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Michael Heneise and Heid Jerstad

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Editorial: Why the open access publishing movement needs South Asian scholars

Michael Heneise

University of Edinburgh, Editor@southasianist.ed.ac.uk

Heid Jerstad

University of Edinburgh, Editor@southasianist.ed.ac.uk

As this issue is being prepared for publication, a consortium of publishers - namely Cambridge University Press, Oxford University Press and Taylor & Francis - has gained an advantage in a court case over the issue of copyright infringement against Rameshwari Photocopy Services, a small shop on the Delhi University campus that sells affordable photocopied texts such as course-packs to university students. The defendant cites a provision in Section 52 of the Indian Copyright Act that provides an important exemption in the case of reproductions for educational use. However, prosecutors state that while photocopying a portion of a copyrighted text, such as a chapter, is permissible, the commercial reproduction and distribution of entire texts is 'piracy.' Pending a final ruling in the case, an injunction levied on the shop last year forcing it to halt photocopying services was recently upheld by the High Court in Delhi after a recent exam-time appeal by the student community and the university (Desikan 2013). Regardless of the outcome, the case comes at a time when increasingly accessible internet-based technologies offer important opportunities for education in the world's most populous region. This will pose ever-increasing challenges to established publishing practices. We'd like to suggest that these challenges are best met with a new vision; a shift toward open access publishing involving scholars of and from South Asia. This would push the issue decisively, and perhaps offer up a compelling model for scholars who remain ambivalent.

The open access movement has emerged out of necessity. College and university library budgets have been stretched to the limit due to the growing costs of journal subscriptions over the past couple of decades, while the demand for new research and contemporary critical scholarship has only increased. In response, a few visionaries have taken advantage of the

wide access and low cost of internet distribution, and made academic, peer-reviewed research permanently available, at little or no cost¹, allowing for its free redistribution (Open Book Publishers, 2013). Predictably, publishers have dug in their heels, including acquiring former open-access publications. Has the iTunes revolution that has transformed the way music is produced and consumed not offered up a convincing, profitable alternative? For instance, an affordable, digital clearinghouse of texts set up by this same consortium of publishers could immediately appeal to thousands of small colleges and universities throughout Asia – many of whom can scarcely afford the libraries they need!²

Interestingly, the main critique levelled on the open access movement has not centred on author compensation, but on standards. The argument goes along these lines: quality suffers when you don't have dedicated, professional editorial teams protecting readers from unqualified scholars, bogus claims, or just clumsy research. Yet the quality – the soundness of stated problems and objectives, the clarity of methods employed, the depth of analysis, and the originality of the author's final claims – is significantly determined through peer-review – not just editing. What, therefore, would be the clear advantages of open access publishing? Well, the central argument of the open access movement is that quality scholarship depends on the unobstructed exchange of ideas. For one, privileging a few elite institutions provides little advantage if research funding remains concerned with wider applicability and impact. Let us turn to South Asia for a couple examples of 'idea-obstruction':

Few can dispute the impact of South Asian postcolonial studies on the social sciences and humanities. The theories and practices developed by the Subaltern Studies Group³, for

¹ Issues of server security and energy use aside.

² This would dovetail nicely with recent efforts to improve access to internet connectivity throughout India. For instance, currently there is a project underway to provide broadband to the panchayats of several states including Odisha, Bihar, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Punjab, Himachal Pradesh, Jammu and Kashmir, Assam, Nagaland and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. See 'Central project to connect panchayats with broadband,' *Express News Service*, 14 April 2013 [Accessed on 22 June 2013, at <http://newindianexpress.com/states/odisha/Central-project-to-connect-panchayats-with-broadband/2013/04/14/article1544370.ece>]

³ A group of South Asian scholars active since the early 1980s, and led by Ranajit Guha, interested in postcolonial and post-imperialist societies, and particularly in the reconceptualisation of histories of resistance to colonial rule 'from below' i.e., from the perspective of non-elites who, though hidden from traditional histories, are agents of change.

instance, have been employed extensively by researchers exploring the histories ‘from below’ of other regions such as Latin America and Africa, and been influential in the development of new fields such as post-socialism. It turns out, however, that this rich cross-fertilisation of ideas has not always come full-circle and benefitted South Asian postgraduates and lecturers. Ideas that emerged from the Global South, and that have been transformative in a variety of ways to a variety of disciplines, have become the copyrighted material protected by publishers and university departments.

