

# THE COMMODIFICATION OF ACADEMIC RESEARCH AND THE KNOWLEDGE SOCIETY

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## Abstract

*The knowledge society is best defined as the society where production, distribution and use of knowledge play the central role in the social matrix. The possession of technological means of production has been replaced by the possession of useful knowledge, and most theorists embrace this change thinking it could offer us hope for a better future. But does it really contribute to the development of a better society? The main objective of my article is to offer a realistic answer to this question. The perpetuation of the capitalistic way of production in the academic world leads us to the situation where ideas and scientific articles are being commodified. In theory, the knowledge society is built on the idea of producing, disseminating and using information for the well being of the people. I claim that this is a very naïve perspective on how our current knowledge society is actually functioning. Since information is so easy to transfer one could expect that all the members of the society could benefit from it. As my article will show, this is not in fact the case. Not everybody is able to produce and use knowledge. Since what we are experiencing is the commodification of academic articles only few people are able to produce and use knowledge. This way the knowledge society becomes a closed society where only a privileged financial elite has access to the latest academic research.*

**Keywords:** *academic research, academic freedom, commodification of ideas, knowledge society, commodification of academic articles*

## Introduction

Cultural relativism started to erode humanities and social sciences foundation at the exact time where the free-market system entered the scene. In a previous article<sup>2</sup> I focused my attention on the role of the university in the era of a commodified knowledge. This article is a continuation of the idea that interesting as it may seem the term “knowledge society” is nothing but an appealing label for the “society of commodified information”. There are optimistic perspectives on the role of the university in our relativistic and commercial society. For instance “this battles [the cultural ones] can be seen as renewing the moral purpose of the university as opposed to simple eroding the very possibility of the university having a moral purpose.”<sup>3</sup> The author considers that the fact that nowadays universities are cosmopolitan is in fact an advantage, a challenge to be met:

“The university is the institution in the society most capable of linking the requirements of industry technology and market forces with the demands of citizenship. Given the enormous dependence of these forces on university based experts, the university is in fact in a position of strength, not of weakness. While it is true that the new production of knowledge is dominated by an instrumentalization of knowledge and that as a result the traditional role of the university has been undermined it is now in a position to serve social goals more fully than previously when other goals were more prominent.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Maria Cernat (2011) “The Role of the University in the Knowledge Society”, CKS Proceedings Volume.

<sup>3</sup> Gerard Delanty (2001) *Challenging Knowledge. The University in the Knowledge Society*, SHRE & Open University, p. 210.

<sup>4</sup> *Op. cit.* . p. 229.

While Delanty's analysis on the negative forces influencing today's universities – instrumentalism and relativism – is very precise and well documented, the methods the university is to survive the dominant market forces in order to fulfill social goals remains unclear. Simply expressing the desire that the university regains its freedom in the era of academic capitalism in order to become a key player in the global arena cannot count as a clear way out of the trap of instrumentalism and relativism. In Delanty's very optimistic perspective the university should offer us a sense of global citizenship helping to create a global community. The current realities shows just how far are we from such an ideal. The main purpose of my article is to show that transforming academic articles into a commodity transforms the global academia into an information market that has nothing to do with a meritocratic intellectual community. In the first section of my article I shall discuss some of the most controversial aspects surrounding the copyright of academic articles and also some of its most relevant effects on faculty members. In the second part of my paper I shall prove that Romanian academics as well as other academics are literally forced to publish their articles in internationally indexed journals. While this offers great visibility for academic research the access to such articles is restricted through very expensive fees. This creates a very unfair system of exclusion that is not at all justifiable in terms of production costs. The third section of my paper will be dedicated to the analysis of some of the most important social and academic effects of this capitalist way of academic texts production.

### **The copyright: a cluster of rights regarding abstract objects**

The copyright laws refer to a very interesting type of objects: the ones that do not diminish through repeated use. The literature passionate reader may even claim that there are novels that reveal their true beauty after several readings – that is after repeated uses. Having the possibility of collect a specific amount of money for every use of a *token* of an abstract object *type* seems like the best business one can imagine. No wonder the debates surrounding today's legislative efforts of protecting the intellectual property are so heated<sup>5</sup>. When academic texts were produced in the era of mechanical reproduction the publishing houses spent much money in the production and dissemination process. Once Internet has become a service available world wide the dissemination of academic articles is virtually free of charge. The huge opportunity provided by the world wide web was soon to be ignored by those trying to gain as much as possible from the intellectual work of academics. It is nowadays harder to protect the intellectual products and this is why the publishing houses and media corporations are desperately seeking more punitive and restrictive laws to protect their way making profit. This article is an attempt to focus on other values that should guide the academic life. If profit is all that is important a lot of other things such as meritocracy, inter-cultural dialogue, better communication and interactivity are lost. The Internet makes it harder for those profiting from the copyright laws to protect their abstract objects but it makes it so much easier for academics world wide to share and communicate their ideas. There are probably exceptions to this rule: the high costs of research in natural science makes it more acceptable to protect the scientific findings. But this is clearly not the case for humanities or social sciences. On the contrary: the incredible communication platform represented by the internet is actually a mean of progress. Humanities and social sciences are actually gaining from the constant dialogue between academics and any tool facilitating such dialogue should be welcomed. If more academics world wide could gain access to excellent journals in humanities and social science that it would be easier for a great number of faculty members belonging to very different cultural environments to engage in the

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<sup>5</sup> In 2012 Romania along with many other European countries signed Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement – a series of regulations protecting the intellectual property. This decision was criticized by important organizations in the civil society since it is thought to be a way of protecting media corporations and not the public or the artists.

dialogue. As long as it is so expensive to read the mainstream academic journals this is only a remote ideal.

