

Spring 2023

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Recommended Citation

Mapes, Meggie, and Teri Terigele. 2023. "Criticizing Paywall Publishing, or Integrating Open Access into Feminist Movement." *Journal of Feminist Scholarship* 22 (Spring): 1-17. 10.23860/jfs.2023.22.01.

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Criticizing Paywall Publishing, or Integrating Open Access into Feminist Movement

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Abstract: Dominant scholarly publishing models, reliant on expensive paywalls, remain preferential throughout higher education's landscape. This essay engages paywall publishing from a feminist communicative perspective by asking, how can publishing extend or prohibit feminist movements? Or, as Nancy Fraser (2013) asks, "which modes of feminist theorizing should be incorporated into the new political imaginaries now being invented by new generations" (2)? With these questions in mind, we integrate feminist epistemologies into publishing practices to argue that open access is integral to the feminist movement. The argument unfolds in three parts: first, we conduct a feminist criticism of paywall publishing by arguing that status quo practices constitute a dominant public based on onto-epistemological foundations of exclusion that systematically subordinate potentially liberatory knowledge. Second, we consider open access as a feminist re-tooling that creates new political imaginaries. In this section, we place open access in conversation with bell hooks's conception of literacy and Fraser's counterpublic theory. We conclude by considering how to live feminist lives with these criticisms and re-toolings in mind.

Keywords: open access; counterpublic theory; communication; publishing; feminist epistemology

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Closed system journal publishing is often constituted as a normal, neutral, and central component of academic processes, whereby scholars produce content for publishers that facilitate the production of works, offered for a fee, and often made accessible through publisher bundles to university or institutional libraries (McGuigan and Russell 2008; Bergstrom et al. 2014). Faculty are incentivized in this process to "participate in the generation and dissemination of new knowledge" and to increase credentialism during tenure and promotion (McGuigan and Russell 2008, para. 8; see Anderson 2012). We often hear (re)circulated narratives to graduate student audiences that value "publish or perish" rhetoric, explicitly denoting the central role that publishing plays in an academic's career. Our closed system publishing model, however, is increasingly unstable, inching toward what *Inside Higher Ed* (2018) called a "crisis in academic publishing" with unsustainable cost bundles that universities can no longer afford (Resnick 2019) and a "dramatic increase in predatory journals" trying to cash-in on the payout (De Wit et al. 2018, para. 10). Not only has a "publish or perish" ideology led to publishers flooded with manuscripts that may never be read (De Wit et al. 2018, para. 1), but five for-profit publishers¹ still control the majority of journal manuscripts (Batterbury 2022), and institutions risk losing access because of cost.

Open access has emerged as one alternative to traditional and conventional publishing models, where, as Martin Paul Eve (2014) explains, "open access would function simply to allow researchers and the general public to have access to academic research material when they otherwise could not" (7). In 2011, Carys J. Craig, Joseph F. Turcotte, and Rosemary J. Coombe engaged open access by asking, "what's feminist about open access?", crafting arguments to support a broader open access agenda to challenge "the

prevailing hegemony within traditional legal scholarship” (4). Their work utilized feminist legal theory to argue that copyright reform is necessary to innovate alongside the digital revolution. Sadly, however, limited engagement that explores this intersection has occurred in the ten years since their work was published, and our home discipline of communication studies has virtually avoided engaging open access literature entirely. Jefferson D. Pooley (2016) concurs, remarking that, “with notable exceptions, media and communication scholars have opted out of the cross-disciplinary conversation on the future of academic knowledge-sharing” (6155–56). We, like Pooley (2016), believe that communication should be at the forefront of core epistemological questions around open access precisely because the communication discipline interrogates both the form and function of communication channels. The impact, then, of for-profit publishing should remain central to feminist communication and interdisciplinary studies with “private ownership, exclusion and pay-per-use practices obstruct[ing] the capacity of network technologies to create an accessible, democratic and vital space in which citizens can freely participate” (Craig et al. 2011, 2).

In this essay, we extend Craig, Turcotte, and Coombe’s work by asking, how can publishing extend or prohibit feminist movements? Or, as Fraser (2013) asks, “which modes of feminist theorizing should be incorporated into the new political imaginaries now being invented by new generations” (2)? Below, we read feminist epistemologies into publishing practices to argue that open access is integral to a communicatively centered feminist movement. To lead with feminist epistemological commitments means acknowledging that (in)justice often emerges in and through the communicative channels that constitute knowledge-production. Where Denisse Albornoz, Angela Okune, and Leslie Chan (2020) ask, “can openness promote epistemic justice?” (65), we argue that revolutionary feminist counterpublics can provide one framework for open access to avoid merely reconstituting unjust publishing systems. We accomplish this in three parts: first, we conduct a feminist criticism of paywall publishing by articulating paywall publishing as a dominant public, highlighting how closed systems of information sharing function by teasing out implications of traditional publishing processes. Second, we consider open access as a feminist re-tooling that creates new political imaginaries. In this section, we place open access in conversation with bell hooks’s conception of literacy and Nancy Fraser’s counterpublic theory. Third, we consider how to live feminist lives with these criticisms and re-toolings in mind.

