The Fallacy of 'Open'

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[This is the text (and slides) of the presentation I gave at the [HASTAC 2015 conference [http://www.hastac2015.org/]](http://www.hastac2015.org/) in East Lansing in May 2015. Please note that many links will take you directly to a pdf of the article referenced.]

My presentation today is part of a larger work-in-progress that is essentially my dissertation, and I want to share some ideas and questions about what we think of as "open" and what we're meant to think of as "open" and the ramifications of both of these positions. Just to set my presentation in the proper context, my research is on the role of Twitter in academic communities and scholarly work. While reading about, researching, and being part of scholarly communities online, I've had the time and opportunity to reflect a lot on the concept of "open", and how that has evolved for me, and others, over time.

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[https://edtechbooks.org/-HHh]

A note about my slides: I asked my Twitter community to tell me what "open" meant to them, and I will be showing some of those responses. Apologies to those whose tweets were not included here. All tweets were used with permission.

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[[https://edtechbooks.org/-qsb]](https://edtechbooks.org/-qsb)

There are some commonly used concepts in the "open" world:

- *Open access*: is access to scholarly work, freeing it from being behind paywalls.
- *Open source*: is free access to software and hardware, increasing potential for collaborative programming and creating hardware components.
- *Open data*: is free access to data, making it easier for the public to potentially understand larger patterns in specific contexts, and increasing transparency in use of said data.
- *Open content*: is free access to online content for reuse,

revision, remix, and redistribution.

Open in all these contexts talks about *access to* rather than a way of being, but when we partake in any of these contexts, we're often expected to be *open*. We can already see the built-in divides and the somewhat misleading implication of "access". For example, open data implies access to certain kinds of data, but without knowledge of how to use that data or what to do with it, it being "open" is of little use to us.

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[https://edtechbooks.org/-dTA]

EdTech in the Wild

When "they" created the internet, and I'm simplifying things a little here, it was with a view to creating an open and democratic space which would allow for the free exchange of ideas. While this is one of the things that happened, sadly, it's not the only thing that happened. We reminisce about the "good old days of the internet" which was about 15 years ago, when things seemed simpler and friendlier, and now we reminisce about the social media of 5 years ago, when things seemed simpler and friendlier. 5 years! That isn't even a blip in time!

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[https://edtechbooks.org/-Kpy]

So what is the difference between social media, then and now? The number of people? The kinds of conversations? The features of the platforms? Being able to talk about the good old days of social media is in itself a privilege. We yearn for the days when our privilege meant we had a particular kind of access to things. And now that everyone has access to those things, they've ruined our fun. How Twitter and other social media platforms were designed and how that design has changed over time has had a huge impact on how we interact with each other - some good, many bad. I won't go into the whole "they're using our data!" thing because that's a different conversation, but these platforms were designed with specific people in mind, and those people were rarely people of color, minorities, women, or marginalized folks. And, sadly, these are the people who are most often harmed by the very openness that they're meant to embrace.

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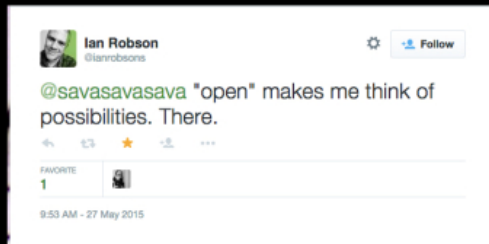
[https://edtechbooks.org/-Qex]

Social networking platforms make it easy to share and reshare things - links, ideas, comments, research - and also find community around shared values or interests. As George Veletsianos found [https://edtechbooks.org/-NYp], these online spaces provide academics a perfect setting to share their work, and in fact, "sharing" is considered a virtue, and possibly a virtue that adds to an individual's social capital and online currency. This idea is also supported by Christina Costa's work [https://edtechbooks.org/-mfW] on the Participatory Web as a space for collaboration and sharing. Costa uses the collective term "Participatory Web" to mean,

> … a set of digital communicating networks, applications, and environments on which individuals act as active participants, contributors, and co-creators of information, knowledge, and opinions,

which contribute to what she refers to as the habitus of digital scholars.

With the advent of the internet, some might consider academic identity as an important part of an academic CV. Scholars and academics who demonstrate an understanding of the online world bring to their positions that added advantage. There are those academics who have a robust online presence, one that is either carefully cultivated, or curated in such a way that the community they have created reflects who they are. Often, because of online identities, academics have access to opportunities that otherwise might have passed them by. Invitations to collaborate, access to online publishing, networking, and even access to senior academics one would normally never be able to talk to. Some academics take the trouble to groom their online identity in such a way as to appear more desirable and well-connected, increasing their chances at job opportunities.