As Andrew Alexandra<sup>6</sup> points out, when talking about copyright there are two types of rights involved: “control” rights (the possibility that someone is recognized as the author of a certain paper; the right protecting someone’s text from being altered or used against the author’s intentions) and “commodity” rights (the right to profit from the reproduction and dissemination of the article; the right to transfer the right to profit from the reproduction and dissemination of written articles). In the era of mechanical reproduction it was almost impossible to reach the public without the aid of a publishing house. The use of Internet made it possible to reach the public directly. But things were not so simple. Instead of having publishing houses we have international databases indexing academic journals and imposing restrictive access through expensive fees. Alexandra’s claim that “the development of electronic publishing on the internet, however, means that in academic publishing as elsewhere it is becoming possible to cut out the “middleman” who have mediated between producers and consumers: the original holders of copyright are increasingly in a position to send their work directly to readers.” But this is not the case of academic articles. As I mentioned earlier, most prestigious journals are now indexed in several databases that gain important amounts of money from the reproduction and dissemination of intellectual labor. So the “middle man” was not at all easy to be “cut off”. The producer of academic text is often the last to be profiting from its own intellectual labor. Some universities consider that as long as an academic published papers while being the university employee, he has no right to profit from the reproduction and dissemination of its work. The famous academic incentive is “publish or perish”, so, most academics are compelled to publish as many articles as possible. But, they are not always allowed to profit from the reproduction and distribution of their texts. The university they work in takes all the credit and all the profit from the academic copyrighted material.

There are important “side-effects” to the way nowadays copyright laws are conceived. First of all there ethically controversial aspects related to the fact that academics are compelled to publish as many papers as possible. But this is not for the sole purpose of intellectual progress. In many cases the university they work in is the only one to profit from the right reproduction and dissemination of academic articles. If this is the case it is only fair to assume that more articles means more money and not necessarily more scientific progress. But this is not the most negative of the side-effects I am trying to highlight here. The biggest problem of this way of transforming the academic texts into an information market is the system of exclusions it generates. In 2011 the Romanian Central University Library was able offer it’s readers access to the most important academic databases such as Sage, Francis Taylor, Emerald, etc. Up to that point it was virtually impossible for Romanian academics to gain access to the latest research studies since the access fees for those databases were very expensive. Even now, only Romanian academics living in Bucharest can benefit form this information platform. This example touches the most controversial aspect related to the way the copyright laws are conceived: academics living in poor countries do no have access to latest results in scientific research since they cannot read the most important academic journals in their field of expertise. The media corporations, the owners of international databases and publishing houses are surely benefiting form this way of transforming the knowledge society into a commodified information society. But the rest of the people engaged in this system, academics forced to publish even though they cannot fully profit form their intellectual labor, the academics living in poor countries are not.

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<sup>6</sup> Andrew Alexandra (2002) „Academic personality and the Commodification of Academic Texts”, *Ethics of Information and Technology*, 4, 279–276.

The producers of knowledge are located in the richest countries and it seems they have no intention in sharing their findings and ideas with less fortunate peers living in poor countries. Gaining access to the academic market of ideas is a question of how much money you have in your pocket not how smart you are. The commodification of academic texts leaves outside the mainstream research a lot of brilliant academics lacking the financial resources to become an important players in the intellectual arena. The intellectual community is thought to be a place where meritocracy is represented at its best. One could expect that once the production costs of reproducing academic text lowered so much as a result of internet connection the a digital academic environment would welcome academics lacking the financial resources of their peers living in rich countries. This was not the case.

In fact today's regulations actually fight against the possibilities our current technology is offering us. The Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement is an international law protecting the intellectual property that has been the subject of very pertinent criticism. First of all the Wikileaks site provided evidence that most countries were negotiating a law protecting the intellectual property behind closed doors. The negotiations were secret up to may 2008 when the text of the law was published on the Internet. Soon after this disclosure the mainstream media treated the subject extensively. The main problem is the internet is a global network and all the problems related to it are also global. Different states have only local solutions to a global problem. The ACTA was the subject of secret negotiations between states partly because there is no international institution having the task of generating international regulation regarding the use of the internet.<sup>7</sup> And, since this is an international problem, local solutions or solutions resulting from secret negotiations between states are clearly no long term solutions. Perhaps this is the typical case where technologies move faster than our institutions ability to regulate them. But this is no excuse for the lack of an international debate on the ethical issues regarding the copyright laws in general and those regarding academic texts in particular.