Part One: Feminist Critiques of Paywall Publishing

In this section, we both describe and criticize closed paywall publishing systems from a feminist perspective, whereby status quo practices constitute a “dominant public” based on epistemological foundations of exclusion that systematically subordinate potentially liberatory knowledge. We define a dominant public as collective knowledge that “corresponds with the views of a society’s dominant groups” (Toepfl and Piwoni 2018, 2014). Indeed, preferential treatment toward closed system publishing occurs discursively throughout our disciplinary infrastructures; thus, our criticism is, at its core, a reflection of longstanding ideologies that influence the values within academe. Our focus on the epistemological infrastructures of publishing prioritizes criticisms that identify epistemic injustices that have necessitated scholarly exclusions. Below, we begin by defining closed system publishing, contextualizing these findings within our discipline of communication studies, before exploring closed publishing as a dominant public and rendering our feminist criticisms.

First, closed system publishing refers to any closed system of information whereby content “is behind a paywall or requires a subscription” (Mapes 2019, chap. 4).² Closed systems are a product of and constituted by paywalls (Anderson 2012). This approach has been the preferential organizational mechanism for journal access throughout academe. At many higher education institutions, libraries are responsible for purchasing and maintaining closed systems information, including journal subscriptions; thus, many academic writer-scholars mistake closed journal access as “open” because they perceive information as easily accessible through their library database. Despite this perception, libraries can spend upwards of millions of dollars on journal bundle subscriptions to provide campuses continued access to preferred scholarly content that is only available through closed systems (see Bergstrom et al. 2014). Libraries have warned scholarly communities about the unsustainable future for closed, paywall publishing, with Harvard revealing an annual bill of \$3.5m a year, encouraging scientists to abandon paywall journals (Sample 2012).

Most of these closed, paywall journal publishers are privatized, enabling publishers to set the market price of access, resulting in astronomical profits. Martin Hagve (2020) summarizes, in detail: “The market is largely dominated by five large publishing houses: Elsevier, Black & Wiley, Taylor & Francis, Springer Nature, & SAGE, which control more than 50% of the market between them . . . As an industry, these publishing houses are unique in terms of their profitability, generating large net profits. Elsevier has a profit margin approaching 40%, which is higher than that of companies such as Microsoft, Google and Coca Cola” (para.1). Hagve’s insights are staggering, and Stephen Buranyi (2017) confirms that academic publishers make more than 19 billion pounds (about 22.67 billion dollars) in world-wide sales. And these margins continue to date. For example, Taylor & Francis saw 3.5 percent growth in the first five months of 2022 with a continued commitment to widen and expand their “pay-to-publish” arm (Brown 2022, para. 1). Wiley similarly saw an increase in their 2022 fiscal year revenue with “Research & Publishing Platforms” rising by five percent (Campbell 2022, para. 4). Horrifically, despite COVID’s negative influence on other economic sectors, private publishers capitalized on the pandemic by excessively raising e-book prices “by as much as 500%” and placing e-books in bundled packages for libraries to purchase (Anderson & McCauley 2022, para. 4). These profits reveal how integral closed information systems are to academic publishing, with publishers being “deeply enmeshed” in scientific publishing (Buranyi 2017, para. 12). Ryan B. Anderson (2012) succinctly argues that “our publishing system has become extremely insular, focused only on satisfying the needs of our own political economies” (3).

Because academic journal paywall publishing is unique to other types of closed information systems, such insularity requires explicit discussion. Indeed, a private magazine subscription would still monetize content behind a paywall; however, in this example, editors, reviewers, and writers are financially compensated for their labor. Conversely, in academic publishing, scholars, paid for through their institutions, submit manuscripts to journals free of charge, with “the bulk of the editorial burden,” including reviews, done voluntarily (Buranyi 2017, para. 4). Institutions then purchase back the very content that they paid their faculty-scholars to conduct. The writers become the purchasers, resulting in a circular system whereby scholars, taunted by promotion and prestige, require validation in a closed system that is created and managed by their own un-paid peers. And, because institutional promotion structures bolster these practices, universities bite the bullet and pay millions.³

These price hikes have resulted in what Peter Suber (2012) calls a “crisis for scholarly journals” (29), with academic library subscriptions outpacing inflation by 300 percent since 1986 (ARL), leading to an average annual increase of 3-5 percent (Langley & Khan 2022, para. 2). While “most works with price tags are individually affordable,” when researchers require access to “hundreds of works” or “when a library must provide access for thousands of faculty and students working on tens of thousands of projects . . . price barriers become insurmountable” (Suber 2012, 4). In turn, libraries are forced to adapt, leading to an

increase in journal cancellations (Langley & Khan 2022) that reduces access for scholarly stakeholders. Thus, “cancellations mitigate one problem and aggravate another” (Suber 2012, 30).

Despite criticisms of this system, scientific communities continue privileging closed system journals, confirmed through data. For example, in our home discipline of communication studies, Schimago Journal and Country Rank (2020) reported that the 10 top ranked communication journals remain closed. Of the top 30 listed, just two are open access. The Observatory of International Research (2020) rankings concur, similarly ranking only five of the top 94 communication journals as open. Conversely, very few communication studies journals are indexed in the Directory of Open Access Journals. Zero journals are listed under the subject of “communication studies” (DOAJ). While a few journals list “communication” as a keyword, the difficulty in locating disciplinary-specific journals that promotional procedures would require demonstrate that communication studies is heavily reliant on paywall publishing practices to sustain the circulation and archives of our research practices and, as we will argue, reflection into this process reveals epistemological strongholds that lead to exclusion.