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[https://edtechbooks.org/-wbz]

John Willinsky referred to this as the "reputational economy" [https://edtechbooks.org/-guS], where reputation is currency with the academy, in which

> ...reputation in academic life controls the production, consumption, and distribution of this public good known as research and scholarship.

He notes that we need to reassess scholarly reputations given the rise in use and popularity of the digital element of scholarly

communication, especially with things like open access. Bonnie Stewart notes [https://edtechbooks.org/-mWA] that scholars cultivate a type of reputation and influence on Twitter that is different from traditional academia and that they are,

> … engaged in curating and contributing resources to a broader "conversation" in their field or area of interest rather than merely promoting themselves or their work.

While building networks, users learn to recognize valuable connections and to weed out the 'noise' or unwanted information and people. Judith Donath compared this to signaling theory [https://edtechbooks.org/-jfJ] - originally from economics and biology - as the

> … relationship between signals and qualities, showing why certain signals are more reliable and others are not.

Taking an example from Twitter, hashtags can be thought of as signaling identity units* [#hashtagpublics], and identifying with particular hashtags can mean access to important connections and a resource-rich community.

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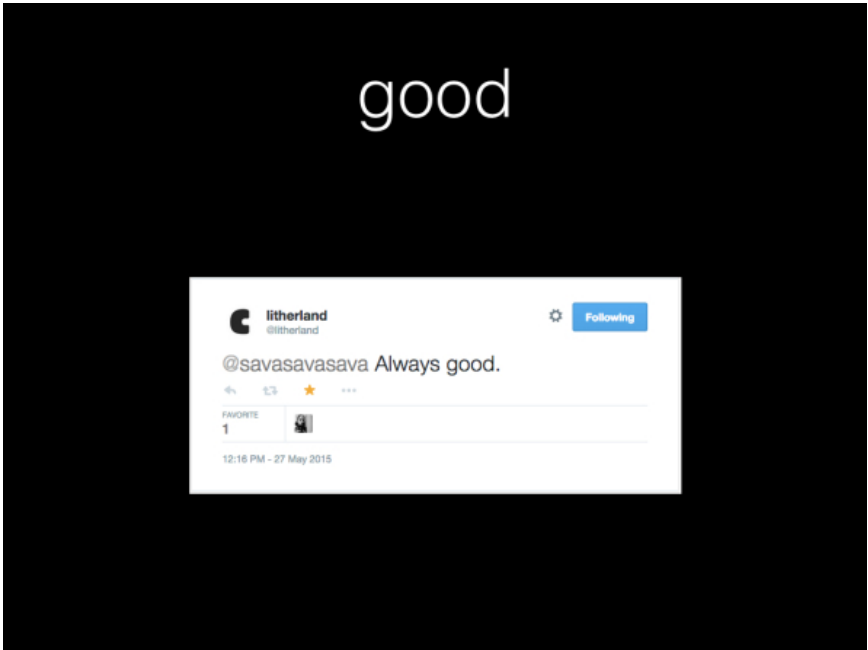
[https://edtechbooks.org/-kcE]

Let's talk about scholarship in the open. There are multiple articles and tweets and blogposts about the virtues of conducting one's scholarship in the open. And they're all right. But they're also all right for some people, and not for everyone.

The internet affords a type of open scholarship in which scholars can use blogs, Facebook, Twitter, and other platforms to think out loud and elicit feedback from peers. Doing so can yield surprising results, such as Jessie Daniels' experience [https://edtechbooks.org/-uat] of tweeting about a topic, those tweets and the conversation around those tweets grew into a series of blog posts, and those posts and discussions around

them led to a peer-reviewed journal article. It is a perfect example of what it means to be a scholar in the digital age - the very nature of scholarship and process of scholarly work can look completely different from traditional academic models of scholarship.

[Martin Weller has talked about \[https://edtechbooks.org/-UBS\]](https://edtechbooks.org/-UBS) urging institutions to reward digital scholarship and even include it during tenure review. He identifies two good reasons for why academic institutions should recognize and reward digital scholarship:

1. support for scholars who produce work online signals to other members of the institution that being digital is a desirable and rewardable activity, and
2. as a way to foster innovation within the institution itself.

