

# Open for Debate: Situating Open Research for the Humanities in a Neoliberal Setting

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**Abstract:** Open research has been widely promoted as a means of democratizing knowledge, yet its uptake in the humanities has remained limited and frequently marked by ambivalence. In the context of growing institutional investment in open research, this article interrogates what openness entails for the humanities within a research setting increasingly shaped by neoliberal rationalities. While often framed as a democratizing force, the implementation of open research policies, particularly around open access and open data, seems to have largely aligned with market-oriented imperatives, emphasizing transparency, efficiency, and economic return. The article argues that the friction between open research and the humanities arises not from an aversion to openness per se, but from the instrumentalization of open research and its imposition as a universalizing, science-centric framework that fails to accommodate the pluralistic dimensions of humanistic research. Rather than dismissing openness, the article calls for a reimagining of open research grounded in pluralism, situated ethics, and disciplinary specificity.

**Keywords:** open research, humanities, neoliberalism, openness

## Introduction

This article starts from the premise that the current research and academic policy landscape, particularly science policies in the Global North, is situated within a neoliberal context, one marked by market logics, performance metrics, and increasing pressure for demonstrable economic impact. Neoliberalism here is understood not simply as a set of economic policies, but as a broader rationality that shapes how knowledge is produced, evaluated, and circulated “in accordance with market logic, promoting market-based outcomes where possible” (Moore 2019, 18). This understanding draws on scholars such as Zoe Hope Bulaitis (2020), who critiques the reconfiguration of academia as a business, and Eric Kansa (2014), who calls attention to the entrenched neoliberal

ideologies shaping the scholarly communication system. Within this broader political economy, open research seems to have emerged as a key instrument of research reform.

While open research is often framed as a progressive and democratizing movement, emphasizing transparency, collaboration, reproducibility and accessibility, it is not politically neutral, being highly contextual (Neylon 2017). The term *open research* encompasses a variety of practices and values, shaped by disciplinary traditions, institutional policies, and agendas. This article delves into what open research means for the humanities, whose epistemologies, communication practices, and research outputs often do not align with the assumptions underpinning dominant open research frameworks.

Several scholars have already critically examined the tensions between openness in scholarly communication and neoliberalism (Lawson 2019; Moore 2019; Sanders and Bowie 2020) and the need to recognize the differences and plurality among epistemic cultures in order to achieve meaningful openness (Kiesewetter 2023). This article advances the discussion by interrogating specifically how the humanities, as a community of practice composed of several epistemic cultures, are positioned within this regime. It does so by tracing how open science policies and discourses, largely conceived within empiricist research traditions, translate into research systems governed by neoliberal logics. Drawing on scholarship from information science, critical publishing studies, and science and technology studies, the article argues that open research cannot be meaningfully understood as a universal or discipline-neutral paradigm. Rather, it should be understood as a political construct, the neoliberal institutionalization of which risks eroding the ethical and reflexive foundations of humanistic inquiry. The main argument of the article then adds nuance to the existing discussions around re-situating openness.

The goal is not to reject openness per se, but to critically examine how the concept has been mobilized and what it entails when applied across different knowledge cultures. Following Rebekka Kiesewetter (2023, 151), who argues for a “situational, relational, and interventionist” approach to open access publishing, the article treats openness as a contested and situated concept rather than a fixed ideal. As Thomas Hostler (2024) notes, if openness is to function as a meaningful value for research, it must be examined in relation to the political and institutional systems in which it operates, including those increasingly influenced by academic capitalism.

This analysis is informed by my own positionality as a researcher in information science, working at the intersection of critical librarianship and scholarly communication, and situated within a European, specifically Portuguese, academic context. My understanding of openness, neoliberalism, and the humanities is therefore shaped by both the geopolitical and epistemic conditions of the Global North, where discourses of open science are often formulated. This perspective does not seek neutrality. Instead, I intend to examine how these discourses materialize in situated and disciplinary realities,

acknowledging the uneven power relations that structure knowledge production. Through this lens, the article explores how open research policies, particularly when tied to concepts such as quality, economic competitiveness, efficiency, and return on investment, can create friction with the values and practices of humanities scholarship.

Throughout this article, the term *humanities* is used as a heuristic category rather than a homogeneous field. I recognize that the humanities encompass a plurality of disciplines and practices, each with their own ways of knowledge production and distinct relationships to openness. My argument therefore doesn't presume a singular "humanities openness" but instead seeks to trace how certain humanistic traditions engage with, resist, or reinterpret the neoliberal framings of open research.

Taken together, these discussions contribute to ongoing efforts to rethink openness not as a technocratic reform but as a site of contestation where epistemic, political, and ethical questions intersect (Chan 2019). The article aims to expand the conceptual terrain of open research beyond the empirical-informed fields paradigm that currently dominate policy and rhetoric (Hanchard and San Roman Pineda 2025) by critiquing the neoliberal appropriation of open science.

The article first outlines the emergence and institutionalization of the open research discourse, highlighting its varied definitions and underlying ambitions while identifying initial points of friction with humanities-based research. The second section deepens this analysis by exploring how open research has functioned as a political object, often aligned with neoliberal and academic capitalist agendas, and how this framing influences policy implementation and research incentives. The third section turns to the concept of openness itself, arguing that it is far from neutral or universal and instead must be understood as context-dependent, historically contingent, and politically situated. The fourth section brings these threads together by situating openness within the humanities, contrasting the power structures and value systems of open research with those of humanistic inquiry. The article concludes by reflecting on how openness must be re-imagined if it is to serve the humanities meaningfully, not as a one-size-fits-all mandate but as a pluralistic, value-driven practice that takes context, community, and ethics seriously.