So far, we have described the process and practice of paywall publishing, but how are these practices sustained? Here, we theorize academic publishing through Michael Warner’s rhetorical theory of publics, arguing that current practices constitute *a* public, bound by and discursively sutured to closed system publishing through scientific and institutional communication processes. Warner (2002) theorizes *a* public as “a crowd witnessing itself in visible space” and “also has a sense of totality” because they are bound by the thing, event, or space (413, emphasis added). Any member within the publishing life cycle, including scholars, reviewers, librarians, or students, constitute such a public—they are a totalizing group bound to the academic culture and circularity of scholarly publishing. They are assembled through commonality by discursively showing up as participants in the publishing public, and they are self-reliant on collective witnessing of disciplinary knowledge. Or, put simply, “if you are reading (or hearing) this, you are part of its public” (Warner 2002, 413); thus, academic scholar-readers who maintain a reliance on paywall publishing participate in sustaining a publishing public.

Theorizing paywall publishing as *a* public is important for two reasons. First, it highlights publishing as itself a communicative phenomenon that remains epistemologically significant. Discourse constitutes a public through participation of interlocutors that performatively co-imagine citational fields (Warner 2002). Second, it reveals that paywall publishing participation relies on self-organizing for sustainment. Journal publishers function as the organizational mechanism that assist authors in the circulation of content toward a public of readers. Readers, as participants in a paywall public, are interpellated through explicit qualities that are required to access the content, including the financial requirement to access. And higher education institutions accept such interpellation, paying for access as they are hailed as the audience for *a* publishing public⁴ since faculty require access to enter disciplinary fields of knowledge production. To be succinct: this system exists by voluntary participation from academic audiences who constitute a public, hailing and interpellating others in to and out of their own labor, readership, and authorship. This means that a public is performative and infused with epistemological strongholds that are valued and integrated through discursive participation.

A public, particularly one with longevity and archival validity like scholarly publishing, can appear to be a neutral and natural process of academic participation. Despite the reality that “an infinite number of publics” could exist “within the social totality,” we can be misled by “a public, in practice, appear[ing] as *the* public” (Warner 2002, 414, emphasis in original), shifting from *a* (neutral) public to a dominant public. Our logic unfolds as follows: because many disciplines—including our own—rely on journal ranking and impact calculations to determine prestige, and because teacher-scholars rely on those rankings to make decisions about publications due to institutional processes and reviews that integrate said data, paywall publishing creates a false choice, legitimizing its own existence and hailing reader-authors into the

dominant public. While, certainly, scholars are not universally mandated to publish in these venues, closed systems' journals are normalized as preferential through epistemologically significant ideologies of traditionalism and business-as-usual norms that suture academic success to publishing within these preconceived structures. So, what's the problem? This dominant public thus defines scholarship through a closed circuit and an academic public sphere that constitutes exclusionary processes—what Albornoz et al. (2020) call epistemic injustice—practices that are at odds with feminist movements.

Feminist scholar Nancy Fraser (1990) criticizes public spheres that assume publics exist as “a space of zero degree culture” “with perfect neutrality” (64). While Fraser's initial criticisms emerged in response to Habermasian public sphere theory, Fraser's feminist criticism demands reflexivity around power and marginalization within public spheres. Thus, a dominant public enables deeper feminist criticism of processes that uphold myths of neutrality. As our description noted, privatized paywall publishing leads to expensive and inaccessible journal subscriptions. The appearance of neutrality amongst a paywall publishing public and the dominance that it maintains can mask the implications of the implicit and explicit exclusionary practices. Above, for example, we noted the privatized, expensive landscape defined by paywall publishing. As a dominant public, implications of these processes are often masked through encouragement to participate, whereby individuals who have access to the means of participation (i.e. access) can invisibilize who is left out of such discursive terrain. This landscape informs our feminist criticisms below.

Closed Systems as a Dominant Public

Theorized as a dominant public, paywall publishing emerges in tension with feminist epistemological roots. Our feminist criticism is explicit: rather than a neutral public, closed system publishing functions as a dominant public and includes ubiquitous ideological mechanisms and power differentials with lasting implications for accessible educational knowledge circulation. In this section, we evoke a feminist ethos that relies on bell hooks's (2015) broad feminist framework, focusing on an exploration of power as a mechanism of domination and control (83). Albornoz et al.'s (2020) exploration of epistemic injustice, or the process of devaluing certain types and locations of knowledge, nuance our hooksian focus on power because, as they argue, “knowledge is always shaped by the identities, social practices, social locations, and sociopolitical experiences of those who produce it and share it” (67). Rather than take a public for granted, we instead consider systemic implications with a focus on oppressive ideologies by asking: what are the consequences of the current processes, protocols, and publishing narratives? How might epistemic injustice be constituted in this dominant public? Sophie Sills et al. (2016) are explicit that “the dominant ‘public’ is rife with exclusions along gender, race/ethnicity, and class lines, and women's voices have always struggled for legitimacy” (937). Below, we articulate three specific criticisms of this dominant public: the feminization of labor, the elimination of educational ideologies toward a public good, and privatization as a means of control that prioritize privileged academic literacies.

