2002). Like crossing the Rubicon, this statement leads the way to holding OA accountable to its implicit ideals. One of the earliest to discuss a democratisation of knowledge through OA and, thus, making this ideal explicit, has been Willinsky. As an early strong OA advocate, he introduces aspects of the social epistemology of scholarship, engaging with the work of Longino (2002; see also: Willinsky, 2006, chapter 2) as well as with Sen (1999) and Canagarajah (2002). Within his consideration of the need of a democratisation of knowledge and the ways OA might help achieve this (2006, chapter 7), Willinsky looks at structural improvement and warns about the extension of a Western colonisation of knowledge. What he did not foresee—and does not discuss in his work for obvious reasons—is how forms of large-scale implementation of OA in Western academia achieves to extend their hegemonial colonisation.

Recent developments revived the discourse on the democratisation of knowledge: both Holbrook (2019) and Inefuku (2017) are wary of the trajectory of OA regarding achieving its ideal. Though they emphasise positive aspects of some OA developments, both offer strong criticism: Holbrook is highly critical of the unlikely democratising and equalising impact recent large-scale implementations of OA may have, while Inefuku remains critical of its cultural impact and implicitly signals a sort of technological determinism. Sengupta goes further and explicates the academic colonialism that OA pursues (2020).

These authors demonstrate how the democratisation of knowledge is negatively thematic for OA, but they do not elaborate on the underlying social epistemology systematically. I provide a conception of these social epistemological injustices in the context of scholarly communication and argue that—for accessibility to apply in the general sense of a democratisation of knowledge—these injustices need to be overcome.

I proceed in this article by highlighting cases of the discourses and implementations of OA that evidence the shallowness of the narrow accessibility problem and how it got co-opted by capital.
These cases underscore the agenda of progressive neoliberalism (Fraser, 2019), that infiltrates academia and is taking advantage of OA in unprecedented ways. I go on to discuss the connection between general accessibility and the democratisation of knowledge, arguing that for such a democratisation to take place, academia would need to overcome the problem of epistemic injustices. I propose three forms of such injustice that are solidified by the current mode of scholarly communication. This is followed by a discussion where I connect and critically engage the discursive threads of my argument. This scholarship is necessary and engagement with a re-assessment of accessibility highly relevant since OA is ever more co-opted by the established capitalist order that is indifferent to solving social inequities.

2 Narrow Accessibility: Allowing Consumption

There are, in essence, two ways accessibility problems can arise in scholarly communication: by way of accessing the results of past discourses or by way of accessing ongoing and future discourses in their making. The former is the premise upon which large-scale implementations of OA in Western academia are built: accessible means affordable consumption. This premise exposes a political trajectory: retaining the established order of a Western hegemony while reducing structural change of access to affordable consumption. This conception of an accessibility problem resonates the lofty idea of increasing equity through a one-sided distribution of knowledge. Concern about the predicament of this idea is often missing in discourses on OA.

Most scholarship focuses either on assessments or technicalities of its implementation (for instance: Björk, 2012; Bosman and Kramer, 2018; Brehm and Neumann, 2018; Eve et al., 2017; Eysenbach, 2006; Martín-Martín et al., 2018; Tanner, 2017), or on a critique within the narrow conception of accessibility (for instance: Barnes and Gatti, 2019; Crossick, 2016; Eve, 2014; Mandler, 2013; Moore, 2017). Discussions in favour of OA as a solution to narrow accessibility can be encountered in politically more radical versions (Swartz, 2008; Swartz and Lessig, 2016) as well as conservative or neoliberal ones (Crossick, 2016; Finch, 2012). Moreover, ideological centring of the narrow accessibility often inheres—though mostly only implicitly—in notions of the tax-payer argument of OA (Suber, 2003, 2016) or knowledge as a public good (Hess, 2012; Hess and Ostrom, 2011; Moore, 2019; Suber, 2003). That the governance of communication, its innate structure, and the reputation practices on which it thrives are to be left untouched, seems to be a read thread working through Knowledge Unbound, the comprehensive overview of Suber’s
concept of accessibility in OA (2016). Though these works tend to criticise capitalist principles and market imperatives, they usually do no leave the realm of system-immanent critique. Even activists of the more comprehensive open science ideology tend to fall for the narrow accessibility fallacy. This is visible, for instance, in the way Tennant et al. imply that OA is no solution (2020b), but fail to make this shortcoming explicit.

