Samuel A. Moore, Ph.D, Scholarly Communication Specialist, Cambridge University Libraries and Homerton College, Cambridge, United Kingdom, sam214@cam.ac.uk

Book review:

Corporate capitalism's use of openness

Profit for free?

Arwid Lund and Mariano Zukerfeld (2020). Corporate capitalism's use of openness: Profit for free? Cham: Springer Nature. ISBN: 9783030282189

Openness is a slippery concept. It connotes freedom, structurelessness and experimentation, alongside ambiguity or receptiveness to the new. Its indefinability means that openness is used by a range of actors spanning the political landscape and for very different ends. In a technological sense, openness is mainly used to refer to freedom both to access and use a certain digital resource, while its positive connotation means that it has been successfully exploited by activists, organisations, and companies for a range of purposes. In *Corporate capitalism's use of openness*, Arwid Lund and Mariano Zukerfeld focus on the latter of these through a critical exploration of how for-profit companies have adopted the language of openness to promote their products and services.

The 'openness ideology' is identified early in the book as having resonance with the California Ideology of Silicon Valley that espoused faith in the emancipatory powers of digital technologies. The openness ideology, the authors write, has its roots in movements for open-source software and open access research that argued for the freedom to use and reuse software, publications, and other digital materials. The capitalist approach to openness combines free digital materials with a recognition of the limitations of the pre-existing 'enclosures model' whereby companies sold products to users (p. 7). The enclosures model is less equipped to deal with a digital world in which products can be copied and disseminated at next to no cost, and so companies have sought business models based on giving their products away. This, the authors explore, has profound implications for the ways in which digital materials are created and distributed, usually requiring cheaper forms of labour often conducted in users' leisure time.

The book takes great care to explore the political economy of digital technologies in some detail. Chapter 2 outlines contemporary debates on issues associated with ideology, labour and platformisation, all of which will be of great benefit to students of digital media. We learn that open cultures evolved from a struggle between an explicitly political understanding of Free Software that was antagonistic to commercial concerns, versus a more business-friendly approach that was 'open to subsequent commercial enclosures' (p. 46). Ultimately, the more business-friendly approach of the Open Source Initiative was to prevail, allowing companies to exploit open-source software to their own ends. This commercial exploitation was to extend to all areas of open cultures, which the book covers through four case studies of open-source software, open access publishing, open education, and free multimedia content.

Chapter 3 explores the rise of for-profit open-source software provider Red Hat and its successful repackaging and enclosure of openly licensed software that the company licenses out to other businesses. The authors conclude that 'the company's appropriation of the copyright to the collective work of the Linux distribution from the community is not carried out in the interests of the community, but in the interest of its shareholders and to facilitate the use of trademark law to partially enclose its products' (p. 139). Openness, they argue, is only important to Red Hat inasmuch as it offers the company unremunerated labour and the ability to combine and repackage open and enclosed software through a series of exceptions embedded in open-source licences. For this reason, Red Hat seeks to 'depoliticise' the openness of Free Software in order to promote a 'capitalist business-logic' they can monetise as efficiently as possible (p. 140).

In Chapters 4, 5 and 6 we see examples of a similar kind of ideological capture in the name of openness by the publisher Elsevier, the video platform YouTube, and the free courseware provider Coursera. In each case, the labour and content for these businesses are provided for free by someone else (users, academics, educators, etc.), while the profits are kept within the companies themselves. The language of openness and freedom is, in varying ways, vital for sustaining these business models. For example, the authors argue, Elsevier uses its open access content to 'open wash' the rest of its subscription offerings and the company more broadly. Elsevier gets to portray itself as an 'open' company while continuing to monetise its subscription model of enclosed products in hybrid and subscription journals. This is the ideological trick at play: businesses deploy the language of openness while enclosing the profits.

In response to the case studies in the book, all of which highlight a negative usage of openness in the service of profit, the authors make a series of policy recommendations for nurturing a more positive 'commons' approach to openness. Through an illustration of a broad range of legal and economic structures, the authors propose a series of alternative ways of creating open resources more equitably – from Universal Basic Income to workers cooperatives. Throughout the book, this theme of the commons emerges in a variety of interesting ways as a counterpoint to the extraction of corporations in the name of openness. The reader is shown that there is a relationship between openness and the commons, but one that is frequently exploited by companies rather than explored as a mode of production in itself. The goal, then, is to build new structures for common ownership of production, not just relying on corporations to give their resources away based on free labour.

The book is strongest as a text that introduces students to a variety of themes relating to digital work, capitalism, and debates around openness. The concepts are explored thoroughly, and the case studies presented with meticulous detail, showing a high level of research and knowledge. Yet the detail included also distracts from the book as a scholarly monograph aimed at experts in the field. The book sits somewhere between a monograph and a textbook, with very long explanations of concepts that would be better summarised more succinctly if at all. It is not, therefore, clear to whom this book is

pitched, meaning that it reads unevenly and awkwardly at times. This does not take away from the research itself – nor the expertise on display – but it is likely that students will benefit more from *Corporate capitalism's use of openness* because of its pedagogical breadth.