First, the dominant paywall public utilizes processes that exploit libraries and librarians—an area of academic labor often relegated to “service” and highly gendered. Similar to contingent instructors, librarians are statistically more likely to be women, leading to the feminization of labor that ultimately denigrates librarianships through misogynistic de-valuation of women's work (see Garrison 1977; Mapes 2019). The dominant paywall publishing public continues this exploitation by requiring libraries to buy back and carry the material weight of access for academics, including contractual negotiation and lasting labor to prioritize expensive scholarly epistemologies. Despite librarian attempts to educate faculty on the unsustainable infrastructure of current paywall publishing practices for over a decade (Norrie 2012; Bothwell 2020; Sample 2012), disciplinary research foci continue to participate in the dominant public.

Such participation constitutes support of the feminization of librarianship by relegating librarian expertise as less-valuable, inferior, or intellectual (Garrison 1977). Because “the circulation of public discourse is constantly imagined” (Warner 2002, 423), academics—readers, editors, and authors—continue participating in an institutional-imagining that of domination and exclusion.

Second, the dominant public reconfigures education from a public good to a privately funded research enterprise. As we’ve noted, journal access is increasingly expensive, with journal bundles costing exorbitant amounts of money. Below, we extend Nancy Fraser’s (1990) feminist criticism of the unequal (dominant) public sphere and cite Fraser at length:

Unequally empowered social groups tend to develop unequally valued cultural styles. The result is the development of powerful informal pressures that marginalize the contributions of members of subordinated groups both in everyday life contexts and in official public spheres . . . In this public sphere, the media that constitute the material support for the circulation of views are privately owned and operated. Consequently, subordinated social groups usually lack equal access to the material means of equal participation. (64–65)

Fraser’s criticism invites us to ask: what groups or knowledge types become excluded when access is eliminated in favor of privatization? This is epistemologically significant precisely because these components privilege certain forms of knowledge and participation while subordinating others.

Indeed, these epistemological practices bar multiple stakeholders that should and could benefit from access. Audiences who lack access to institutional databases, including an increasing number of on-campus scholars, are unable to utilize research findings and, as a result, prohibited from participating in ongoing scholarly conversations. Eve (2014) argues that as “libraries are unable to afford the subscriptions, academic researchers and students at many institutions come up against paywalls that hinder their ability to conduct research and to teach/learn efficiently” (13). This insight was confirmed by a Research Information Network Survey (2009) where 40 percent of scholars reported barriers to accessing licensed literature that could influence their research (Brine 2010). In addition to on-campus scholars, access gaps are exacerbated outside the Global North. Laura Czerniewicz (2013) argues that there are vast global disparities in scholarly knowledge production and circulation—disparities influenced by monetary support or lack thereof. Scholars in the Global South often combat limited access to research because of expensive paywalls that prohibit engaging with academic knowledge, with, for example, “several sub-Saharan Universities libraries subscribed to zero” and offering “no conventional journals” (Suber 2012, 30–32).

Excluding communities from accessing knowledge excludes stakeholders from integrating, challenging, or applying scholarly knowledge. Knowledge, from a feminist standpoint, can enable a consciousness of oppressive structures or, as Nikos Koutras (2016) notes, “education is fundamental to and extremely important for social welfare” (50). As feminist scholar Claire Polster (2001) argued twenty years ago, the privatization of scholarly knowledge corporatizes universities in favor of intellectual property rights that, she warns, could devastate feminist inquiry by transforming academic knowledge from a social good to a market commodity. Closed systems rely on controlling information—a tactic to uphold power by gatekeeping knowledge from subordinated groups and placing a market value on scientific inquiry. More pointedly, this dominant public upholds epistemic injustice by prioritizing knowledge from the Global North, where, Czerniewicz (2012) warns, an exorbitant amount of information in scientific journals originates.⁵ Thus, even *if* scholars from the Global South have the monetary means to overcome price barriers, the knowledge represented throughout conventional journals both reflect Western epistemological values and often require similar scholarly commitments to publish. For example, as Suber (2012) notes, publishers who control permissions may prohibit the translation of texts beyond English. Upon first glance,

we can arrive at the important yet simplistic criticism that publicly funded knowledge should be publicly available and part of *the* public, what Warner (2002) calls a social totality or people in general. We agree, and, in addition, a deeper interrogation of who benefits from closed systems reveals deeper epistemological commitments to exclusion.

So far, we have articulated criticisms of paywall publishing's dominant public by noting who is excluded, namely broader audiences, but what types of knowledge flourish under this system, receiving preferential treatment within the public? In other words, who publishes and why? While, certainly, any associated or independent scholar *could* submit content for publication, faculty at research one institutions and tenure-track faculty with research designations are incentivized and are required to publish for job security. Research one institutions spent more money on journal bundles than their research two or teaching counterparts (Bergstrom et al. 2014), presumably resulting in access to larger numbers of paywall publishing content. To continue being cutting edge, a scholar at a research-intensive institution requires access to publish in the very same "top" journals that may be inaccessible to other institutions. This leads to what we call "circular citational prestige." scholars require journal access to build and extend ongoing scholarly conversations, and to become a top researcher you must serve on top editorial boards and publish in top journals that are validated by other top scholars and top researchers. Simon Batterbury (2020) elaborates that "many senior academics influencing career progression and hiring ignore these issues, prioritising publication of articles in prestige outlets, almost all of them now residing with five major publishers, over publication ethics for themselves and junior scholars. The latter respond by seeking that prestige, as I once did, because in turn, high-profile publications are essential for rewarding jobs at the best universities, which have better resources" (para. 7). Prestige is defined through citational circularity, and closed systems enable metrics of "merit" whereby top research is always already defined in and through a narrowly accessed information channel.