Illuminating for how the fallacy of narrow accessibility slips into the authors’ reasoning is the following example. Tennant et al. (2016) engage an anecdote to support their argument of the democratic impact of allowing more widespread access to Western knowledge. The authors point to a paper (Knobloch et al., 1982) that provides evidence for why Liberia should be within the Ebola endemic zone. Up to and during the 2014 outbreak of Ebola, this paper is supposed to have been unknown to Liberian officials for it was published behind a paywall, the authors argue. OA would have changed this, implying that solving narrow accessibility would have been a solution. But can this argument justifiably be made? I suggest it cannot, for simply tearing down paywalls does not resolve the issue that Knobloch et al. published their research in a Western journal (the Annales de l’Institut Pasteur in France) for a Western audience, gaining authorship recognition for a Western sense of reputation. Tennant et al. insist that “OA provides a mechanism to level the playing field between developed and developing countries” (2016) but they do not work out what this mechanism might be. It is implied that allowing others to access knowledge for free constitutes this mechanism. And yet, the anecdote shows that when this mechanism is explicated—that Liberian officials would have incorporated knowledge provided in this article if a paywall would not have been in place—it seems unjustified. Consider the question of why Knobloch et al. have not published their research in a Liberian or African journal in the first place. It was not a paywall preventing them from so doing.

By focusing on narrow accessibility as a problem in academia, discourses miss to connect the dots between the co-optation of OA by politics of progressive neoliberalism and the failed revolution of a democratisation of knowledge. This politics enabled neoliberal economic principles to become legitimated because of a coating of meritocratic diversity. The appearance of equality allows for hierarchies to continue to exist. In the context of Western academia, solving a narrow accessibility problem provided the established order with a “patina of legitimacy”, to utilise the language of Fraser (2019: 15). Those agents of traditional scholarly communication that have been strong—corporate publishing, financially well-equipped academic organisations, and research management staff in Western nations—found a way of manifesting their position: they repurposed accessibility
as a form of affordability and merely shifted this affordability from the reader to the author (or their institutions). This co-optation in practice can be shown with a range of cases.

Publishers, especially the oligopoly of large for-profit organisations (Larivière et al., 2015), have been the first to co-opt OA and re-shape its purpose. Yet, where Holbrook claims that publishers have “remained a step ahead of policy-makers by inventing new ways to take advantage of the push for OA” (2019), this claim misses to point to the underlying scholarly practices to which publishers only responded in the ordinary capitalist fashion.

The practices of corporate publishing presuppose that Western academia rests on, or exists in accordance with, some form of market imperative. Scholars and especially research policy makers could have rejected corporate publishing by steering towards entirely alternative approaches such as open instead of proprietary publishing infrastructures, encouraging publishing that does not depend on authorship reputation, or allow for cost-effective green OA. These alternatives could have led the way for tackling a general accessibility problem in academia. Yet, where academia compromised on commercial solutions to the narrow accessibility problem, it also compromised on working on rectifying accessibility in general.

The successful commodification of OA is visible in a variety of instances, one of which is the compromise made for embargo periods, outlined in 2007 as “a period of exclusivity for the publisher followed by free online access for the public” (Suber, 2007). Those promoting OA progressively, such as Suber, essentially concede that there is a right to economic exploitation on sides of the publishers, a period of about 12 to 24 months given for a future OA publication to be placed behind a paywall so that publishers may sustain revenue from subscriptions. It is here not coincidental that just those embargoed OA venues have considerably higher citation rates (Laakso and Björk, 2013), making them required subscription assets in libraries. This jeopardises positioning OA as a solution to the journal crisis and, thus, could not even be claimed to be a solution to the affordability problem.