## 1. The Open Research Discourse

Open science has emerged as a prominent discourse aimed at transforming the research landscape by promoting openness, transparency, and collaboration in scholarly practice (Rafols et al. 2024). However, the discourse is far from homogeneous. The UNESCO Recommendation on Open Science, for example, defines open science as an inclusive construct encompassing various movements. These are aimed at making multilingual

scientific knowledge openly available and accessible, enhancing collaboration, and engaging societal actors beyond traditional academic boundaries (UNESCO 2021). Yet, as Ismael Rafols et al. (2024) point out, this ideal takes on different inflections depending on regional and institutional contexts. The authors highlight that, for instance, in Latin America, open science is often framed by regional research networks and public universities as a contribution to the public good. By contrast, in Europe, the open science discourse has largely been shaped by policy bodies such as the European commission as well as funding agencies, which tend to justify openness through narratives of efficiency, quality, and innovation (Rafols et al. 2024). These differing motivations reflect the underlying tensions within the open science movement and highlight the risk of a standardized model that may not resonate with all epistemic cultures. In other words, open research and its meanings, ambitions, and operational forms vary significantly across geographies, disciplines, and epistemic traditions.

Open research has recently emerged as a broader and more inclusive term than open science. In this article, the terms *open science* and *open research* are used interchangeably, while recognizing that each carries distinct genealogies and epistemic connotations. In the European policy context, *open science* often functions as an umbrella label encompassing several different practices such as open access, open data, and open reproducible research (see, for instance, the FOSTER Open Science Taxonomy; Knoth and Pontika 2015). Yet it implicitly privileges empirically informed fields, such as those of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), models of inquiry that value transparency and reproducibility (Hanchard and San Roman Pineda 2025). By contrast, traditions within the humanities, as well as interpretative social sciences or even STEM, approach openness through dialogic, hermeneutic, and contextual forms of engagement. Acknowledging this polysemy is important, since the term *open*, as Kevin Sanders and Simon Bowie (2020) alert, can become co-opted for neoliberal ends.

The origins of open research reveal ties to the Free and Open Source Software (FOSS) movement of the 1980s (Lawson 2019). This lineage is important for understanding the ideological foundations of openness (Tkacz 2014). As Jonathan Tennant et al. (2020) observe, openness in research shares many principles with FOSS but are considerably more complex, encompassing a wide range of practices such as open access publishing, data sharing, collaborative authorship, and transparent peer review processes. The Budapest Open Access Initiative (BOAI) marked a critical turning point in scholarly communication for the institutionalization of these ideas, leading to a proliferation of “open” practices that now extend well beyond access to publications.

The distinction between the ethical openness of the free-software movement and the market openness promoted by open source models (Tkacz 2014) shows similar tensions within today’s scholarly communication ecosystem. As Matthew Hanchard and Itzel San Roman Pineda (2025, 20) note, the vision of “normal science” as presented by

Thomas Kuhn as cumulative has in recent decades been absorbed by “neoliberal regimes of data extractivism, where publicly funded research generates gain for large corporations.” This shows how the language of openness can also sustain the marketization of research infrastructures.

Nonetheless, the terminological landscape remains contested. Terms such as *open science*, *open scholarship*, *open research*, and *open humanities* are often used interchangeably yet may carry different connotations and reflect different priorities. Several authors note that open science has typically been grounded in STEM disciplines, often overlooking the distinct knowledge-making practices of the arts, humanities, and social sciences (Tennant et al. 2020; Knöchelmann 2019; Arthur and Hearn 2021; Arthur and Hearn 2024; Sidler 2014).

Jürgen Schneider (2024) confirms that literature on open science disproportionately originates from medical, health, and natural sciences, with minimal representation from the humanities. Marcel Knöchelmann (2019) warns that current conceptualizations of open science often fail to adequately engage with the distinct characteristics of the humanities, both terminologically and conceptually. As such, according to the author, there is a pressing need to develop an integrated *open humanities* discourse that can accommodate the specificities of interpretive, critical, and reflective scholarship (Knöchelmann 2019). In addition, power imbalances around the discourse have also led some scholars to advocate for a more inclusive discourse that both accounts for disciplinary plurality and avoids reinforcing epistemological and geopolitical hierarchies (Chan 2019).

One of the main challenges with open research in the humanities is the difference in the underlying methods and assumptions. Open research practices such as pre-registration, data sharing, and reproducibility protocols are primarily designed to address challenges in quantitative, hypothetico-deductive research models. These practices aim to make the research process more transparent and verifiable by making methodological decisions and data publicly available. For example, pre-registration, highly used in psychology and biomedical fields, requires researchers to make their hypotheses and protocols available before data collection, in order to reduce the risk of selective reporting or post hoc interpretation. As Bogdana Huma and Jack Joyce (2023) argue, these practices often fail to account for the diversity and nuance of qualitative methodologies. They tend to assume that research data are discrete, decontextualized, and transferable across settings, potentially leading qualitative researchers and humanities scholars to leave behind non-traditional methods to follow mainstream qualitative approaches (Huma and Joyce 2023). This mismatch can lead to increased workloads, bureaucratic constraints, and a perceived need to conform to norms that misrepresent their research processes and also generate moralized distinctions between “good” and “bad” research (Huma and Joyce 2023; Hostler 2024; Tennant et al. 2020).

