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Beyond Access – Publishing as Infrastructural Experimentation

Some thoughts for Open Access Week 2026

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In a recent essay for Open Humanities Press, "Who Will Find Us? What Happens to Open Access After Search?," Gary Hall raises a series of important questions about the future of open-access publishing in a world increasingly mediated by artificial intelligence. If people increasingly discover information through AI chatbots rather than search engines, what happens to the assumption that making knowledge freely available online also makes it discoverable? And what might radical publishers do in response? Hall explores several possibilities: a return to analogue forms such as zines and pamphlets, building more direct relationships with readers, and cultivating smaller, situated communities of intellectual exchange. These are all valuable directions for experimentation. But what would happen if we shifted the starting point slightly. Rather than asking how open-access publishing can adapt to the changing technological

conditions of knowledge circulation, perhaps we should begin with a more fundamental question: *what kinds of intellectual and social relationships do we want publishing to make possible?*

This seems particularly appropriate during Open Access Week. Open access has achieved much by challenging the enclosure of knowledge behind commercial paywalls, making scholarship and other intellectual work available beyond the institutions and individuals able to afford access. These struggles remain important, particularly as the infrastructures of academic publishing become increasingly concentrated in the hands of commercial interests. But access to texts is not the same thing as access to the conditions in which knowledge can be collectively produced, discussed, challenged, and developed. Making a book freely available online is valuable, but it doesn't necessarily create the time, spaces, relationships, or capacities needed to engage with it. We might have access to an enormous library of texts while finding ourselves increasingly isolated in the ways we encounter them. The question,

then, is not simply how to make knowledge more accessible, but how to create and sustain the conditions for thinking and studying together.

The affordances of different forms

One response to the growing dominance of AI-mediated discovery is to turn towards analogue forms of communication: zines, pamphlets, physical books, and other kinds of printed matter that circulate outside the infrastructures of digital platforms. There is much to appreciate here, although perhaps not primarily because analogue media offer some kind of escape from technological capture. Every form of communication has particular affordances, possibilities, and limitations. Rather than imagining a retreat from digital media, we might consider what different forms enable us to do and how they might complement one another. Vinyl records are amazing, for instance, partly because of the experience they demand: large-format artwork, physical engagement with the

object, and a particular invitation to slow down and listen. There is something similar about zines and physical books, not simply in their material qualities but in the social relationships that gather around them.

What kinds of encounters become possible at zine fairs, radical bookfairs, reading groups, and collectively organised launches? What forms of community emerge through the shared production of printed matter? How might a beautifully produced art edition coexist with a freely available digital version, each enabling different forms of circulation and engagement? There is no necessary opposition between these approaches. Indeed, one of the most interesting possibilities lies in developing a richer publishing ecology in which different forms reinforce one another. Digital circulation can make work accessible across geographical distances, while physical editions and gatherings can create different kinds of encounters, attachments, and relationships. The point is not to celebrate the physical over the digital, or vice versa, but to experiment with what each can make possible.

From access to collective study

This brings us to an increasingly important distinction: the difference between building an audience and building a community of study. Publishers are understandably concerned about how to reach readers, particularly as the mechanisms of online discoverability change. Newsletters, podcasts, social media, and direct relationships with audiences offer ways of reducing dependence on search engines and algorithmic platforms. But there is a danger that these activities become understood primarily as alternative marketing strategies, ways of retaining attention and maintaining visibility within an increasingly fragmented media environment. What if we approached them differently? Rather than thinking of readers primarily as an audience to be reached, we might understand them as potential participants in ongoing processes of collective intellectual production. Publishing would then become less about transmitting finished ideas from authors to readers and more about creating situations in which ideas can be encountered, discussed, transformed, and put to use.

This is closely connected to what Stefano Harney and Fred Moten describe as *study*: not simply formal education or individual intellectual development, but something that emerges through being and thinking together. Study is a social activity, one that can take place in all sorts of settings, often outside the institutions that claim authority over knowledge. From this perspective, the value of a publication cannot be measured solely through circulation figures, downloads, citations, or sales. We might also ask what conversations it generates, what relationships it sustains, what new projects it helps bring into being, and what forms of collective capacity develop around it. A book can be an invitation, a point of

connection, or a resource for ongoing activity rather than the endpoint of intellectual work.