Alongside embargo periods, Western academia accepted to invest in hybrid OA which is at the core of solidifying existing power structures in scholarly communication. Hybrid refers to the mechanism of keeping a journal published as a subscription journal while offering authors to purchase the OA option for the individual article. This mechanism further subverted the idea of OA to a neoliberal ideology in which individuals can access OA by means of substantial financial investment. The required fees outgrow those of any other
form of OA making hybrid an excessively high priced expenditure (Björk, 2012; Björk and Solomon, 2015; Khoo, 2018; Solomon and Björk, 2012). This mechanism is, even within financially well-equipped Western nations, ridiculing notions of democratisation. The argument that all fields of scholarship offer alternative publication venues with much less expensive OA only highlights the blinkered attitude since career advances often depend on the high-priced publication venue in one form or another. Consider an election where access to some polling places need to be bought, but in return, votes in these places count twice. Without question, those who wish to make their voices heard will keep investing.

Next to the corporate repurposing of OA, commercialisations such as that of Knowledge Unlatched or the acquisition of F1000Research by the publishing conglomerate Taylor & Francis show how fruitfully the efforts of bottom-up approaches turn into a perpetuation of economic agendas: Knowledge Unlatched was launched as a not-for-profit organisation and got secretly integrated into a for-profit company (Knöchelmann, 2018), showing increased efforts to centralise and commercialise on the formerly community-focused infrastructure (Esposito, 2019; Gatti, 2018). This is the procedure a culture of sharing failed to conceive: if OA is about re-use and aims at facilitating such re-use without boundaries, the missing boundaries also do not apply to capitalist exploitation.

The disproportionate costs associated with OA and the additional costs of the bureaucracy around organising OA led to the demand for large-scale OA deals. Among others, such deals are instituted in the Netherlands, Sweden, Norway, or Germany (Kwon, 2019; Max Planck Gesellschaft, 2019; Rijcke, 2020). They are hailed as being transformative and ground-breaking. They are so mostly for those signing the contract, though.

The case of Germany is epitome in this instance: project DEAL, representing a consortium of more than 700 libraries and research organisations in Germany, closed large-scale OA deals with both SpringerNature and Wiley, while discussions with Elsevier are ongoing. Effectively, these deals are perpetuations of hybrid journal publishing in that German research organisations subscribe to read a publisher’s entire non-OA journal portfolio while paying substantially to publish their articles OA.¹ Through such deals, German scholars gain a considerable advantage compared with scholars in many other countries in that they can read the whole portfolio and publish OA without bureaucratic or financial hurdles. It is highly questionable whether other countries can afford to institute

¹ According to early estimates of about 10,000 articles annually published with Wiley, the annual costs for the deal with this one publisher alone will amount to €27,500,000 plus additional publishing fees; see: Knöchelmann (2019).
similar contracts. And yet, it is unlikely that publishers will contemplate lowering the costs to publish hybrid, considering that such deals secure a safe revenue. It follows that such deals are, on the one hand, segregating scholars and countries into those who can afford to publish OA, either by means of large-scale deals or excessive publishing fees, or they are excluded from the benefits of OA. On the other hand, with a further increase of such OA publications, free access to them will create a two-class system, dividing journals and series internally. The affluent and financially well-equipped organisations and scholars can push their visibility further, while the rest must hope that others remain willing to subscribe to the journals publishing their paywalled scholarship. This is OA as a means of power: reproducing the standing of a few by granting others, a majority, the right to access their knowledge. To be sure, there are non-fee OA venues; but the high-impact journals or book publishers demanded for career advancements in many fields remain paywalled or hybrid, ensuring that authors stay committed to the established hierarchy. Prominent agents of this hierarchy regularly ask for sympathy, such as EMBO (2019), putting forward the questionable argument that their high costs were justified because of the expensive selection processes that maintains their position in the hierarchy. In return, then, if the academy would agree to replace this mode of hierarchy—that gamut of contingent post-publication impact based on pre-publication selection—with a more transparent and dynamic mode, no such publishing business model would survive. As long as this is not the case, investing in these publishers (paying their APCs or subscriptions) translates into investing into the perpetuation of the established hierarchy: these agents do not gain their income because they are at the top of the impact gamut—they gain their income to maintain this impact gamut.