Schneider (2024) warns of the dangers of standardizing open research practices, which risks privileging research cultures where full openness is feasible while marginalizing those in which only partial forms of openness are appropriate. This approach not only emphasizes conflicts between disciplines but also makes it harder to find common ground across different academic traditions. Without adequate sensitivity to these methodological differences, open research risks becoming not just a prescriptive framework but an indiscriminate one that shapes disciplines and practices in ways that create tensions rather than enable meaningful openness.

These tensions cannot be separated from the wider transformation of higher education and research under neoliberal governance. Policies such as Plan S, statements such as the UNESCO Recommendation on Open Science, and national open science strategies embed openness within performance-based and compliance regimes connected with market-driven ideologies. Take, for instance, the Portuguese National Open Science Policy, an initiative between the Portuguese government and the Ministry of Science, Technology and Higher Education, which recognized open science as “a means that allows the translation of scientific knowledge to the scientific community, society and companies, thus making it possible to increase the recognition and social economic impact of science” (Ministry of Science, Technology and Higher Education 2016). This same strategy identified three pillars for open science, namely “transparency in practices, methodology, observation and data collection; availability and reuse of scientific data, public access and transparency in scientific communication; and the use of web-based tools in order to facilitate scientific collaboration” (Ministry of Science, Technology and Higher Education 2016).

More recently, the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT) announced a revision of its open access policy in order to align with Plan S (Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia 2025). This policy orientation translates epistemic ideals into administrative instruments that prioritize measurable outputs, positioning openness as a proxy for efficiency and accountability rather than an ethical commitment. In such contexts, researchers frequently encounter openness not as invitation but as mandate (Sanders and Bowie 2020).

Beyond methodological frictions, a more profound concern lies in the alignment of open research with neoliberal agendas. Several scholars have observed that open research is increasingly framed as a tool for enhancing research efficiency, innovation, and return on investment, often in ways that echo market-based rationalities (Rafols et al. 2024; Albornoz et al. 2018). Governments and funding agencies in countries such as Portugal, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands have supported open research initiatives largely due to their perceived economic benefits (De Jonge 2024; Ministry of Science, Technology and Higher Education 2016).

Joe Deville (2018) and Hostler (2024) note that this instrumentalization contributes to the standardization of open research practices through research bureaucracies and metrics, which may pressure scholars to adopt forms of openness that align poorly with their disciplinary values. An example is humanities researchers being required to deposit interpretive or context-dependent materials in repositories designed for quantitative datasets. This dynamic reflects broader patterns of academic capitalism and the influence of performative evaluation systems on scholarly labor (Deville 2018; Peters and Roberts 2012).

Moreover, as Cameron Neylon (2017) and Nathaniel Tkacz (2014) suggest, openness, and consequently open research, is not a politically neutral project. Its ideological roots in Western techno-utopianism, coupled with its adoption by governments and institutions with neoliberal commitments, raise questions about whose interests openness ultimately serves (Neylon 2017). Neylon frames openness within this perspective as a network-enabled mode of collaboration and engagement, yet it coexists with oppositional and politically inflected forms that can reproduce power asymmetries. While open research aspires to values such as equity, inclusion, and collective benefit (UNESCO 2021), in practice these values may be compromised by economic imperatives that shape policy and implementation (Rafols et al. 2024; Apartis et al. 2025).

Understanding how these diverse meanings of openness become codified in institutional policy reveals the extent to which open research functions as a political object. Its vocabulary around “transparency” and “access” conceals the performative work it does in legitimizing specific economic and ideological agendas within research.

## 2. Open Research as a Political Object

Open research is frequently promoted as a neutral, universally beneficial project grounded in values such as transparency, reproducibility, accessibility, and collaboration. It is also often framed as a movement to improve research (Uygun Tunç et al. 2023). However, scholars such as Nadine Levin and Sabina Leonelli (2017) and Martin Paul Eve (2017) stress that open research is deeply politicized, shaped by institutional policies, funding structures, and dominant ideologies. When openness is codified in policy, it performs specific values, assigning legitimacy to particular research outputs while marginalizing others (Lawson 2019; Moore 2019).

One of the central critiques emerging in the literature is that open research policies—especially those emphasizing open access and open data—have become vehicles for institutional strategy and market competitiveness (Moore 2019; Lawson 2019). In doing so, they also shape the practices and epistemologies, guiding scholars toward certain ways of knowledge production that may diverge from their epistemic norms.