Another front of equal importance is the ‘burial’ of ideas – postgraduate monographs, for instance, that have been bound and archived in obscure university facilities, never to see the light of day. Most of these have been produced after long stretches of fieldwork, and are the end product of a significant expenditure of financial resources, and of time – time committed by informants, the researcher and his or her supervisors. Informants throughout the Global South continue to wait patiently for ‘the book’ detailing their stories, histories and narratives that well-intentioned researchers promised they would produce upon the completion of their degree requirements.

In both cases, South Asian ideas helped to propel research and researchers further, yet failed to impact locally – and this is largely due to institutional impediments (intended and unintended) that have not realised the revolutionary potential of open access publishing. The campus-buzz triggered by the copyright case in Delhi has also provoked a conversation among students and lecturers across campuses, and throughout India. Whichever way the case goes, the power and affordability of new internet-based media and publishing only points to an increase in the use and practicality of digital resources. This provides as good an opportunity as any to showcase the capabilities of open access publishing, and to encourage South Asian scholars to adopt it and ensure that their ideas and those scholars in other parts of the world may be exchanged freely and productively. Publishing always costs someone something. In our case those costs – the websites, the dedicated time of a team of open access publishing professionals at the Digital Library, promotional materials – are generously borne by the University of Edinburgh. As sponsors go, this academic institution is one of the more open ones. As with most academic journals our peer reviewers and staff members volunteer their time. In this sense, as well as that of no cost, except the bandwidth to download a .pdf,

the South Asianist is free. But as stated before, it must not simply be accessible to readers. In this issue we are launching a new section called ‘exploratory essays’ – or ‘tea stallers’ (as one of our Editorial Board members based in Dhaka suggested) – which are shorter in length, intended to raise debates or provoke discussion, and are thus more ‘open-ended’ than more traditional articles. They also are in response to the distance that many South Asian scholars feel separates them from publishing in widely-circulated and recognised publications, a discrepancy that Amita Baviskar articulates well in her response to Daniel Miller’s recent article on open access publishing:⁴

The canons of academic judgment ... are even more questionable in India and other parts of the South. For researchers whose first language is not English and who are not rigorously trained in the discipline’s concepts, modes of analysis, and presentation, it seems impossible to write up their work such that it speaks to contemporary debates ... Yet the work itself is worthwhile and rich: the intellectual aim is passionately felt, data is gathered with diligent sincerity, and intense thoughtful labor expended on the task of writing it up. Equally important, the research deals with concerns that are more immediate and proximate to the researcher and rarely count as cutting edge (2012: 393)

As an online journal we enjoy the luxury of flexibility, and so this issue includes some finished pieces and some abstracts, waiting on finished pieces. Some would say that mimicking something solid (actual paper journals) should mean recreating the conditions, like the absolute publication deadline. Open access publishing is still so new though, and particularly in light of the collaborations with local scholars not used to this format, we would like the journal to be a site of experimentation as well as of solid scholarship. There is general enthusiasm among the team for new endeavours such as encouraging comments below the articles, or having more video content, but it is only in putting these ideas into practice that we can see how they work and how they are received. Because of the (unexpected) success of our conference issues this is only the second regularly scheduled issue of the South Asianist, and we hope to continue these productive collaborations.

⁴Miller, Daniel,. "Open Access, scholarship and digital anthropology" *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* [Online], Volume 2 Number 1 (19 June 2012)

This issue, as with our three previous issues, is the product of many months of interaction with authors, peer reviewers and members of the editorial team – all spread out across three continents. We have encountered differences of expectation, the impact of the turbulent times, and unquestionable sacrifice in terms of time and effort on the part of authors and reviewers. We are also launching several new sections, all of which have required considerable planning and consultation. In addition to our new ‘tea-stallers’ section - with a timely essay on politics in Pakistan – we begin our long-awaited book reviews section with a robust collection of four reviews. Our articles also cover five countries in the region, and a wide range of topics ranging from the ritual feeding of elephants in the Chitwan National Park in Nepal; to questions of identity and nationalism in the context of the Hornbill Festival in Nagaland; to domestic workers’ consumption in Dhaka, Bangladesh. We have added a number of new interactive features online, and welcome your comments and feedback. We are particularly keen to gather feedback on our new ‘tea-staller’ section, as it is an experimental piece we would like to continue to refine. We look forward to more of the same as well as more and other new endeavours. 🍵

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