The national deals have further implications on the future of scholarship where today’s narrow accessibility is traded against tomorrow’s decision-making sovereignty in regard to digital infrastructures and system integration. In the context of the national OA deal in the Netherlands, for instance, making the works of Dutch scholars published in Elsevier journals freely available comes at the cost of providing the publishing corporation primary access to fostering their research intelligence service. In a market where rates of profit reached an unsurpassable peak, this is a strategic positioning for future means of exploitation. With entering such a deal, a country concedes to support that business strategy which has long-term effects beyond mere cash-for-openness. Observe de Rijcke’s reflections on this deal which “may effectively transfer crucial means to influence Dutch science policy to a monopolistic private enterprise” (2020). Future retrospections may well
observe the realisation of a downward spiral in the context of such deals: they are solutions to an affordability problem that was exacerbated because of monopolistic market structures—and by actualising such solutions, those monopolistic market structures got carried into the future where renewed efforts were required to find solutions for an affordability problem. And so on.

*Plan S* stands in line with these large-scale OA deals. Though it is not yet implemented, meaning that room for an alternative development is still there, it currently fares as an embodiment of the progression of a neoliberal OA logic. *Plan S* refers to the strategy of a coalition of (predominantly Western) funding bodies to establish a form of OA market. The coalition provided a set of guidelines in a policy which outlines the rules participants aiming to partake in said market need to adhere to (Schiltz, 2018). This perpetuates some of the principles of the large-scale deals, even though it aims to discredit hybrid OA: scholars supported by charitable or national funders in the Western dominion are positioned to afford openness, while the bulk of other scholars is required to rely on individual deals or personal subsistence. All the while, the funded scholars can grant access to their knowledge to an unfunded other.

Exemplary for the neoliberal reasoning underpinning *Plan S* is a talk given by Jean-Claude Burgelman who serves as OA Envoy of the European Commission, which is responsible for the founding of *Plan S*. Speaking about the future of open science he consistently suggests OA to be a key institution to advance returns on investments and to capitalise on the OA standing European countries already possess (Burgelman, 2020). In the same vein, Burgelman, among others, voiced the option of a “geo-specific access model” which would mean that OA would be restricted geographically (McKie, 2019). The rationale is that this mechanism would pressurise countries who have not yet invested in OA or related policies to do so. And as long as they do not follow suit, these outsider countries should not benefit from the OA publications of European organisations.

Note that *geo-specific* and *OA* are conceptually contradictory: if access to a publication is restricted geographically, it is an exclusive club good and not openly accessible. This may evoke the notorious tax-payer argument (and show its limited applicability for a solidary scholarly communication): since countries in the EU are paying for the EU’s research funding, they should benefit from the fruits of this funding, the reasoning of *geo-specific* goes. Besides showing an indifference to non-economic principles, this argument inheres in the ill-conceived premise that the production of knowledge is a fragmented endeavour of
individual nation states. It eradicates the OA reasoning in the debate of whether knowledge is a public good and, thus, contradicts its conceptual basis. If a nation state would want to be the sole beneficiary of its knowledge production, why not create a publishing platform to which only that state has access? It seems ludicrous to pose this question. But then, what else as a patina of legitimacy is behind the logic of a geo-specific OA solution?

Speaking from the perspective of the Global South, Becerril-García critically comments on the development of Plan S and argues that “a model is being set up which again makes the South and North confront each other, in lieu of seeking to construct common platforms that use technologies for preventing henceforth the possibility of simply being controlled” (Becerril-García, 2019). Precisely such assessments direct attention to the ideal of a democratisation of knowledge that is made impossible by solving a narrow accessibility problem. Yet, by claiming to solve an accessibility problem, the agents pushing for today’s large-scale OA reinforce imperialist structures that are morally disguised: publishing OA is presented as a better publishing because, by so doing, the West grants others access to the results of Western scholarship. In the following section, I will turn to the problems of such a patronising notion.

3 General Accessibility: The Democratisation of Knowledge and Epistemic Injustices

The democratisation of knowledge, I argue, requires not just the dissemination of gratis knowledge, but holistic access to the means of communication, involving authorship, readership, and governance alike. This is the conception of accessibility often neglected by OA discourses: widening the accessibility to ongoing and future discourses in their making. Only solving this accessibility would bring about a democratisation of knowledge, which necessitates overcoming epistemic injustices.

