



The Paradox of Open Knowledge: Digital Democratization and Epistemic Violence in Open Educational Resources

A Critical Case Study of ‘OER Commons’

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ABSTRACT

This master thesis examines the paradoxical relationship between knowledge democratization and epistemic colonialism within Open Educational Resources (OER), focusing specifically on ‘*OER Commons*’ as a case study. Drawing from feminist decolonial theory, this work argues that digital educational platforms simultaneously enable unprecedented access to knowledge, whilst potentially reproducing colonial hierarchies through their design, content organization systems, validation mechanism and circulation patterns. Through integrated digital ethnography and critical discourse analysis, the study shows how OER Commons embodies fundamental tensions between democratic aspirations and systemic inequalities in contemporary educational technology. Despite genuine commitments to educational equity, digital platforms inevitably encode particular epistemological assumptions that privilege certain forms of knowledge while marginalizing others. Furthermore, this analysis contributes to understanding how epistemic colonialism operates in digital contexts, while pointing toward more equitable, non-hierarchical approaches to truly open knowledge dissemination.

Deze masterthesis belicht de paradoxale verhouding tussen kennisdemocratisering en epistemische kolonisering binnen Open Educational Resources (OER), met een specifieke focus op ‘*OER Commons*’ als case-study. Voortbouwend op feministisch dekoloniaal denken, beargumenteert deze thesis dat digitale onderwijsplatforms tegelijkertijd ongekennde toegang tot kennis mogelijk maken terwijl ze potentieel koloniale hiërarchieën reproduceren door hun ontwerp, organisatiesystematiek, validatiemechanismen, en circulatiepatronen. Door middel van een combinatie van digitale etnografie en kritische discoursanalyse toont het onderzoek hoe OER Commons fundamentele spanningen belichaamt tussen democratische aspiraties en systemische ongelijkheden in hedendaagse onderwijstechnologie. Desondanks oprechte toewijding aan onderwijsgelijkheid, digitale platforms onvermijdelijk bepaalde epistemologische aannames opleggen, die specifieke kennisvormen bevoordelen terwijl andere worden gemarginaliseerd. Verder, draagt deze analyse bij aan het begrip van hoe epistemisch kolonialisme ageert in digitale contexten, en wijst het naar meer gelijkvaardige, niet-hiërarchische benadering van feitelijk openlijke kennisverspreiding.

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CHAPTER ONE – THE KNOWLEDGE PARADOX

1.1. Research Problem and Significance

Knowledge, in its myriad of forms, exists as one of the world's most precious, yet fiercely contested resources. Unlike material commodities that deplete through distribution, knowledge multiplies when shared – yet its circulation remains strikingly unequal across global contexts (Suber, 2012; Eve, 2014; UNESCO, 2019). This inequality betrays knowledge as anything but politically innocent. Far from the neutral territory it often claims to occupy, knowledge embodies fundamental asymmetry that stems not from scarcity, but from systematic operations of power that determine who gets access to information, which voices can speak, and which forms of understanding gain recognition and legitimacy in global discourse. Knowledge inhabits an inherently paradoxical position – simultaneously abundant and sparse, generative yet isolating; it is both a force that gives rights and a mechanism of exclusion, capable of liberation and domination within the very same systems (Dutta et al., 2021).

The fundamental tension between knowledge's expansive potential and its systematic containment becomes particularly acute in today's digital age. As educational institutions worldwide increasingly rely on digital tools and platforms, knowledge asymmetries have grown more complex and entrenched. Within this context, Open Educational Resources (OER) have emerged as a groundbreaking development within modern educational practices, representing both a practical intervention and philosophical commitment to democratizing education (dos Santos et al., 2016; UNESCO, 2019; Mane, 2024). Simply put, OER are freely available teaching, learning and research materials online that anyone can use, adapt and redistribute without much restriction – drastically transforming how knowledge is created, distributed, and accessed across global learning communities.

This vision of open knowledge carries genuine transformative possibilities. Yet, this democratizing impulse coexists restlessly with what might be understood as a form of epistemic violence. Online educational resources promise universal access – at least to anyone who has a connection to the internet – whilst simultaneously encoding particular ways of learning and knowing into their basic architecture, creating new epistemological boundaries even as they claim to dissolve old ones. Indeed, digital platforms like OER – and technology at large – cannot be understood as neutral containers of information; they function as active agents shaping not only what knowledge becomes accessible, but how different forms of understanding can be encountered, valued, and circulated. The very sites designed to expand access often reproduce the hierarchical structures they claim to challenge, creating new forms of knowledge dependency disguised as educational liberation.

This research emerges from recognizing that these contradictions demand sustained critical attention rather than quick resolution. The societal importance centres on what lies beneath the surface of digital educational equity discourse. While considerable attention focuses on expanding access to online resources, examining how access itself becomes mediated – and under which conditions knowledge actually becomes 'known' – it is equally crucial (Plantin &

Punathambekar, 2018). The stakes extend far beyond academic inquiry into questions affecting millions of learners worldwide who increasingly depend on digital platforms for educational participation.