I have been given various opportunities and made valuable connections because of how open I was online. I reaped the benefits of this openness, but was also aware of how I came about those things, and how I had to put myself out there a little in order to come by them.

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[https://edtechbooks.org/-rhj]

There are numerous examples of harm that has come from being "open" online, almost too many to list. Many might be familiar with more recent controversies, but I want to talk about a slightly older example of an academic kerfuffle (2012 is now considered old!) in what came to be known [https://edtechbooks.org/-zAJ] as [https://edtechbooks.org/-Grd] #twittergate [https://edtechbooks.org/-MHa]. Some of us might remember it, but a quick recap: #twittergate referred to what I understood to be reservations about live-tweeting academic conferences, and the many reactions - positive and negative - to these reservations.

EdTech in the Wild

I bring up this example because it highlights some interesting points about "open" in the context of the academy, and how things like social media are pushing those boundaries. Academic conferences are thought of as both "open" places and "closed" spaces. They are attended by our peers and are where we share new ideas and get feedback on those ideas. They're often a testing ground, if you will, for things a lot like what I'm doing now. Academic conferences are also traditionally open fora, but only insofar as our immediate communities and disciplines are concerned, given the ability or support for travel and registration fees. With social media like Twitter, this "open" forum gets more open, in a sense. The communities that tune in are often just extensions of the communities present physically - mostly academic, but livetweeting also makes these conferences accessible to those who may be interested but not in academia and those who cannot attend in person.

A lot of the commentary about this issue supported livetweeting, but called for being respectful of what presenters might prefer. What's interesting is that we don't even really think about this any more. Like it's fine to livetweet now, it's expected, even required. But the thing that struck me during it all, was that not as many people considered who might be harmed by this behavior. A lot of the focus was on academics who were thought of as somewhat "old school", paranoid, and possibly privileged, rather than on those academics who were more junior, conducting sensitive research, or just preferred not to be broadcast in that way. Personally, I am conflicted about this issue. And perhaps it is a non-issue now, but still something we should consider.

And there are more examples. Many more. Friends who have

been open about their feelings, opinions, and work have been on the receiving end of a barrage of hate and abuse, to the extent of being afraid for their lives. This is not the "democratic" internet or social media we were promised.

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[https://edtechbooks.org/-GkS]

We touched on networked scholarship a little earlier and I want to talk about it a little more. We're all here as part of a network of scholars, namely HASTAC. hastac.org [http://www.hastac.org] is a really amazing place for our network to share scholarship and have discussions around ideas

and shared interests, but it's also a place where many scholars post their work and research. It's a community that respects its members. And I think this is partly because of how the community and platform are designed, and how membership is set up. It is not an open platform in the vein of Twitter, and it caters to a very specific community.

[Veletsianos and Kimmons call it [https://edtechbooks.org/-FWx]](https://edtechbooks.org/-FWx) "networked participatory scholarship" to provide a paradigm for the way in which scholars are using participatory online technologies to add to existing scholarly practices, and even bring them into the 21st century.

For example, social media platforms like Twitter afford further forms of peer review, and possibly even push the definition of "peer review". Scholars who discuss academic ideas and themes get a sort of early peer input on their work, which can then translate into early drafts of a larger work which they can share on Twitter and elicit further feedback, and finally submit the work to a formal academic journal after having already received a substantial degree of peer review and input. While Jessie Daniels' story from earlier is the most positive example of this sort of evolved and collaborative peer review, it will be interesting to see how this model develops.

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[https://edtechbooks.org/-avd]

Veletsianos and Kimmons highlight the advantages of open scholarship, but also warn of the down sides of it, such as misappropriation, expectation of digital literacy, and the potential of openness creating inequalities within scholarly communities. Tressie McMillan Cottom points out [https://edtechbooks.org/-zAJ] the risks of online scholarship to scholars who are members of marginalized or minority groups. Scholars can feel pressured to take on open scholarship - either as a way to increase visibility for their own work or at the insistence of their academic institutions, Cottom says, but institutions should offer support to these scholars, especially if they are minorities, women, and junior scholars. While public

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scholarship can be vastly advantageous and beneficial to some, not all are prepared to face the kinds of discrimination and harassment the open web can bring to your door.