The meaning of democratising knowledge is investigated in a variety of approaches (Biesta, 2007; Canagarajah, 2002; Dewey, [1927] 2012; Freire, [1970] 2017; Fuller, 2013; Ogone, 2017; Paasi, 2015; Pitts, 2017). It can be understood as the ways in which knowledge contributes to processes of democratisation and, in dialogue with this, how no citizen shall be excluded from being able to know. This takes as its premise that knowledge is more than mere information or fact. Dewey argues that “knowledge is communication as well as
understanding” but that “[d]issemination is something other than scattering at large. Seeds are sown, not by virtue of being thrown out at random, but by being so distributed as to take root and have a chance of growth” (Dewey, [1927] 2012: 137). This expresses the requirement of not just consuming knowledge but gaining access to influencing what is being known. Having the ability to understand as well as the capacity to affect what, and how, something is known are equally crucial for the democratisation of knowledge. This is the case because knowledge is situated so that being a knower presupposes a social interdependence: “those who are not positioned well to influence epistemic resources will find that the dominant resources for knowing are less likely to be suited for knowing those parts of the world toward which their situatedness orients them” (Pohlhaus, 2011). Underpinning the processes of knowing and, accordingly, the processes of producing and communicating knowledge, are themes of power and oppression that are captured by the concept of epistemic injustice.

Miranda Fricker first developed the comprehensive concept and established two forms of epistemic injustice:

[...]testimonial injustice occurs when prejudice causes a hearer to give a deflated level of credibility to a speaker’s word; hermeneutical injustice occurs at a prior stage, when a gap in collective interpretive resources puts someone at an unfair disadvantage when it comes to making sense of their social experiences (Fricker, 2007: 1).

The concept was further developed into more wide-ranging social epistemologies and also applied to a general discourse on knowledge (Fricker, 2017; Fuller, 2013) as well as cultural and intellectual imperialism (Alatas, 2000; Bhargava, 2013; McConkey, 2004; Medina, 2011, 2012; Ogone, 2017). This elevated the concept into discourses on the roots and consequences of oppression and marginalisation as well as its most radical form of hermeneutical death (Medina, 2017). I argue that such oppression and marginalisation are actualised in scholarly communication in three ways:

Firstly, testimonial injustice happens across disciplines in that groups of scholars are pre-emptively silenced. Paasi implies this in his conception of the Western hegemony that emerged as a power manifestation building on three forms of marginalisation: discrimination of scholars on grounds of their origin, exclusion based on the power of citations and evaluations of journals governed by Anglophone editorial boards (which is further connected to the marginalisation of languages other than English in scholarly communication—a trend non-native-English scholars in the Western dominion
increasingly come to experience first-hand; see also: Gordin, 2017; Hyland, 2015), and, lastly, “the supposedly inferior quality of knowledge produced in non-Anglophone social spaces” (Paasi, 2015: 515).

By means of the unshakable entry threshold—closed, pre-publication peer review—Western journals hold power to the shibboleth to establishing knowledge: English language, specialised terminology, citation networks, and their modes of application in highly specialised discourse communities. The inequity produced through such testimonial injustice is the exclusion from discourses—one that occurs undeterred by economic or bureaucratic hindrances that OA may change, for this is not a readership access problem. In the historical development of the production of knowledge, this silencing recursively created, and continues to create, more silencing by ignoring social groups in the conduct of discourses that are maintained by a Western hegemony. That the legitimacy of produced knowledge hinges upon the apparatus surrounding its production is one of the truisms of Western academia (see, for instance: Dewey, [1927] 2012, Latour, 1987, or Knorr-Cetina, 1981). This includes an agenda setting and the ways of determining what is established knowledge: what are the methods, methodologies, conditions, and terminologies of correct and justified understanding, and what are the right places for this understanding to be disseminated with. This inherently has an exclusionary effect which is actualised by entry thresholds qua selection, foremost peer review and editorial decision making. The resulting exclusion turns into oppression when it is no longer justifiable by a crude layperson/expert binary: non-Western scholars are excluded from discourses despite being experts, for their expertise does not accord to Western norms.