As Hostler (2024) notes, while universities cannot openly restrict academic freedom, they can shape environments that encourage scholars to align their work with institutional goals and funding priorities, subtly steering research toward topics favored by external grant systems. This has led to a reorientation of academic labor around large-scale, interdisciplinary projects that maximize visibility, scalability, and funding potential, often central features of academic capitalism (Davi et al. 2021; Hostler 2024). In this context, open research is not merely a framework for improving research quality but also a technocratic tool of governance, implemented through standards, metrics, and performance indicators that align with neoliberal efficiency imperatives (Albornoz et al. 2018; Peters and Roberts 2012; Levin and Leonelli 2017; Leonelli 2023; Deville 2018). Originally grounded in the moral argument that publicly funded research should be publicly accessible, open access has increasingly been reframed as a policy requirement, becoming enforced through research assessment frameworks, as seen in the United Kingdom (Deville 2018). This reveals a broader trend in which ethical ideals are absorbed into compliance regimes, reducing open research to a symbolic gesture of transparency rather than a meaningful restructuring of scholarly communication (Moore 2019; Marczevska 2018). Once openness is codified in policy, it no longer simply denotes access but defines what counts as valuable or legitimate research, introducing the distinction between good and bad research (Tennant et al. 2020; Hostler 2024). These embedded valuations, driven by economic and political reasoning, thus reinforce existing hierarchies within the global research economy (Albornoz et al. 2018; Chen et al. 2018; Chan 2019).

Many scholars frame the trajectory of open research as symptomatic of broader transformations within higher education under neoliberalism. Here, we assume neoliberalism in academia as a system that promotes competition, efficiency, and marketization across all domains of academic life (Sleigh 2021; Bulaitis 2020; Kiesewetter 2020a). Hostler (2024) and Eve (2017) both highlight how research in this context becomes a currency in a prestige economy, shaped by funding incentives and proxy metrics that prioritize institutional visibility over epistemic diversity or social utility.

The rise of neoliberalism in academia has fundamentally reshaped the landscape of knowledge production and dissemination. Since the 1980s, the push for privatization, deregulation, and market orientation in higher education has redefined universities as market-driven institutions (Kansa 2014). This shift has led to the rise of academic capitalism, where the pursuit of knowledge is increasingly dictated by economic considerations, and the value of research is often measured in terms of its financial return or market impact (Hostler 2024).

Neoliberalism and open research are not inherently opposed, though their relationship might be considered complex. On the one hand, open research promotes the free sharing of knowledge, so this ideal can clash with market-driven interests that aim

to commercialize academic outputs. On the other hand, open research policies can be instrumentalized by neoliberal agendas, where research outputs are valued based on their potential to generate economic returns or competitive advantage (Kiesewetter 2020a; 2020b; Albornoz et al. 2018). This shift is evident in the increasing tendency to evaluate research outputs based on metrics such as citation counts and grant income, which favor certain disciplines over others, especially those focused on empirically informed research (Hostler 2024; Peters and Roberts 2012; Davi et al. 2021).

In this neoliberal setting, open research has taken on new meanings. Originally conceived as a way to expand access to research, its implementation is now often tied to national competitiveness and economic performance (Albornoz et al. 2018; Chen et al. 2018; Méndez Cota 2018). The European Union, for instance, promotes open access and open data initiatives not only as tools for increasing public knowledge but also as means to boost economic growth and enhance Europe's position in the global knowledge economy, so that it doesn't "fall behind" (Chen et al. 2018; Albornoz et al. 2018). The increasing emphasis on economic impact in funder and policy-based strategies aligns with neoliberal ideologies, which seek to link academic research directly to marketable outputs and economic value (Leonelli 2023; Kiesewetter 2020b). This dynamic disproportionately affects underfunded disciplines and marginalized epistemologies, particularly within the humanities. Bulaitis (2020) and Kiesewetter (2023) note a devaluation of moral and democratic dimensions of knowledge production, as universities increasingly privilege forms of research that can be easily measured, standardized, and marketed.

Open research, in this context, risks becoming a politicized and technocratic project, one that aligns with an empirically informed economy and the knowledge-transfer goals of innovation-focused governance (Dutta et al. 2021). This is reinforced through mandates that apply universal standards of openness that may ignore local contexts and situated knowledges, thus reproducing global asymmetries in access, participation, and epistemic authority (Albornoz et al. 2018).

Despite these critiques, there is disagreement in the literature over whether open research is inherently neoliberal or whether it represents a countermovement against neoliberal academic practices. Some scholars (Uygun Tunç et al. 2023; Hostler 2024) argue that open research and open access can and do encompass diverse motivations, including efforts to reclaim research from market logics, challenge the dominance of commercial publishing, and restore trust in knowledge production. In this view, open research is a reaction to the distortions caused by academic capitalism, rather than a product of it.

However, even these reformist accounts acknowledge the structural contradictions facing open research initiatives. As Hostler (2024) cautions, reform efforts often remain embedded within the very systems they seek to change, resulting in partial or

performative transformations that ultimately reinforce bureaucratic control and institutional conservatism.

The contradictory and ambiguous nature of open research, simultaneously reformist and regulatory, reveals its status as a political object rather than a neutral descriptor. These tensions highlight the need to interrogate openness not only as a set of practices but as a historically situated and politically charged concept.

### 3. Openness as a Contested and Situated Concept

In the academic literature, openness is increasingly recognized as a contested and even polarized term, far from the neutral ideal it is often portrayed to be in policy frameworks (Neylon 2017). According to Tennant et al. (2020), the histories of scholarship and scholarly communication are non-linear, inconsistent, and highly variable across regions and disciplines. This historical diversity undermines attempts to impose a unified model of openness across all fields and geographies. Some scholars argue that a singular, consensus definition of open research is neither possible nor desirable, as it risks flattening important differences and obscuring tensions that arise in practice (Tennant et al. 2020).