This begs the question: what types of epistemic knowledge are operationalized through merit? Demographic information of research intensive and tenure-track faculty who are most likely to participating in current publishing enterprise are statistically significant because they point to an epistemology of whiteness and sexism. About three-fourths of all faculty are white (Griffin 2019), with Latinx, Black, and Indigenous scholars being underrepresented at research institutions (Finkelstein et al. 2016; Griffin 2019). Thus, structural racism exists in scholarly publication and classroom education regardless of discipline (see Chakravartty et al. 2018; Ramirez-Valles 2021). Teachers Insurance and Annuity Association of America (TIAA) data also noted that "among tenure-track appointees, the gender gap has been virtually eliminated among all institutional types, except the research universities—and there the gap is still at about 1.3:1" (Finkelstein et al. 2016, 5). Because published scholars are statistically more likely to occupy a privileged positionality, their scholarly endeavors emerge from such epistemic privilege. For example, White scholars are provided inherent legitimacy, while scholars of color are not only unrepresented in academe and published research but also in the populations who are being researched. Scholars who study minority populations often face challenges from reviewers to defend the importance and necessity of their topic. Thus, conventional publishing practices exclude communities from participation by emboldening and privileging particularized epistemic experiences over others. For example, as Albornoz et al. (2020) articulates, "an Anglo-American man from a prestigious American University . . . is often afforded higher epistemic value and thus considered to be more legitimate, valid, truthful, and universal" demonstrating that "scholarly communication systems play a fundamental role in constructing . . . notions of expertise" (67). While, certainly, scholars have acknowledged whiteness within higher education, the dominant paywall public includes an additional metric by which epistemic privilege can flourish.

Finally, this backdrop transitions us into our third major criticism of the dominant paywall public: the ideologies that permeate these practices exacerbate the exclusive nature of higher education through niche academic literacy requirements. In much of her writing, hooks (2015) criticized the difficulty to access feminist theory because of complex writing styles, challenging scholar-writers to consider broader implications of our writing practices. Access, then, becomes criticized beyond material means to include exclusionary writing styles. A simple conversation with graduate and undergraduate students or a search on social media will show the struggle to read academic articles for beginners, let alone for people who have no experience in higher education. Academic writing is normalized to be distinct from other genres of creative writing by how it is written and where it is published. When the categorization of “academic” is over emphasized—made possible by a closed system of publishing—it affects the language that is used. In a closed system where both writers and readers are part of an academic public, writing can be full of jargon and sophisticated phrases. In a presentation at the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association, Anderson (2012) argued: “I don't agree with the argument put forth by scholars like Gayatri Spivak, who often defend nearly unreadable texts with the response that there is no other way to communicate complex ideas. I disagree. I think it is indeed possible to communicate complexity in a clear—and even interesting—manner” (4). Admittedly, abstract and theoretical ideas require accurate descriptions and explanations. However, standardizing complexity can reduce the educational experience of diverse readers.

Language is not only used to deliver the meaning of a complex idea but to indicate the stance and position of the communicators, especially when hierarchy is present. When someone has a higher position in a hierarchy or takes pride in their identity, they tend to use linguistic cues to emphasize that advantage. For example, studies found that women are more accommodative to men in intergender conversation but not the other way around (Mulac et al. 1987; Namy et al. 2002). In verbal interactions, both men and women tend to stick to gender stereotypical way of communication (e.g., men using lower pitch and assertive tone while women using higher pitch and tentative language) (Bayard 1995; Hogg 1985; Palomares 2009) because it is often expected by the social norm. This pattern also applies to the communication between well-educated elite populations in academia and other publics. It is normalized in academia to purposely use jargon, insider talks, and nonaccommodative ways of communication to seek for uniqueness—norms that, in our view, constitute the types of technical norms and standards that constitute epistemic injustice (Albornoz et al. 2020). The lack of accommodation to its readers in academic writing indicates an exclusive connotation that one “should” have the “basic literacy” to be able to comprehend the content and further to participate in the conversation. Thus, not only do closed systems explicitly exclude non-academic communities, but this dominant public epistemologically enables niche jargon that creates the conditions for privilege.

In this section, we provided a description of current paywall publishing practices, and theorized closed systems as a public, noting the discursive constitution of publics via communication. Rather than a neutral public, the ideology inherent within current practices have formed a dominant public that has systematically justified white epistemic knowledge circulation at the expense of the broader good. What now? We introduce a new system below.

Part Two: Open Access as a Feminist Re-tooling

So far, we have articulated criticisms of closed, paywall publishing practices by arguing that they constitute mechanisms of control by relying on a dominant publishing public that creates exclusions based on epistemic injustices. In this section, we introduce open access as a method of feminist re-tooling. Using

hooks and Fraser, we offer insights into how and why open access is central to the feminist movement by articulating open access as a feminist counterpublic, focusing on literacy and community-oriented scholarship. We begin by theorizing an open access counterpublic.