Secondly, hermeneutical injustice takes place especially in scholarly fields of meaning-making since their epistemologies are highly socially context-dependent. Remember, this form of injustice refers to cases where the experiences of some social groups in a collective are not reflected in and through interpretive schemes of that collective, for those social groups do not contribute to the collective’s hermeneutical resources (Fricker, 2007; Medina, 2012, 2017). The imbalance of contributions and the resulting hermeneutical indifference disadvantages social groups culturally and materially. To be sure, this disadvantage hinges on the notion of the collective: in the context of an (aspired) global production of knowledge, the collective must comprise of all human subjects. Normatively, then, the drive towards globalisation marks the creation of a new collective that translates—epistemologically—to an inclusive expansion of hermeneutical resources. An exclusive expansion of a particular social group’s interpretive schemes results in a
hermeneutical oppression of those social groups which are included in the collective, but excluded from contributing.

Since the arts and humanities as well as the humanistic social sciences aim to understand meaning by studying products of the human mind as well as the signs and symbols of meaningful human relations and actions, they try to provide accounts and theories about being human and being social. Such accounts and theories, however, are always geared to just those products, relations, and actions studied. The resulting hermeneutical resources are effectively community efforts. The theories developed are tied towards those communities in that the practices of developing them always depend on the particular forms of the social existing in this community in that time. Some disciplines are more reflective of this—the philologies or history—but others are not. Essentially, then, in the sense of a globalised production of knowledge, non-Western scholars are treated unjust in that they contribute far less to global hermeneutic resources. Moreover, especially within the Western hegemony, clusters of epistemes are often artificially specialised and outsourced which renders their idiosyncrasies as another pre-emptively: race studies, indigenous studies, or gender studies are but a few examples here. Consider how W.E.B. du Bois is side-lined among the founding figures of sociology or the way scholars of gender studies are continuously required to authorise their field beyond its scholarliness. The reason for the existence of the scholarly fields corresponding to these subjects can both be internalised and externalised: the discursive realms exist so that their epistemes have a space for recognition and scholarly advancement on their own. But another reason for why they exist is grounded in the fact that they have not been recognised and advanced within the establishment of disciplines in the first place. The hermeneutic void that the established scholarship generates necessitates their disciplinary independence. All the while, their disciplinary existences remain ambiguous solutions that embody their—both intellectually critical and politically non-affirmative—struggles already in the processes of formation (see, for instance, Wendy Brown’s deliberation about the intellectual project of women’s studies: 1997).

Such hermeneutic void continues in a global scholarly context and its borders are marked by the binary of inclusion and exclusion of scholarly communication. Imagine a Great Library of Alexandria of the 21st Century that strives to represent what it means to be human by collecting memoirs, myths, and meditations from around the world. If it consisted of, say, 90% of contributions from 10% of the world population, how representative of being human would it be?
I issue a third category of injustice which is that of epistemic objectification: an exclusion by means of silencing the epistemic subject where a person (or social group) is treated as an informant while being undermined in one’s (or their) capacity of being an enquirer. The higher level of thinking is accorded only to one group—Western academia—while others remain to be communicators or mere objects, for their epistemic subjectivity is made structurally defective. Dotson calls this epistemic exclusion “an infringement on the epistemic agency of knowers that reduces her or his ability to participate in a given epistemic community” (2012: 24). This process is exemplified in a case Ogone communicates: the injustice that an African community has been objectified while being entirely excluded from the ensuing discourse and its benefits:

the Maasai people’s genetic resources were ‘harvested’ without their informed consent […].

The researchers are therefore guilty of conveniently keeping their subjects [turned objects] in unjust ignorance for their own selfish gains (2017: 24).

This intellectual imperialism can be summarised as a colonisation of information in that knowledge is drained from the World to circulate within Western discourses and, first and foremost, make a benefit there.

4 Discussion

Solving a narrow accessibility problem does nothing to counter epistemic injustices. Quite the contrary, I argue that by maintaining hierarchies and the governance of the means of communication, OA solidifies injustices and disguises that imperial structures prevail and do harm. This argument is based on the premise that the production of knowledge becomes more globalised—and that this globalisation is, above all, a Westernisation.

