
John Dewey's Philosophical Legacy for the "Open Movements" in the Digital Age

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Abstract

Open source, open access, open data, open government, open science, open education, open design, open innovation, open collaboration, open knowledge, ... – "openness" has become one of most popular (and equally diffuse) terms for collaborative practices in the Digital Age. As the since 1998 continuing controversy between Richard Stallman's *Free Software Foundation* and the *Open Source Initiative* demonstrates, the meaning and distinction of "open", "free" and "public" is highly contested even within the various movements.

In this paper I argue that John Dewey's social and political philosophy, especially his progressive concepts of freedom, openness, and creative democracy, provides a valuable legacy for the contemporary "open" movements.¹ While all these movements share some general principles, each is oriented towards a specific field, f. e. open source on software code or open access on academic publications. By contrast, the term "Access to Knowledge" (A2K) is used here as an umbrella, both for the various open movements which emphasize all the social importance of a *public and free access to knowledge* and for a loose collection of related movements and organizations that are concerned with a critical examination of copyright law and intellectual property.²

To advance the aim of A2K, I will have a closer look at the guiding principles and assumptions which I will examine from a Deweyan pragmatist perspective. Thereby, I intend to show, on the one hand, the already existing proximity of A2K to philosophical pragmatism, and, on the other hand, I will point out what the A2K movement can learn from Dewey's philosophical conceptions of freedom, openness, and creative democracy. By emphasizing the link between Dewey's pragmatist philosophy and the contemporary A2K movement, I hope to contribute to a deepening of engagement and collaboration on both sides.

One of many actors in the A2K movement is the not-for-profit organization and global network "Open Knowledge"³ on which I will center my attention here. They have explicated their principles in the *Open Definition*.⁴ Based on that definition and further explications,⁵ I will discuss the following questions in three corresponding parts:

What does 'open' mean and how is it contested within the open movements? I will briefly discuss the principles of the *Open Definition*, which are derived from the *Open Source Definition* and the *Free Software Definition*.⁶ In this intertwined relationship, the conflict between "open" and "free" is already becoming obvious. I will point out, that the principles are mainly focused on legal and technical aspects, while the social aspects are often neglected or remain implicit.

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What is excluded from the conception compared to Dewey's notion of openness? The main connection to Dewey's social and political philosophy lies in the common aim of *intelligent social cooperation*, which is fundamental to all open movements. I will give a brief summary of his understanding of freedom and openness.⁷ I will point out how Dewey's emphasis on the social aspect of freedom and cooperation could remedy deficiencies of the A2K principles.

Last, I will show in which sense the A2K principles are related to Dewey's idea of creative democracy and how A2K can be understood within a larger picture of Dewey's political philosophy. I will argue that Dewey's pragmatist approach can still work as a guideline for the open movements and intelligent cooperation today, when technology and culture are becoming more entangled.⁸

Footnotes:

1 The movements that I mention are not mere social movements in a narrower sense, but rather heterogeneous activities of individual activists, civil society groups, scientific communities, businesses, public institutions, and governments.

2 Kapczynski, A. (2010): *Access to Knowledge: A Conceptual Genealogy*. In Kapczynski, A. & Krikorian, G. (Eds.), *Access to Knowledge in the Age of Intellectual Property*, pp. 17–56, New York: Zone Books; Noronha, F. & Malcolm, J. (2010). *Access to Knowledge: A Guide for Everyone*, Kuala Lumpur: Consumers International.

3 See <http://okfn.org/>.

4 I refer to version 2.0 (<http://opendefinition.org/od/>).

5 Kelty, C. (2008): *Two Bits. The Cultural Significance of Free Software*, Durham: Duke University Press; Fecher, B. & Friesike, S. (2014): *Open Science: One Term, Five Schools of Thought*. In Bartling, S. & Friesike, S. (Eds.) (2013). *Opening Science: The Evolving Guide on How the Internet is Changing Research, Collaboration and Scholarly Publishing*. New York, NY: Springer, pp. 17–47.

6 *Open Source Definition*, 1998: <http://opensource.org/docs/osd/>;
Free Software Definition: <http://www.gnu.org/philosophy/free-sw.html>, published in its first version in 1986.

7 I will mainly refer to Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (1916, MW: 9); *The Public and Its Problems* (1927, LW: 2); *Individualism, Old and New* (1930, LW: 5); *Liberalism and Social Action* (1935, LW: 11); *Freedom and Culture* (1939, LW: 13).

8 Marres, N. (2014): *Technology and culture are becoming more and more entangled*. Blog post on *The Impact of Social Sciences blog*, Philosophy of Data Science series, December 3rd, 2014: <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2014/12/03/philosophy-of-data-science-noortje-marres/>.

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