Samuel Moore (2019) offers a compelling theoretical framework by treating open access—and in the scope of this article, by extension, open research—as a boundary object. This can be interpreted as a shared term that facilitates communication across diverse communities but that lacks a fixed meaning. This ambiguity is part of its appeal, allowing various actors to align under a common banner. However, this malleability also opens the door to hegemonic interventions. Policymakers, commercial publishers, and dominant disciplines may exploit the ambiguity of “open” to advance their own agendas, whether by monetizing open access models, enforcing standardized mandates, or reinforcing disciplinary hierarchies under the guise of openness (Moore 2019).

The idea that openness is inherently situated and dependent on specific cultural, economic, and political contexts is a growing theme in critical open research literature. Leslie Chan (2019) argues that definitions of open research often ignore the diversity of knowledge systems, histories, and social structures. Framing openness merely in terms of workflows, infrastructures, or licensing standards, without attending to local context, risks replicating the very inequalities and exclusions it seeks to address (Chan 2019). Similarly, Denisse Albornoz et al. (2018) emphasize the need to interrogate the neutrality of open research, highlighting how its definitions are shaped by those with greater institutional power and access to resources.

This is particularly evident in the context of open access in the Global South. As Thomas Hervé Mboa Nkoudou (2020) has shown, initiatives in regions in Africa may

reproduce neocolonial dynamics. Research from the Global North dominates the discursive space while local scholarship remains structurally disadvantaged by processing charge models and language barriers (Nkoudou 2020). In such cases, openness becomes a conduit for epistemic extraction rather than exchange (Pinfield 2024).

Writing from a geopolitical location in the Global North, I acknowledge that many of the examples I discuss emerge from contexts where power relations, funding infrastructures, and epistemic norms are shaped by Western academic institutions. Following scholars such as Nkoudou (2020) and Chan (2019), I remain attentive to the risk of universalizing these experiences, recognizing that openness may materialize differently across regions and epistemic cultures.

Levin and Leonelli (2017) offer a further critique, describing openness as relational, positional, and performative; decisions about what to make open, and how, are deeply entangled with judgments about value, care, labor, and recognition. Openness, in their account, enacts specific forms of worth, while devaluing others, particularly when filtered through top-down mandates that abstract research from the communities and contexts in which it is produced. When openness is treated mainly as a policy goal instead of something based on relationships and trust, it can weaken the social connections that make knowledge-sharing meaningful (Lawson 2019). In their place, we often see a focus on metrics and economic value instead. When open research practices are materialized through measurable outputs and performance indicators, they narrow the interpretive space through which different epistemic cultures understand and embody openness. The plurality of such interpretations, however, is what enriches the discourses of openness.

The operationalization of openness as an institutional norm or policy imperative can create new exclusions, especially when framed in moralistic terms. Tennant et al. (2020) caution against conflating open research with “good” research, noting that such framing stigmatizes those who cannot, or choose not to, participate in open practices. Researchers in under-resourced settings, or those working in sensitive or community-based contexts, may find themselves penalized or marginalized under systems that equate openness with excellence or integrity (Huma and Joyce 2023).

This moralization of openness resonates with broader neoliberal meritocratic ideologies, in which individual success is presumed to reflect merit rather than structural advantage. Here, open research becomes a new site for reproducing inequalities under the guise of fairness. In a neoliberal research setting, openness is often instrumentalized as a reputational asset, a metric to be optimized rather than a value to be cultivated.

As Tkacz (2014) argues, openness is frequently defined in contrast to closure, positioning it as a reformist or oppositional force. Yet over time, openness itself can become institutionalized and even co-opted by the status quo, cycling through phases of radical potential, bureaucratic capture, and eventual conservatism (Neylon 2017). Because of

this, the idea of openness needs to be regularly reconsidered to make sure it doesn't just hide or support the current power imbalances.

Recognizing openness as a performative practice (Kiesewetter 2023) rather than a fixed category allows us to account for its plurality. Openness does not occur in the abstract; rather, it is performed differently within distinct epistemic cultures, institutional arrangements, and socio-technical infrastructures. Scholars thus urge us to ask fundamental questions: For whom is research being opened? By whom? Who benefits, and who is excluded or made vulnerable? (Chan 2019). Kiesewetter (2023) similarly stresses that openness is not a universally shared good, but a performative and situated practice, shaped by the relationships, locations, and resource asymmetries involved in any given research process. Even within the same institutional setting, openness may take vastly different forms across disciplines and traditions. Thus, the question is not whether openness is good or bad but how it is performed, by whom, and to what ends.

This multiplicity creates both opportunities and risks. On the one hand, the flexibility of the concept allows for pluralistic, community-led practices that reflect diverse values and epistemologies (Moore 2019). On the other, the lack of shared principles leaves open research vulnerable to co-optation, particularly by actors aligned with neo-liberal or commercial interests (Knöchelmann 2023). This becomes especially pressing for the humanities, where openness cannot simply be equated with transparency or reproducibility of data but must be understood in relation to interpretive, critical, and affective dimensions of knowledge production.