The Western hegemony is reinforced by the impact of large-scale OA. By manifesting the power structures in scholarly communication, the journal as a “white epistemic institution” (Pohlhaus, 2017: 15) as well as the established book publishing venues keep their structural dominance. They keep being governed by Western scholars and their epistemes. Instead of an opening up of discourses—a globalisation in form of a global inclusion—the Western governance causes an expansion of discourses to be an expansion of the Western dominance that either excludes epistemes or demands the adjustment of other social groups to Western norms. Such an expansion is unreflective of the situatedness of
knowledge in that it leads to epistemic adjustments to the norms of existing Western discourse practices. Understanding and meaning, then, lose parts of their specificity and contextual relevance for the community it was produced in and, originally, for.

Particularly for the assessment of large-scale OA implementations, the impact beyond the hegemonic order has not yet been acknowledged. The push of progressive neoliberal agendas through such implementations has a twofold impact. Firstly, these deals crystallise the way OA is perceived: as a costly endeavour that needs to be purchased and that many countries and institutions cannot afford. And secondly, they effect a furthering of market imperatives and a commodification of knowledge in that they imply an emphasis on competition which demands even more focus on league tables and rankings which are predominantly Westernised. The latter point seems indirect but is crucial in a global perspective: neoliberal principles permeating academia allowed for an evaluative structuring that positions everything in relation to each other in rankings, lists, and units of reputation to be monitored (Brink, 2018; Dowsett, 2020; Moore et al., 2016). This has created an “academic nationalism” where the “claims for the need to internationalize national science are often made in the name of national competitiveness” (Paasi, 2015: 513). The impact of OA on this has so far been neglected. And it is this latter point that drives local producers of knowledge globally towards Western discourses so that inequities are solidified in terms of epistemic injustices: researchers are more and more compelled to access Western means of communication, for those count in league tables and rankings. Studies of the degrees of openness in scholarly communication often try to account for regional differences (for instance: Bosman and Kramer, 2018; Martín-Martín et al., 2018; Piwowar et al., 2018). But the task of accounting for the subtle but crucial differences of the drive of non-Western scholars to Western publishing venues, or of the latter trying to expand towards non-Western scholars, is far more complicated.

China may be central to understanding this: studies of the publishing behaviour of Chinese scholars and scientists are very much historical accounts of efforts of formal Westernisation, where for “most Chinese scientists […] the gold standard is English-language journals” (Hvistendahl, 2013). Moreover, China now also endorses the general principles of the Western Plan S (Schiermeier, 2018), which supports their efforts for more national visibility in Western discourses. The monetary reward system in China—where scholars publishing in Western high impact journals are financially rewarded—centres around visibility in the Western focussed Web of Science publishing index (Quan et al., 2017). Not coincidentally, native Chinese OA journals fail to attract high impact research
submissions, for they have low visibility in Western publication indices (Shen, 2017). The technicalities of these shifts are easily accessible by means of indices and policies. The epistemic consequences, though, are rarely articulated.

The problem of missing multilingualism only feeds into the structural divides between the Western dominion and the many countries of the world (Salager-Meyer, 2008): in the UAE “the local language (Arabic) has been sidelined by English as the main language” where the publishing landscape is dominated by commercial publishers and fee-driven OA (Boufarss, 2020). Other studies provide similar evidence for pressure to publish in Westernised venues such as for India (Singh, 2018) or Chile (Broekhoff, 2019). Ogone describes the futile aim for a balance as a “tendency for African scholars to seek validation from their Western counterparts while simultaneously trying to appeal to their African roots” (2017: 27). Ultimately, indicative in this respect is that predatory publishing venues often target organisations outside of the Western hegemony, especially Asia and Africa, to lure them into a false international visibility (Berger, 2017; Gasparyan et al., 2016; Shen and Björk, 2015).

It should not be left unacknowledged that there are indeed ways the global sharing of knowledge produced in the West can be beneficial for everyone. Firstly, where knowledge—especially directly practical knowledge such as from STEM or medical science fields—is made available globally for free, this can have an undeniable positive effect in the short run. Initiatives such as Hinari, research4life, AGORA, or OARE aim for global access to knowledge as a bridge to increase the viability of humanitarian efforts. Yet, short term is the keyword here: these initiatives need to be separated from the OA that is pushed for in Western academia. The humanitarian efforts seek short term solutions put forward to solve crises today; progressive neoliberalism puts OA forward as a solution that aims to keep the established order in the long run.