### **The case of Romanian academics**

In 2011 a new law of national education was adopted. This law changed entirely the evaluation and promotion criteria for the Romanian academics. What I am trying to emphasize in section of my article is that under the current regulations only academic texts published in internationally indexed journals are acceptable in order to get a good evaluation. If we look at the promotion criteria we find out that all that matters is the research activity. Under the previous law<sup>8</sup> the teaching activity used to count for something in the academic evaluation.<sup>9</sup> The first criterion of evaluation consisted in the teaching activity performance. The actual law says virtually nothing about one of the most important academic activity. The quality-assurance process presupposes that every academic should have the self-evaluation, peer evaluation and the student evaluation. But all those evaluations are not really relevant to the promotion criteria. The institution authorized to establish the promotion criteria for the academics, The National Council for the Certification of Academic Titles, Certificates and Diplomas, does not mention anything about the teaching activity. All the criteria regard the research activity and especially the publication of articles in internationally indexed journals. The whole burden of getting access to the international databases is put on the shoulders of the universities. They have to grant their employees a good research environment by providing

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<sup>7</sup> Most of the civil rights activists harshly criticized this trade agreement. What is interesting is that so much effort is being put to the task of protecting intellectual property and very little is being done against more violent crimes committed on the internet. No international negotiation regarding child pornography on the internet is yet being done. Once the internet allows people to connect world wide we worry so much about the media corporations profits and so little about the children. This fact cast a very disappointing light on our current political leaders priorities really are.

<sup>8</sup> [http://legislatie.resurse-pentru-democratie.org/84\\_1995.php](http://legislatie.resurse-pentru-democratie.org/84_1995.php)

<sup>9</sup> [www.aracis.ro/uploads/media/Metodologie\\_aprobata\\_1418-2006.pdf](http://www.aracis.ro/uploads/media/Metodologie_aprobata_1418-2006.pdf)

access to the international databases. Moreover, there are only a few databases for every scientific field recognized by the But is this requirement realistic? First of all there is a problem regarding the restrictive number of databases for each theoretical field. For example, if someone wishes to get promoted in sociology there are only five databases recognized as being relevant for that particular theoretical field. Sage publications, Emerald, Oxford Journals are only few examples of databases that are not present in the short list selected for the above mentioned theoretical field. This is not really a problem since the most important journals are indexed in multiple databases. But the most important problem is how to grant access to all academics to the research resources. As stated earlier this burden is placed exclusively on the university's shoulders. If all the universities in Romania were private, this would probably make sense, but, since most of them are publicly funded than this doesn't seem financially prudent. The best way for granting access to international academic databases is through a publicly funded national program. This way a single subscription would be bought for all the public universities. But such a decision solves the problem only for our country. Nobody can argue that there are not brilliant academics living in poor countries. In the era of mechanical reproduction of academic text perhaps most of them relied on their best fortune or other arbitrary forces. Today's advances in technology allows the dissemination of academic texts world wide. Unfortunately the place of ideological restriction has been taken by the financial restriction. Romanian recent history was marked by a very dark episode where totalitarianism prevented everyone trying to read and do research especially in the humanities or social sciences field from getting to the foreign academic journals. When trying to write an article most people spent an incredible amount of time often risking their freedom to gain access to mainstream academic journals. Unfortunately things did not dramatically change once democratic regimes were installed in Romania. There are of course huge differences. We are not prosecuted for reading mainstream journals and with the help of the friends living in richer countries we can finally document our articles. The current trend resulting from Romanian academic regulation is to gain more visibility for the research done in our country. Nobody can argue that this is in fact a very positive aspiration. But the financial restrictions Romanian academics have to face have to be taken into account.

### 3. Conclusions

The very low disseminating costs of academic articles in the areas of humanities or social sciences should make us hope for a virtual meritocratic academic community. The financial restrictions imposed to academics living in poor countries represents a clear obstacle preventing us from achieving this goal. The negotiations regarding the future fate of academic articles should not be the result of negotiations between states behind closed doors. Since so much energy is being mobilized to protect the intellectual property it is only fair to assume that part of that energy should be spent in order to find better ways of sharing ideas and research findings among academics world wide. Maybe such an endeavor would not be to the benefit of publishing houses but values like scientific progress and inter-cultural dialogue would be, by no means, better protected in a real knowledge society. Emphasizing only the protection and not the sharing of intellectual property is the best way to build a commercial society where the money are the ultimate value everybody should accept. Transforming the academic texts and journals form an academic arena where ideas are exchanged into a information market that privileges only those academics rich enough to participate to the dialogue is by no means the best way to build the "knowledge" society.

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**Online resources:**

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- [www.aracis.ro/uploads/media/Metodologie\\_aprobata\\_1418-2006.pdf](http://www.aracis.ro/uploads/media/Metodologie_aprobata_1418-2006.pdf)