

**CHANGE, MASS AVAILABILITY,
AND THE DECLINE OF QUALITY IN ACADEME**

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I think it is beyond discussion that the existence of the internet has significantly affected the way scholarship is done. More specifically, I would argue that the existence of the world-wide-web is a radical change, far greater, for example, than the introduction of word-processing in the writing process, in the late 1970s/early 1980s. My contention is that the appearance of the internet is an epochal change, on the scale of writing and the printing press. In my opinion, there have been three major changes in the history of knowledge :

1. the invention of writing ;
2. the invention of printing with moveable characters ; and
3. the advent of the internet.

All three changes are multiplicative. The invention of writing means that more than the persons who heard a teacher lecture can benefit from it. Writing is far more permanent than speech : it can be stored, shared, reproduced by third parties who did not hear the original exchange. This is the difference between Socrates, a teacher who talked to his students, and Plato, who also wrote down his teaching. It effectively eliminates the difference between esoteric and exoteric knowledge : once committed to writing, knowledge cannot be kept within the bounds of the school that produced it. Moveable type is also multiplicative because it significantly reduces, by a factor of three orders of magnitude, the cost of reproducing a text. In less time and at the same cost it would have taken a scribe to copy a manuscript, the press can produce thousands of copies of it, which allows a much faster and distributed penetration of the work in the community of readers/scholars. The internet, Google scholar, and various

forms of scholarly communities online essentially all but eliminate the cost of reproduction and distribution of articles and books. Increasingly scholars are uploading their papers on the internet, after and even before publication. Gray areas of the internet allow the downloading of copyrighted books and articles. Any library has access to vast databases of knowledge that lie behind paywalls but are increasingly being “liberated” (Mohdin, 2015). All this pushes the cost of acquiring a given text to tend asymptotically to zero.

Anyone with access to the internet and the time and knowledge to do so, can find practically anything that has ever been published, within limits. The world is not flat : there are significant differences in what has and has not been digitized, in what is or isn't available on the internet, or even on the availability of the internet itself, for political and economic reasons. However, these caveats do not negate the overall trend : knowledge, as was famously said, wants to be free.

There is a dark side to the lowering of the cost of knowledge. If knowledge is essentially free or costs less than a latte macchiato, this means that knowledge is becoming a commodity. There are two fundamental ways of looking at a commodified good : the producer and the consumer. If we look at it from the point of view of academics or teachers who are paid to convey knowledge as part of the teaching process, this change can only be the harbinger of unwelcome change, as inevitably the market will turn into a race to the bottom, where competition will be determined by price alone. If we look at it from the standpoint of the consumer of knowledge, the situation is close to ideal. Anyone privileged enough to have a use for academic knowledge can acquire it almost instantaneously at virtually no cost.

This dualism will inevitably bring about a crisis, as less people will be willing to produce knowledge for no compensation, until eventually there will be a very high number of consumers willing to consume knowledge for free, but a very small number of people capable and/or willing of producing knowledge for free (because, for example, they are independently wealthy or they are sponsored by some entity, which may or may not be benevolent). Good, current examples of this situation are journalism and pop music. The system of producers/consumers of knowledge may find some alternative equilibrium, for example with micro-payments or through crowd-funding (imagine a Kickstarter-like system where academics publish an abstract of the research they intend to write and the audience funds their time). However, there is no way of predicting what this equilibrium will look like. In the meantime, we can already observe the first effects of the multiplicative change of the mass availability of publications.

Mass availability has a strong effect both in positive and in negative terms. Good research can be disseminated very fast and influence a significantly larger number of other scholars than it would have in the past. However, this is also true for bad scholarship. In fact, quality does not seem to be the determining factor, rather,

scholarship that appears in easily accessed sources (open access, online journals, for example, but also web-sites, etc.) will be found more easily and hence eventually will be quoted more frequently. In particular, scholars new to a field will be most likely to be influenced by the first thing they read. This has the effect of flooding the space, effectively pushing less accessible scholarship to the margins (past the first two-three pages of an online search). There is some evidence (Larivière *et al.*, 2009) that more and more articles are being cited and that elite journals are losing part of their status due to ease of accessibility (Acharya *et al.*, 2014), i.e. papers are increasingly published in a broader range of journals. This is bad, because an elite journal is such because, among other things, it has a very good screening system in place that accepts only high quality material, which in turn provides an incentive for the production of high-quality material.