Secondly, there are initiatives highlighting that a different OA would be possible, one that is bottom-up driven, tied to communities, and conceiving of accessibility in a more democratic way. Sharing knowledge is bound to the notion of solidarity here; neither to taxes nor reward. I may refer to initiatives such as the small-scaling publishers united in the Radical Open Access Collective or the Open Library of Humanities. Its organisational philosophies are based on collaboration, co-ownership, and the focus on scholarly communities just as Moore explicates: “[s]cholar-led publishers are embedded in their disciplinary networks, reflecting a nuanced publishing praxis that is sensitive to the working practices of particular
To be sure, as these initiatives originate in Western scholarship, being tied to this scholarship does not make them in any way non-Western. But they invite replication, create open infrastructures to be re-used globally, and showcase that governance of the means of communication can be democratised. They, thus, provide points of reference for both cultural and material change. In fact, since these initiatives are small-scaling—achieving their potential by many small community-owned initiatives (Barnes and Gatti, 2019)—their success does not depend on the uptake of those publishing initiatives already in this network, but precisely on replication. Since this is the case, these initiatives are yet weak in their implementation and have only little structural effect compared with the shift towards large-scale implementations of OA. Moreover, by bypassing established publishing structures entirely, it can be argued that their efforts are not about OA at all, but about a radically new version of collaborative publishing in general.

Furthermore, this category needs to account for organisations going a third way such as AmeliCA or Redalyc in South America which already achieve a democratic accessibility, allowing for community-owned processes and open publishing without author charges. Governance of the means of communication is spread across scholarly communities here. Especially these are important as counterparts to Plan S: in the end, investments in large-scale OA deals and Plan S could have likewise been investments in European imitations of such South American initiatives. But efforts to de-Westernise governance are generally not on the agenda of progressive neoliberalism unless these efforts provide a patina of legitimacy.

5 Conclusion

“The solution is not to ‘integrate’ [the oppressed] into the structure of oppression, but to transform that structure so that [the oppressed] can become ‘beings for themselves’” (Freire, [1970] 2017: 47). What Freire suggests as a solution to the banking concept of education is precisely what OA does not achieve in its large-scale implementations in Western academia: fundamentally transform its communicative power structure so that epistemic injustices can be overcome. This is what I have tried to explicate in this article.
I have provided the argument that the accessibility problem of OA is short-sighted and that, by pushing for such OA, established agents in Western academia are not interested in democratising knowledge but seek to retain owning the governance of the means of communication. I have dialectically approached the accessibility problem to arrive at a critique of the current large-scale implementations of OA in light of an ideal to democratise knowledge. The development of a deeper understanding of epistemic injustices helps apprehending the shortcoming of the narrow accessibility problem. This approach to openness solidifies the powers inherent in the established means of scholarly communication and, thus, reproduces existing inequities. It reinstitutes that large parts of the means of communication remain in their Western hegemonial order, despite all counter-efforts of small-scaling, community-centred publishing initiatives. Moreover, and highly problematic regarding the normative statements of OA being better publishing, these practices of OA disguise that the existing inequities prevail and that the cultural orders of knowledge informing practices have not changed: knowledge produced by the West is deemed superior.

Conclusively, this diagnosis positions OA next to other technologies that promised more equity but could not deliver on this promise; Early conceptions of revolutionary change are often driven by a technological determinism; Marx’s historical materialism provides such a reductionist account as do premises in McLuhan’s media analyses. Up until today, new technology is often welcomed as transformative in that it is said to allow for a restructuring of established power relations. Materialist conceptions focus on redistributinal mechanisms and neglect cultural aspects that are significant for making such redistribution necessary in the first place. Technology is not fully conceptualised if the culture it is rooted in as well as its governance and entrenched hierarchies are ignored. Above all, the history of the internet is one such example where neutrally networked machines could have provided a level playing field (Morozov, 2011, 2013). Today, however, it is but a replica of hegemonic structures as they have existed before the establishment of HTML. Similarly, OA was not able to take advantage of the re-distributional potential of new media technologies, resulting in the replication of old hierarchies. My analysis shows that successful change through technology is contingent on the problem that is set to be solved: the problem of accessibility is posed in a way that allows for OA to being only a cosmetic shift within the existing structures, without posing significant change to the structures themselves.
6 Reference List


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