The open access (OA) movement emerged from the open software movement with the goal of democratizing education (see Craig et al. 2011; Batterbury 2020). Namely, the open access movement focuses on making information freely available, including the elimination of paywalls and closed systems of information gatekeeping. We rely on two complementary definitions of OA: Suber (2012) describes OA content as “digital, online, free of charge, and free of most copyright and licensing restrictions” or “barrier-free access” (4). Copyright plays a key role in OA, with “open” denoting open licensing over traditional copyright models whereby publishers own and oversee rights to content—a requirement for closed publishing to restrict the circulation of manuscripts. Open licensing copyright models strive to normalize accessibility and collaborative creation by allowing “free accessibility, further distribution and proper archiving of scientific and scholarly publications” (Guibault 2011, 139). Suber’s description of OA reduces both price and permission barriers while still prioritizing attribution as a standard to foreground authorial autonomy. Well known OA scholar Martin Paul Eve (2014) similarly describes OA, arguing that “Open access means peer-reviewed academic research work that is free to read online and that anybody may redistribute and reuse, with some restrictions” (1). Open access could be achieved by either creating more open access journals (Golden Road) or establishing institutional repositories where authors can deposit all their published works (Green Road) (Guibault 2011, 139). Open access journals, while certainly operationalized through multiple instantiations, are often committed to open systems of information sharing over closed, paywall systems.⁶

Through commitments like open collaboration and accessibility, open access communities can serve as a counterpublic that re-constitutes knowledge production and asks broad questions about our publishing norms. This approach is revolutionary to the dominant, closed paywall public when infused with commitments to the feminist movement. Here, we rely on Fraser’s (1990) pointed question when she asks, “what institutional arrangements will best help narrow the gap in participatory parity between dominant and subordinate groups?” (66). For us, open access can offer *one* route to resist dominant narratives of publishing. Fraser (1990) calls these alternative publics “*subaltern counterpublics* in order to signal that they are parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter discourses” (67, emphasis in original). We find it imperative to proffer open access participation as a counterpublic rather than end our argument with an emphasis on open access journals’ ability to eliminate paywalls more broadly. A counterpublic signals a reimagination—a revolutionary invitation to consider the means of production and reflexively interrogate practices that no longer serve us, including publisher-owned copyright, academic jargon, and restrictive citational circles. To theorize and praxiologically situate open access participation as a counterpublic enables members of the counterpublic “to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (Fraser 1990, 67, emphasis in original). What, then, are the oppositional interpretations that an open access feminist counterpublic could provide?

First, an open access counterpublic broadens access to community-oriented epistemologies. An open academic system, including open access journals and open educational resources, links academic communities to a broader audience, bridging the knowledge gap caused by an exclusive academic system. Anne Travers (2003) articulates the importance of building parallel feminist subaltern counterpublics for “subordinate social groups—women, workers, peoples of colour, and gays and lesbians” (230) to increase the presence and participation of all subordinated social groups. Thus, creating a new norm of an open academic system is essential for academics and the larger non-academic public in communicating scientific knowledge. General publics outside of academe can access scientific knowledge and educate themselves without the financial burden that dictates the status quo. They could also interact and contribute their own

perspectives to the development of academic research because they have uninhibited access to scholarly conversations. Normalizing an open access system will diversify the involving parties and the roles that they play. For examples, college instructors from non-research one institutions could access the latest journal publications and update their teaching accordingly. K-12 teachers could educate themselves and their students by accessing more academic research. Independent researchers who have no affiliation access could connect the academic public and the broader public with their previous academic training. Individuals who did not or were not able to receive higher education could educate themselves and participate in the conversation in their own way. Because an open access counterpublic hails broader community members to participate by eliminating structural and material barriers, subordinated groups are given access to the means of scholarly production.

On a basic level, this commitment to broader access is re-centering education as liberatory rather than transactional. Koutras (2016) argues that “when we can access information resources, we can also access knowledge” (59), and access to knowledge can lead to an increase in consciousness to reduce oppression (see Freire 2005). Publishing as a mechanism of educational processes, both for researchers, institutions, and for a broader readership, is surely distinct from dominant models of career-over-community. Thus, rather than research as an instantiation of neoliberal logics of ownership, placing a market-value on scientific inquiry, open access builds on feminist commitments of collaboration and liberation. In fact, feminists’ work in Distributed Open Collaborative Scholarship (DOCS) is one example of a feminist movement that integrates open access materials to disentangle technology “from the limiting values of efficiency, transparency and compliance” (Kember 2020, para. 3). Instead, DOCS prioritizes the rebuilding of disciplinary norms and infrastructures toward distributed and collaborative scholarly publishing models (Kember 2020). By building on, collaborating with, and being inspired by feminist work like DOCS, OA counterpublics can re-tool publishing as an educational means toward a public good. This is core to open access as a feminist re-tooling because it invites scholars to think beyond the individualizing mechanism of privatization to instead re-constitute publishing toward broader epistemologies.