#### 4. Situating Open Research in the Humanities

Throughout this section, I use the term *the humanities* aware of the risks of treating it as a monolithic entity. The humanities encompass a wide range of disciplines, epistemic traditions, and communities of practice, each with distinct relationships to research infrastructure, publishing practices, and, consequently, concepts of openness. There is a plurality of epistemic cultures within the humanities, and some of these traditions align with social sciences or even STEM-based epistemologies. My use of the term is thus indicative of broader tendencies, seeking to advance a productive argument rather than describing a unified field. At the same time, I recognize that both the humanities and STEM are not homogeneous blocks in straightforward opposition. Both consist of overlapping, sometimes conflicting, and occasionally convergent strands and practices. Some trends in open research are inclusive of humanities approaches, while certain humanities schools align closely with STEM epistemologies and neoliberal logics. The challenges and dynamics highlighted by open research are therefore not unique to either domain but shared across interpretive and critical research fields.

The tensions experienced by the humanities in engaging with the open science movement can be traced to how openness has been operationalized within a neoliberal setting. While the ideal of openness has long informed humanistic inquiry, often grounded in notions of shared knowledge, collaborative interpretation, and community-oriented dissemination, contemporary open research policies frequently align with technocratic, empirically informed, and economically motivated models (Leonelli 2023) that are misaligned with the epistemological and methodological foundations of the humanities (Knöchelmann 2019; Arthur and Hearn 2024). As a result, openness, rather than enabling greater inclusion and plurality, risks becoming an empty signifier within the humanities, detached from the very values it is supposed to advance.

Open research frameworks within a neoliberal setting tend to favor quantifiable outputs, reproducibility, and standardized datasets, features that align well with the structures of STEM disciplines but pose challenges to humanities modes of knowledge production. As Paul Longley Arthur and Lydia Hearn (2021) note, the products of humanities research are fundamentally diverse, taking the form of essays, monographs, critical editions, and performances, formats that resist easy quantification and do not conform to the metrics-driven evaluation systems preferred by neoliberal policy frameworks.

The relationship between the humanities and the digital humanities offers a revealing lens through which to examine how neoliberalism shapes different configurations of openness within the same epistemic cultures. As Moore (2019) argues, neoliberal governance promotes an organizational philosophy grounded in market logic, whereby scholarly output is rendered measurable, competitive, and economically productive. This logic has privileged disciplines that can demonstrate impact through quantifiable outcomes or empirically informed innovation. Within this context, the digital humanities occupies an ambivalent position. They are rooted in humanistic inquiry and critique, yet their methodological reliance on digital tools, data infrastructures, and collaborative grant-funded projects has often aligned them more closely with the neoliberal university's valorization of productivity, innovation, and visibility. On the one hand, its use of computational tools, structured data, and digital infrastructures aligns with the technocratic logics that dominate research policy. On the other, many digital humanities initiatives have emerged from community-driven traditions that foreground values of accessibility, experimentation, and collective ownership.

Take, for instance, the example of *Programming Historian* (<https://programminghistorian.org>), a community-led, collaborative, and multilingual publication that provides open access, peer-reviewed tutorials for methods in the digital humanities. Another example is *LdoD Archive* (<https://ldod.uc.pt>), a collaborative digital open archive of *The Book of Disquiet*, by Fernando Pessoa; in addition to including images, documents, and transcriptions, the *LdoD Archive* also enables users to collaborate in creating digital

editions of the book. These examples exemplify how the digital humanities can both inhabit and subvert neoliberal infrastructures, making it a revealing site for examining how openness is materialized and contested. Consequently, the digital humanities is frequently celebrated within policy and funding contexts as evidence of the capacity of the humanities to adapt to expectations of efficiency and innovation, while “traditional” humanities practices are problematically cast as resistant or obsolete. This uneven positioning highlights how neoliberal rationalities operate differentially within the humanities, rewarding projects that can be rendered as data or infrastructure.

Moreover, the dominance of neoliberal ideology in research governance means that open research is frequently implemented through policies emphasizing efficiency, accountability, and market value, sidelining scholarly values rooted in reflection, criticality, and care. In such contexts, outputs that are diffuse, complex, or difficult to measure, common in the humanities, struggle for recognition (Kansa 2014). As Bulaitis (2020) argues, the conflation of academic success with measurable outcomes and economic impact obscures the alternative, long-standing values of humanistic inquiry. The institutionalization of openness in this way risks instrumentalizing it in service of the very neoliberal logics that many humanities scholars critique.

These tensions extend to issues of intellectual property and ownership. Recent work by Hanchard and San Roman Pineda (2025) highlights that emerging open research policies, shaped by funders’ governmentalizing strategies, reinforce the disciplinary imaginary of “good science” and “good research” aligned with a realist and cumulative model of inquiry. Within this framework, research outputs are positioned as intellectual property of funding organizations. Such dynamics reveal a mismatch between interpretivist-aligned research traditions and the contours of a policy landscape dominated by neoliberal extractivism, in which publicly funded research is repurposed to generate value for corporate and institutional actors (Hanchard and San Roman Pineda 2025).

Questions of intellectual property are inseparable from the broader limitations of the traditional copyright systems that still structure scholarly communication, which privileges proprietary ownership of knowledge. Copyright has historically functioned as a tool of control that privileges the stability of the finished object over the relational, processual, and collaborative nature of knowledge production (Adema 2021). Within neoliberal academia, copyright and licensing frameworks have been instrumental in consolidating institutional and corporate ownership over research outputs, transforming scholarly work into quantifiable assets (Adema 2021).