Good scholarship gets better in the age of mass availability : good scholars can consult more sources, find more articles on the subject of their choice, and hence publish more articles and books. Unfortunately, bad scholarship also gets worse, when it allows superficial scholars to accumulate impressive lists of references that have not been digested, let alone understood, and are quoted pell-mell, without rhyme or reason, often merely to silence peer-reviewers or to name-check celebrities in the field. We are all familiar with papers that claim to be applications of a model or a theory and have in fact very little, if anything, to do with the said theory or model. Worse yet, citations can be inaccurate and misleading. The trend of quoting only recent research means that we often encounter laughable quotes such as : “The theory of relativity (Wolfson, 2003) famously states that $E= mc^2$.” which seems to imply that the theory of relativity was invented by Wolfson about a century after the fact, only because the author first encountered it in the book quoted. Good scholarship engages the history of the field, it does not merely report its existence.

There is another aspect of the proliferation of publications, which explains why various schools essentially ignore each other, when they do not directly attack each other. Since there are so many journals one can always find a journal that either “belongs” to one’s school or that will accept a paper without proper discussion of relevant background information. Increasingly, researchers write for each other : as journals become ever more specific and narrow in their focus, the need to write for a more general audience disappears. In fact, a strong incentive emerges to use the terminology and the methodology of a given school, if one wants to publish in the journal(s) that subscribe(s) to that set of ideas. Many editors and readers will be content with a name check : if Authority#1 has been quoted and the methodology preferred in the field has been used, even only superficially, chances are that the article will make it through (Ioannidis *et al.*, 2010).

The appearance of predatory presses, that publish anything, for an upfront payment, often cleverly disguised under the trappings of scholarship (some preda-

tory journals are indexed in the best indexing services, claim to be peer reviewed, and even have (fake) impact factors), have further muddied the waters, as have the appearance of “open access” journals which shift the burden of editing and the cost of publishing on the authors of the articles, while advertising the “free” access to the readers. Really free open access journals may exist online, when they are literally the labor of love of dedicated scholars. Sadly, these tend to rely on transitory resources and may disappear, leaving the readers only with more examples of the modern curse of the “broken link.” It is becoming harder to decide if a given journal or press is a serious, quality medium or not (obviously, aside from well-established elite journals/presses).

These issues of world-wide distribution are relevant also in connection to scholarship in languages-other-than-English : scholars do not deliberately ignore Danish scholarship, for example, but very few people, globally speaking, can read Danish, which means that if one wants to be read by as many people as possible, one will publish in English, and thus English-language scholarship floods the field, inevitably pushing Danish-language scholarship to the margins. The only way that Danish scholars can fight this trend is by making a deliberate effort to quote more Danish-language scholarship, or to put it differently, they may become insular. Needless to say, insularity is the kiss of death in scholarship and will lead to further marginalization. It will be useful to recall that this has happened before. Latin was the lingua franca of science for centuries. It then all but disappeared. Things change.

Change is unpleasant, as Umberto Eco reminded us in 1964. There are two usual extreme reactions : to decry the change, claiming it is the end of the world as we know it. Eco labeled those intellectuals who take that stand “apocalyptic”. The other side of course is to embrace the change and eventually become an advocate for it. It is possible that somewhere between these extremes lies wisdom, but it’s hard to tell where.

I don’t know that anything we can do, here and now, can have any significant effect on the overall course scholarship seems to be engaged in. However, no matter how Quixotic the quest, we can oppose the tide of mediocrity and ignorance by ruthlessly rejecting those articles or books we are asked to review that show the symptoms of carelessness and superficiality, by carefully correcting and noting the errors and misinterpretations in the scholarship we review or supervise, and by rejecting outright or demanding corrections of the scholarship we publish in journals and books we edit. Will good scholarship win out ? Probably not, for the reasons outlined above : laziness and sloppiness are easier and require less work than meticulous, careful documentation and reasoning. Bad scholarship will outnumber good scholarship, but we can make the road to publishing bad scholarship as hard as possible.

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