Hailing broader participation into open access counterpublics is significant because it expands readership beyond discretely defined academic audiences. As any rhetorician will note, a competent rhetor considers their audience when constructing an artifact. A broader audience can challenge researchers to consider the utility of their research questions and how their findings are disseminated. Building on this structure, a closed publishing system—because rhetors are primarily accountable to like-minded scholars—can subtly enable the study of research populations, speaking *for* rather than with those populations. As a result, academic scholars will study the experiences of those who have less academic literacy and publish their findings in a system that participants themselves cannot access—either materially or because of inaccessible academic literacy norms. In sum, those who have academic training will filter the voices of the general public through their own points of view, publishing those filtered voices in exclusive language on a closed platform behind the paywall. In opposition to this approach, accessing and participating in scholarly counterpublic spaces, particularly from diverse standpoints, can challenge epistemic privilege that occurs in paywall publishing’s dominant public. As we noted above, open access can lead to a reconfiguration of the very questions that are asked because the audience becomes expansive over insular. Counterpublics can provide “alternative public spheres for feminist to develop new terms and analyses of their social reality” (Sills et al. 2016, 937); thus, when broader audiences are offered access to open access publics, otherwise excluded and devalued experiences and positionalities can interpret and define the new means of engagement (or have the potential to).

In addition to re-tooling and/or challenging *what* is studied, a feminist counterpublic means re-tooling *how* information is conveyed by considering who we are speaking to and how we are speaking to them. As hooks (2015) warns, the “concentration of feminist educators in universities encourages habitual

use of an academic style that may make it impossible for teachers to communicate effectively with individuals who are not familiar with either academic style or jargon” (112). Again, the insularity of a dominant public creates conditions for exclusionary literacy styles, including privileging knowledge that circulates from the Global North. A feminist counterpublic, then, cannot merely expand access to scholarly research without contending with the epistemic injustice inherent within scholarly production writ large. As we have argued, a substantial amount of scholarly publishing prioritizes content from the Global North that, in turn, creates epistemic norms about what scholarly literature is and does. For open access to be integrated into the feminist movement, researchers must critically evaluate the preference for exclusive language in favor of broader and more localized literacies. This isn’t to suggest that all complexity and jargon be eliminated from writing, but to question who that writing serves and at what cost. Similarly, because open access eliminates closed information systems, the broader public is provided opportunity to read and process academic writing.

Finally, operationalizing a feminist OA counterpublic requires both acknowledgement and engagement with OA criticisms. Conventional journal publishers have responded to the momentum for open access by allowing “open” options for authors; however, publishers subsidize their profit losses by instituting Article Process Charges (APCs) (Puehringer et al. 2021). APCs refer to a particular business model that shifts the financial burden to authors whereby authors pay a fee to allow their work to be openly available to audiences after publication. This merely replicates harmful price barriers where publishers utilize open access as the ends to justify a costly means. In fact, Pooley (2016) groups APCs alongside general subscription models when describing conventional publishing processes. We, like Pooley, view APCs as mere co-optation of an OA ethos. Certainly, as Pooley (2016) concedes, publication will always have a cost, but “much broader access can be obtained for a fraction of the billions of dollars sloshing around in the existing tolled system” (6151).

Beyond APCs, critics warn that OA journals risk merely replicating harmful scholarly publishing systems. Certainly, OA does not naturally or innately challenge the type of epistemic injustice that we have criticized above—injustice embedded in a Western, academic lineage of privileged epistemologies. As Pooley (2016) succinctly warns, “The biggest challenge for OA, across the academy and not just in media research, is the dead weight of the past—the accretions of prestige that coat the oldest (and invariably tolled) publications” (6159). These metrics of prestige risk bleeding into OA journal processes. The significance of this risk necessitates, for us, operationalizing OA through radical feminist counterpublics to address the epistemological roots of injustice that sustain scholarly publishing and output. Because, as Travers (2003) warns when writing about online counterpublics: “without feminist and progressive contestation, [digital spaces] are bound to become more inhospitable, and there is a greater likelihood that they will be left to those individuals and groups for whom genuine inclusiveness is not a goal” (227). OA counterpublics require liberatory practices that respond to the criticisms that we, and others, have lodged against conventional publishing.

A liberatory counterpublic ethos is emboldened by embodying what Kathleen Fitzpatrick (2019) calls “generous thinking.” For Fitzpatrick, the current university infrastructure upholds neoliberal values of prestige and merit—values that are certainly reflected in conventional publishing models. Instead, generous thinking is a “mode of engagement that emphasizes listening over speaking, collaboration over competition, and lingering with the ideas that are in front of us rather than continually pressing forward to where we want to go” (Fitzpatrick 2019, 4). Because, as Suber (2012) notes, the complexities of transitioning to OA models are not technical but cultural, generous thinking supplants the necessary revolutionary spirit within OA feminist counterpublics by focusing on relationship building and public consciousness beyond our campus boundaries.

Our goal, however, is not to universalize open access to presume revolutionary potential. Counterpublics are not inherently revolutionary; rather, they extend the discursive space and *can* function as revolutionary to dominant ideologies. Our goal is to suggest feminist values that may enable anti-oppressive regimes of knowledge within open access epistemologies. Our arguments in support of open access counterpublics are suggestive; they are attempts to move participants toward public participation with anti-racist and liberatory ends in mind. As Fraser (2013) reminds us, “for critical theorists . . . there remains a prior task: to analyze alternative grammars of the feminist imaginary in order to assess their emancipatory potential” (1). We view open access as one potential imaginary that can invite dialogue around epistemic privilege, literacy, and research toward liberatory ends. Because we believe that “the rapid spread of open access practices promises a radical change to the way in which knowledge and information is shared and disseminated in the digital world” (Craig et al. 2011, 3). And because publics—including counterpublics—are constituted through communicatively showing up or pulling away, we invite readers to “show up” in feminist open access counterpublics.