Open data mandates in humanities research often encounter significant ethical and methodological obstacles. Take for instance the policy on making data and other results of FCT-funded scientific research available (Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia 2016). This policy, aligned with European initiatives, emphasizes the sharing of data in structured, standardized formats, advocating adherence to disciplinary “best practices.”

Moreover, the expectation of early and broad dissemination may inadvertently pressure scholars to formalize their materials in ways that interfere with the interpretive process, which can lead to reducing the richness of their analysis to exchangeable units.

Archival materials may involve sensitive, restricted, or contested content, ranging from Indigenous knowledge to politically or culturally sensitive oral histories, where openness could harm communities or strip data from its cultural context (Tóth-Czifra 2019). As Levin and Leonelli (2017) observe, decisions about what and how to open are inherently value laden and context sensitive, shaped by power dynamics and cultural frameworks.

As an example, in the realm of peer review, the push for transparency through open peer review may also create risks for critical or dissenting voices (Arthur and Hearn 2021). Anonymous review processes have historically protected scholars working against dominant paradigms in politically charged fields such as feminist theory, postcolonial studies, and critical race studies. Open peer review, while laudable in its transparency, may disincentivize risk-taking and critique (Teixeira da Silva 2018), particularly for early-career researchers and scholars from marginalized backgrounds (Henriquez 2023). However, and at the same time, book reviews, for instance, a common practice in the humanities, can also be seen as a form of open peer review (Knöchelmann 2023).

Importantly, the humanities have not been passive recipients of openness, nor are they inherently resistant to its ideals. On the contrary, as Kiesewetter (2020a) and Moore (2017) document, early initiatives of open access have historically developed their own forms of openness, emphasizing community-led infrastructures, political engagement, and the contextual situatedness of knowledge. These efforts reflect a pre-existing, critically engaged openness grounded in ethical commitments and socio-political awareness rather than in universalizing technical mandates and instrumentalized openness.

While the focus here is on the humanities, many of these tensions and opportunities resonate with other interpretive and critical fields, including segments of the social sciences. These communities similarly grapple with open research mandates that privilege data-centric models and standardized workflows. Recognizing these shared struggles can open possibilities for collective redefinitions of openness that are not bound to technocratic policy framings.

Situating these debates within the humanities, then, means recognizing both their long-standing commitments to openness and their structural vulnerabilities under neoliberal regimes. The digital humanities exemplifies this tension, as it can reproduce dominant policy logics or act as a site for alternative, community-led modes of openness. Intellectual property, ownership, and infrastructural control further complicate this picture, revealing how openness is never simply a technical issue but a political and economic one.

It is important then to recognize that open research is not inherently neoliberal, but its implementation within neoliberal institutional logics has shaped its current form. Likewise, closed or restricted scholarship can also be instrumentalized for market-driven ends. The key issue lies in the political and institutional mechanisms through which openness is enacted, who decides, and whose values are embedded in those decisions.

Consequently, openness in the humanities must be re-situated. It should not be conceived as an add-on to existing practices or as compliance with external mandates (Knöchelmann 2023) but rather as a value-driven, reflective practice embedded in the specific contexts and epistemologies of humanities work. Openness within the humanities implies asking questions about timing, format, ethics, and the potential consequences of sharing, recognizing that openness is not inherently good or neutral but always positional and performative.

The humanities' discomfort with neoliberal open research does not imply a rejection of openness itself, but rather a refusal of its reduction to market logic. Humanistic values, such as critical engagement, reflexivity, care, and situated knowledge, must be foregrounded in any discussion about open research. As Kieseewetter (2020b) asserts, doing open scholarship ethically means not only sharing knowledge but also undoing it so that structures of academic power and epistemic hierarchies are challenged. Shared authorship, decentralized community-led publishing, and collaborative knowledge-making can create "borderland situations" that challenge the hegemony of universalized academic norms and instead foster pluralistic, emancipatory knowledge practices.

In this light, the humanities have much to contribute to the broader discourse on openness. Drawing on their long-standing commitments to open knowledge, they can challenge the one-size-fits-all models of open research and offer alternatives that value diversity, ethics, and justice—discourse that recognizes the plurality of framings and contexts and contributes to a comprehensive understanding of the discourse around openness, without causing parallel ones. At the same time, acknowledging that openness can be co-opted requires sustained critique of both neoliberal open research and the structures of academic privilege that shape access and voice across disciplines.

Table 1 synthesizes these arguments by contrasting the dominant values underpinning open research and the humanities across several dimensions. The table is intended to be a heuristic tool to illustrate how different epistemic cultures are shaped by distinct political, economic, and epistemological logics. It highlights the power asymmetries that emerge when universalized models of openness, largely derived from empirical-based norms and neoliberal governance, are applied to humanities contexts.