Publishing as infrastructural experimentation

These questions have increasingly shaped how we think about Minor Compositions. Although books remain central to the project, we have never understood publishing as simply the production and distribution of texts. It also involves organising conversations, collaborations, podcasts, events, and spaces of collective study. The books emerge from relationships and, hopefully, help produce further ones. We've recently been describing this approach as *publishing as infrastructural experimentation*. Infrastructure is often understood as the background machinery that enables other activities to take place. In publishing, this might mean printers, distribution networks, websites, archives, and systems for managing books and their circulation. All of these are important. But infrastructure can also

be understood more broadly as the social and organisational arrangements that make particular forms of collective activity possible. This shifts attention from the published text alone towards the relations and processes that surround it. Who is involved in producing knowledge? How are decisions made? What resources are shared? How are relationships maintained? What spaces exist for people to encounter one another, develop ideas, and organise further activities? These are not simply administrative questions. They are intellectual and political questions because the forms of organisation we develop shape what kinds of knowledge and collective capacities become possible.

There is a useful connection here to the framework developed by the Design Studio for Social Intervention, which asks us to think through the relationships between *ideas, arrangements, and effects*. We might have ambitious ideas about collective knowledge and intellectual emancipation, but what arrangements would actually enable them to take shape? And what effects do the arrangements we currently inhabit produce, regardless of our stated intentions? For publishing, this means that commitments to openness, collaboration, and collective study cannot remain confined to the content of the books we publish. They need to inform the infrastructures through which publishing happens. A radical text distributed through conventional commercial channels may still be valuable, but how might we also experiment with different forms of production, circulation, governance, and collaboration? How might the activity of publishing itself become part of the political and intellectual experimentation we want to encourage? This is not a demand for purity or complete independence from existing systems. Minor Compositions certainly relies on conventional printing, distribution, and digital platforms alongside other arrangements. Nor does every experiment need to become a

permanent institution. Infrastructures can be small, provisional, situated, and responsive to changing circumstances. The important thing is to treat the development of these arrangements as an active part of our work rather than merely as the technical means of delivering it.

Beyond the open text

Seen in this light, open access becomes part of a much larger question about the organisation of intellectual life. Making a text freely available matters. But so does creating the conditions in which people have the time and capacity to engage with it, the opportunity to participate in conversations around it, and the possibility of contributing to the knowledge being produced.

This also means paying attention to the often invisible labour through which these activities are sustained: editing, organising, facilitating, maintaining relationships, caring for spaces, and the

many forms of reproductive work that enable collective intellectual activity to continue. An open-access publication does not automatically imply an open or equitable process of producing knowledge.

Indeed, we might ask whether some models of openness risk reproducing the very forms of extraction they seek to challenge, making intellectual work freely available while leaving the conditions of its production precarious, individualised, or dependent on unpaid labour. An infrastructural approach requires us to think about these contradictions rather than imagining that questions of access can be solved through licensing arrangements or distribution technologies alone. This year's Open Access Week theme, *The Cost of Knowledge*, offers a particularly useful opportunity to extend this conversation. Beyond financial costs, what social and human costs are imposed by existing arrangements for producing and circulating knowledge? And what different arrangements might allow those costs, responsibilities, and capacities to be shared more collectively?

Let a thousand flowers bloom

None of this provides a straightforward answer to the challenges posed by AI or the increasing enclosure of digital knowledge infrastructures. Nor should it be expected to. Building communities of study, creating alternative spaces of encounter, experimenting with different publishing forms, and developing more collective approaches to intellectual work are not magic solutions to the changing conditions of technological capitalism. But perhaps that is precisely why they matter. These are things worth doing regardless of whether they help us navigate the latest transformation of digital platforms. They are valuable because they enable different kinds of intellectual and social life. And perhaps, in the process, they might also make us less dependent on the infrastructures of visibility, attention, and circulation that are increasingly controlled by a small number of corporate actors.

What is most interesting here is not the possibility of developing a single alternative publishing model, but encouraging a proliferation of experiments. Different communities will develop different arrangements, shaped by their particular needs, histories, resources, and desires. Some will centre physical publications, others digital archives, reading groups, workshops, podcasts, collective research, or forms that don't yet have established names. The challenge is to make these experiments possible, to share what we learn from them, and to develop ways for them to support one another. Open access remains essential. But perhaps we should understand it not simply as the removal of barriers to existing knowledge, but as one element within a broader effort to transform the conditions through which knowledge is produced and collective study becomes possible. The question is not only who can read what we

publish, but what we can create and sustain together through the activity of publishing itself. *Let a thousand flowers bloom*.

https://nihilistoptimism.blogspot.com/2026/10/beyond-access-publishing-as.html