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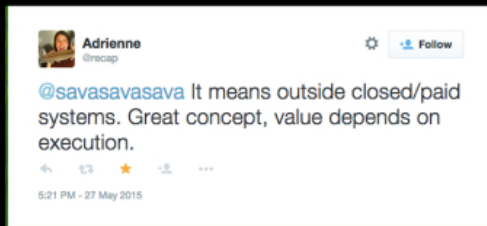
[https://edtechbooks.org/-eDm]

So, open is not good for everyone, and tends to bias those in already privileged positions - race, class, gender. The hype around open, while well-intentioned, is also unintentionally putting many people in harm's way and they in turn end up having to endure so much. The people calling for open are often in positions of privilege, or have reaped the benefits of being

open early on - when the platform wasn't as easily used for abuse, and when we were privileged to create the kinds of networks that included others like us.

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[https://edtechbooks.org/-wem]

What are some of the things we can do to be more sensitive to those for whom "open" can mean harm? Some of these things may seem obvious or commonsensical, but they bear repeating because even I get swept up in things and lose sight of what's important for my community.
Interrogate platforms - We need to look closely at and be

critical of the affordances and features of the platforms and online spaces we use, and point these out often.

Find workarounds - People often find ways to subvert systems to create safer spaces for themselves. When existing structures do not provide safety, we need to look at ways to work around the system in order to create those spaces.

Find and nurture community - It is in our interest to create a close-knit group of people who are easy to access when you need them. This doesn't mean creating closed communities of only your friends, but it does mean that you have a trusted few who you can turn to in times of need.

Push back - We need to take companies and platforms to task, especially those individuals or groups who create them. Software, platforms, and technology are NOT neutral. They are imbued with the biases of those who built them, regardless of whether they were coming from a good place or not.

Create inclusive spaces - We need to do the extra work to include more and diverse voices. We shouldn't be lazy and just reach into our echo chambers, but we need to do the hard work it takes to find people who can speak to different experiences when we build community, organize conferences, or even create an app.

Be self-reflexive - We need to take a long hard look at ourselves and our echo chambers. Echo chamber can be safe spaces - there is overlap here - but we need to be mindful of creating cliques and find the balance between these two.

Support your people - We must push for institutional buy-in for supporting members of our communities. We can work within our universities or educational institutions to put action plans in place and create guidelines for how to address online abuse, should it occur.

Be mindful of using tweets - Don't embed tweets. Just because they're public, this doesn't mean it's ok to embed a tweet without permission of the author, or even otherwise. Embedding a tweet increases the reach of the tweet and brings it to a different medium. it also makes accessing the author easier. In the same way, be careful of how you use storify. Taking tweets out of context can lead people to misinterpret meaning.

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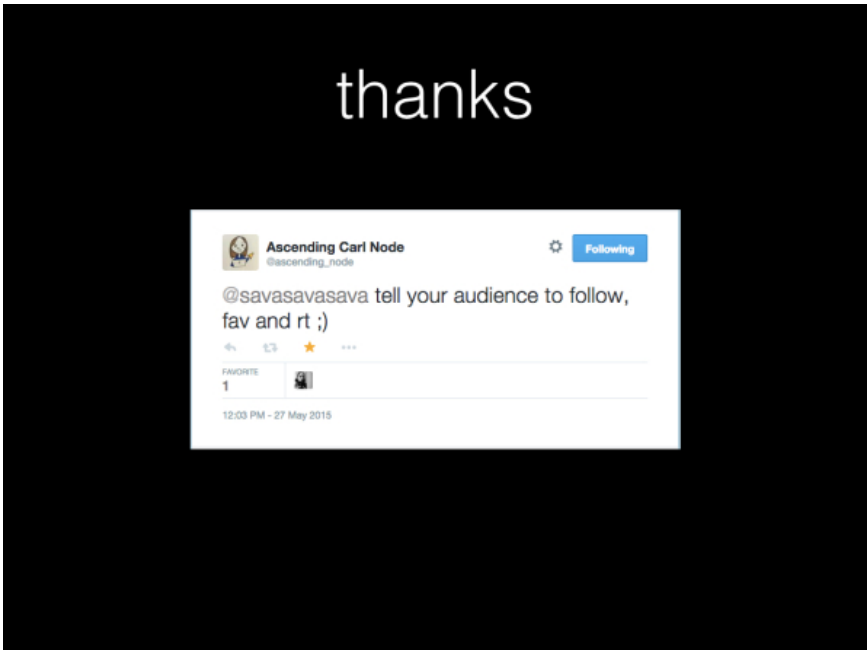
[https://edtechbooks.org/-HfB]

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