The different dimensions reveal how the operationalization of openness is entangled with broader structures of power and governance. Recognizing these divergences

Table 1. *Power structures and values of open research and the humanities.*

Dimensions	Values	
	Open research	Humanities
Political	Closely aligned with government agendas, funding mandates, and international bodies (e.g., Plan S, UNESCO); openness is instrumentalized as a tool for innovation, competitiveness, and measurable societal impact	Emphasizes autonomy and critical distance from power; resists top-down standardization and questions dominant political ideologies; values reflexivity and ethical responsibility over policy compliance
Geographical	Knowledge is universal and shareable, and research can be replicated and generalized across contexts	Emphasizes situatedness and specificity; knowledge is shaped by local, historical, linguistic, and cultural contexts; resists the imposition of universalist standards
Economic	Sees openness as a mechanism for accelerating economic growth, innovation, and efficiency in the knowledge economy; supported by both public and private sector funders	Underfunded and structurally disadvantaged in the open access ecosystem; risks marginalization within market-oriented frameworks; values scholarly labor not easily translated into economic outputs
Epistemological	Emphasizes standardization, transparency, reproducibility, and replicability; assumes that knowledge can be made openly accessible and reused across contexts with minimal distortion, focusing on empirically informed research, assuming knowledge can be produced, reused, and shared openly	Knowledge is discursive, context sensitive, and often resistant to quantification or reproducibility; openness requires careful reflection and ethical negotiation
Social	Promotes openness as a democratizing force, enabling broader participation, citizen science, and societal engagement, often assuming technological accessibility	Highlights the structural inequalities and power asymmetries in knowledge production and dissemination; advocates for inclusive practices but critically questions whose voices are amplified or silenced through “openness”
Cultural	Embedded in a scientific culture that prioritizes efficiency, output, and measurable impact; values technological solutions to scholarly communication	Grounded in traditions of critical thought, self-reflexivity, and cultural critique; resists instrumentalization of knowledge and upholds pluralism, narrative, and aesthetic forms as valid scholarly contributions

allows us to see that the challenge is not whether the humanities can catch up with open research but how the normative concept of openness adopted by technocratic institutions must be re-imagined to accommodate multiple epistemic traditions.

The argument advanced throughout this work has maintained that openness is not a fixed or universally shared concept, but a contested, contextual, and politically charged practice. When implemented through neoliberal frameworks, it risks marginalizing the very scholarly communities it claims to empower. The case of the humanities illustrates how such operationalizations can generate tensions and exclusions as well as how alternative, historically grounded models of openness already exist. By reclaiming and rearticulating openness on their own terms, humanities scholars not only resist its neoliberal appropriation but also enrich the broader conversation around open knowledge.

## Conclusion

This article has argued that the concept of openness, as currently promoted through mainstream open research agendas, is deeply embedded in neoliberal rationalities that instrumentalize policy-based strategies and prioritize economic utility, standardization, and institutional control. While openness is often framed as a universally beneficial value, its meaning and implementation are, in fact, highly contested, situated, and shaped by underlying power structures. In the context of the humanities, these tensions become particularly visible. The epistemological, cultural, and social practices of the humanities resist the reductive logics of market-driven openness, revealing how current open research frameworks often marginalize or overlook forms of knowledge that cannot be easily quantified, shared, or commercialized.

This article contributes to the broader discussion on the need to reframe openness not as a set of procedural norms or policy mandates, but as a relational and epistemically situated practice. Building on existing critiques, this analysis situates openness within the political economy of neoliberal higher education and demonstrates how the humanities' interpretive and reflexive traditions offer a counterpoint to the dominant technocratic logic. While prior scholarship has already argued that openness must be contextual, this article extends that line of thought by linking epistemic diversity to the governance regimes through which openness is enacted. It argues that humanities epistemologies do not simply resist open research frameworks but rather shed light on how openness can be a critical and meaningful mode of knowledge production.

By situating openness within a broader political and historical terrain, and contrasting it with the values of humanistic inquiry, it becomes clear that a one-size-fits-all model of openness not only fails to accommodate the richness of scholarly diversity but also risks emptying the concept of its critical potential. Instead of rejecting openness altogether, this analysis calls for a reimagining of open scholarship, one that is plural, context sensitive, and grounded in ethical reflexivity. Only by recognizing and valuing the distinct contributions of different epistemic cultures can openness move beyond its current instrumentalization and toward a more inclusive, just, and genuinely open knowledge system.

Central to this argument is the observation that the power structures underpinning open research and the humanities expose some fundamental differences. Where open research often operates within institutional, economic, and political frameworks that seek to regulate and optimize knowledge production for broader economic impact, the humanities are more concerned with critique, reflexivity, and resistance to hegemonic knowledge structures. Making something "open," then, is not a neutral act, as it requires particular labor, infrastructures, and decisions about for whom, by whom, and under what conditions knowledge is shared. These decisions are inherently political and shaped by competing values.

However, this analysis also acknowledges its limitations. There is a risk in focusing too heavily on ideal types or overly theoretical critiques that present open research as wholly neoliberal or capitalist in nature. In practice, many open approaches are developed precisely to challenge these forces, emphasizing equity, accessibility, and decentralization. It is important, therefore, to remain alert to the diversity of open initiatives on the ground, especially those that emerge from within marginalized or under-resourced communities, including many in the humanities. These practices demonstrate that openness can also be a tool for resistance and transformation.

The challenge moving forward lies in handling the pressures of academic capitalism and culture change, not only through theoretical critique but also through practical, material engagement. Reimagining openness means not only critiquing how it is currently operationalized but also actively building alternative infrastructures, governance models, and value systems that align with the plural epistemologies of the humanities. Rather than attempting to adapt humanistic research to fit the frameworks of open research, the future of open requires a comprehensive redefinition of openness itself, one that makes room for difference, plurality, and situated forms of knowledge production.

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