A case of open access

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A case of open access

Abstract
I support ‘open access’, the enabling of unrestricted and free internet access to peer-reviewed scholarly research. Too much academic/scholarly writing is locked up behind the paywalls of multinational publishing empires, generating enormous profits from the unpaid, often publicly financed, labours of vassal scholars/academics. So too with scholarly books, confined as they are by small print runs and exorbitant ‘library copy/sale’ prices.

To my mind there is much in contemporary scholarly publishing practice that reminds me of the medieval library at the heart of Umberto Eco’s novel The Name of the Rose (1980), hidden as it is in a labyrinth, accessible only to the librarian and his assistant, its contents protected by poison and murder. Today, much scholarly work is not publicly circulated, but locked up and limited to a privileged and paying few. Which is the name of the game, since a lot of scholarly research, particularly in the humanities, is presented in jargon and genres aimed at specialist audiences. Publishers have scholars over a barrel here; international practice is that this sort of confined niche publication constitutes the pathway to career enhancement/advancement.

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CASE OF OPEN ACCESS
by Rowan Cahill

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Following the award of my PhD by the University of Wollongong (UOW) in 2013, I authorised open access to my dissertation on the controversial Australian left-wing journalist and intellectual Rupert Lockwood (1908-1997). This went online via the UOW Research Online (RO) facility on 18 November 2013. The way the Wollongong RO team have set this facility up, it enjoys a high online profile. By the end of January 2014, the Lockwood dissertation had recorded 512 full downloads, not an insubstantial tally given the pdf runs to some 101,000 words and 1000 footnotes. Doctoral dissertations tend not to be significantly accessed, a literary genre regarded in some quarters as little more than an ‘apprenticeship’ exercise.

Given my dissertation’s length, and believing the wordage and referencing used were necessary, I resisted suggestions that book publication/publisher interest would be attracted by shedding some 20,000 words, footnote rationalisation, and the inclusion of more personal details regarding my subject. The latter in particular was something I was not prepared to do. So I treated the online format of my dissertation as a defacto book/publication. While it met academic requirements, from my own backgrounds in journalism and activist writing I also knew the dissertation would be accessible to a non-specialist audience.

With the luxury of being 68 years old, and an academic career not a consideration, I rejected the ‘trickle down process’ of academia, whereby one’s work is made known to peers via conference papers and publication in peer-reviewed journals. Instead, I set about generating awareness of the existence of the dissertation using promotional skills developed over a lifetime, treating the process as a ‘marketing’ exercise.

Collegial emails, facebook, blogging, interviews, were variously deployed, while twitter was used by allies. Publicity commenced with an item in the Melbourne ASSLH newsletter *Recorder*, fittingly since Melbourne was the city that shaped Lockwood’s politics during the 1930s. The Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) followed, with a story about the dissertation on its website, and later a more detailed
one in its *Maritime Worker* journal. Lockwood had been a long-time journalist employee of the Waterside Workers’ Federation of Australia, one of the key unions that amalgamated in 1993 to form the MUA. Colleagues placed links to the dissertation in various data banks, and Wikipedia insertions were made. Generally, the ‘marketing’ task was enhanced by long-standing historical/political interest in Rupert Lockwood going back to the 1950s, and the high online visibility of the RO facility at the UOW.

What the future holds is a work in progress. Initial personal feedback has been positive, but as they say in the classics, the proof of the pudding will be in the footnoting and citations that may ensue. In academia this could well take time, and is perhaps years down the track. However, the object was to generate awareness of an intellectual ‘product’, and attract an audience. Judging from the number of downloads, increasing even as I write, the Cahill-Lockwood-Open Access exercise has been successful beyond expectation. Interested readers who have not already done so can help themselves, and boost the download rate, at [http://ro.uow.edu.au/theses/3942/](http://ro.uow.edu.au/theses/3942/)

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