The focus on “revolution” rather than reform is purposeful, but a revolutionary approach facilitates starting over to consider the publishing fabric writ-large, as Buranyi (2017) warns that “many scientists also believe that the publishing industry exerts too much influence over what scientists choose to study, which is ultimately bad for science itself” (para. 6). Open access counterpublics cannot merely replace current structures, and how we organize, oversee, and produce content through these counterpublics requires discussion, deliberation, and a commitment to constant reflexivity. To usher toward a revolutionary potential is daunting, but it’s a core component of our argument because without this call, open access journals risk merely replacing our current closed system of information sharing with continued prioritization toward citational circularity and insular validation. Open access overtly eliminates material paywalls that limit access and privatize inquiry, but the feminist movement and a counterpublic ethos can re-tool open access toward revolutionary ends. At least that is what we hope.

Part Three: Integrating Feminism into Our Scholarly Lives

In this final section, we consider the epistemological significance of living a feminist life and provide suggestions for academics. We write this section in the spirit of Albornoz et al. (2020) who remind us to think of openness “not as a set of practices or technologies to follow but, rather, as a ‘state of mind or attitude’ to be adopted primarily by individuals, and as a ‘methodology’ to collaborate and work between diverse communities” (70). For us, this discussion is central to disrupting narratives that uphold, prioritize, and evoke a neutrality myth in the dominant paywall publishing public. As academics, we must question how we talk the talk of publishing and how we show up in our disciplinary circles. We conclude our essay here to evoke reflection and movement toward reimagination in our readers’ minds.

A core epistemological tenet of living a feminist life means living as a skeptic (Ahmed 2017). A deep skepticism of publishing practices is where our journey, as authors, began, leading us to open access. To be a skeptic means engaging in scholarly re-definition whereby institutionalized and traditional practices are questioned. Here, we borrow from Elizabeth Janeway who describes this as “the refusal to accept the definition of oneself that is put forward by the powerful” and using the “power to disbelieve” (qtd. in hooks 2015, 920). A feminist refusal means questioning whether our work belongs behind paywalls. It means re-defining who our work is for. It is a refusal to accept, as scholars, that successful academic progress means participating in overtly discriminatory paywall practices and gatekeeping that excludes community participation and readers of important works.

Such refusal can also necessitate reflexivity and accountability in our own participation in dominant publics. Every instantiation of “public or perish” rhetoric that is passed on; every mention that “you *must* publish in x journal to be successful;” each moment a promotional reviewer demonizes an author for open access publishing—these seemingly disparate moments construct a powerful narrative that hails junior scholars into dominant regimes of closed system publishing. Thus, the route toward disrupting the existence of a dominant public is to halt discursive participation and constitute discursive entanglement elsewhere. Warner (2002) reminds that “the circularity is essential to the phenomenon. A public might be real and efficacious, but its reality lies in just this reflexivity by which an addressable object is conjured into being in order to enable the very discourse that gives it existence” (14). Thus, revolutionary potential emerges from absence—from refusing to be hailed as the audience to closed publishing systems. And it emerges from presence—from showing up within feminist counterpublics like, as we have suggested, open access counterpublics.

Finally, embodying a feminist counterpublic requires a sincere investigation into our institutional processes and the ontological atmosphere that it creates. Here, we find inspiration from Fitzpatrick’s (2019) generous thinking—a tool of resistance to combat competitive neoliberal models that suture success to individualized constructs of distinction. Instead, generous thinking “is a way of being in and with the world” to “ensure that we’re doing everything we possibly can to create the ways of thinking we’d like to see manifested around us” (Fitzpatrick 2019, 6). This way of being means stepping off the “singular path now laid out before us” (Fitzpatrick 2019, 28)—a path sutured to conventional publishing with severely unjust epistemic roots—toward multiplicity, generosity, and openness. We look forward to seeing you there.

Notes

1. The five publishers are: Elsevier, Black and Wiley, Taylor and Francis, SAGE, and Springer Nature.
2. Throughout, we use “closed systems of information” and “paywall publishers” interchangeably as they are self-referential. A closed system is defined by a paywall.
3. Peter Suber (2012) clarifies that reporting complete and accurate library subscription bundles is often prohibited under “confidentiality clauses” (33).
4. While scholars (Warner 2002) have argued that a public can only exist outside the state, we argue that academics (even funded by state institutions) still constitute an external public because of academic freedom. In other words, academics are granted communicative freedom to explore ideas vis-à-vis academic freedom without state intervention. While academic institutions require scholarly participation, a dominant public (as described here) chooses the means by which publishing occurs and where. In other words, a public participates in closed system publishing. The conflation of “academic scholar” with “closed system scholar” is precisely our criticism.
5. See the “World of Science” map created by @juancommander for a visual representation of the scholarly flow of information at <http://jalperin.github.io/d3-cartogram/>
6. See Martin Paul Eve’s 2014 book, *Open Access and the Humanities: Contexts, Controversies and the Future*, for a full review of different categories of open access, including Gold and Green open access.

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