As Dutta et al. (2021, p. 805) heed, “Decolonization, the process of dismantling the material practices and effects of colonization, is intertwined with the undoing of the colonial processes of knowledge production.” As educational institutions become more and more dependent on digital technologies, understanding how they reproduce and/or challenge existing inequalities becomes crucial for meaningful social justice.

Theoretically, this work contributes to understandings of epistemic violence in digital contexts. While scholars like Gayatri Spivak (1988) have theorized epistemic violence in colonial contexts, this dissertation extends these insights to contemporary digital educational platforms. By treating platform design as a discursive practice, the study demonstrates how interface choices, algorithmic logic, and content curation systems carry profound implications for whose knowledge gets preserved and valued in an increasingly digitized educational landscape.

The specific OER platform that will be investigated is OER Commons¹ – a platform that aggregates content from diverse institutional sources, while maintaining its own organizational logic. Unlike platforms tied to single prestigious institutions, OER Commons creates a space where different forms of educational authority come into contact with each other. This platform proves to be a particularly compelling case for this analysis because it explicitly positions itself as a democratizing force in education – a genuine commons where resources flow freely beyond traditional boundaries. Nevertheless, its emancipatory aspirations operate through supposedly neutral technological structures that implicitly embed particular epistemological assumptions.

The primary research question focuses on this fundamental query: **How does OER Commons simultaneously enable knowledge democratization, while potentially reproducing epistemic colonialism in digital educational spaces?**

This question emerged from recognizing that the most interesting dynamics often occur not in spaces of obvious contradiction, but in platforms that genuinely aspire toward justice while operating within systems that may undermine those very aspirations.

Importantly, this research approaches democratization and coloniality not as simple binaries, but as complex, often simultaneous processes that can operate within the same – technological – spaces. Rather than leaning on the presumption that these dynamics exist in absolute opposition to each other, it’s more interesting to capture how they become intertwined through the platform’s daily operations – sometimes pushing against each other, sometimes reinforcing one another, something creating unexpected contradictions.

¹Originally, this research intended to examine UNESCO’s OER platform, that was hosted at https://www.unesco.org/iiiep/eng/focus/opensrc/opensrc_1.html. This platform formed the analytical foundation for my original research proposal, however, during the months following my first ‘start report’, this page became inaccessible, making me pivot towards another OER site.

To engage with this complexity and break it down, this text will furthermore address three interconnected secondary questions that focus on different dimensions of the central inquiry:

- 1. What assumptions are embedded within OER Commons digital architecture, interface design and content organization systems?**
- 2. How do the platform's knowledge representation practices privilege certain epistemological traditions while marginalizing others?**
- 3. What are the geopolitical dimensions of knowledge circulation within OER Commons?**

Together, these questions go hand in hand to create a framework for understanding how OER platforms like OER Commons inhabit a complex space – one where democratic ideals encounter persistent structural inequalities through the medium of digital technology.

1.2.Theoretical Framework

To grasp this paradox – how open educational resources can simultaneously advance democratization while reinforcing coloniality – requires developing a theoretical foundation that can hold these contradictions. The framework I will develop, draws primarily from decolonial² and feminist³ theory on how power governs through knowledge systems and shapes fundamental questions of being.

i. Coloniality of Power, Knowledge and Being

Despite the formal end of colonial rule, colonial structures continue to permeate contemporary society, flowing through seemingly democratic institutions (Quijano, 2000; 2007; Tucker, 2018). To understand this persistence, it is of crucial importance to move towards a more nuanced awareness of how power operates beyond obvious political arrangements, to how colonial logic endures well after formal decolonization processes have concluded.

For this, Peruvian scholar Nelson Maldonado-Torres (2007) offers a clear and useful distinction between colonialism and coloniality. Colonialism, he argues, represents the direct political and economic domination of one nation by another – the kind of reserved imperial control that our history books used to mark with clear beginning and ending dates. Coloniality functions differently and more insidiously, encompassing “long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labour, intersubjectivity relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations.” (Maldonado-Torres, p. 243). And it is these patterns that appear in the form of institutional policies or economic structures that also survive in cultural assumptions about progress and development, in how we understand ourselves and our possibilities. They shape what feels like common sense – framing how we interpret reality and organize social relationships. Indeed, the end of direct political control does by no means not automatically dismantle the hierarchical structures of meaning, value, and authority that colonialism established. “Thus, coloniality survives colonialism,” Maldonado-Torres claims (2007, p. 243).

² I draw on decolonial thinking to challenges the assumed universality of Western knowledge by revealing how it maintains through what appears to be neutral academic, scientific, or technological frameworks. This approach seeks to make visible alternative ways of knowing – and being – that have been systematically obscured or delegitimized by colonial structures. Rather than simply critiquing Western knowledge, decolonial theory works to create space for pluriversal epistemologies – multiple, coexistent ways of understanding reality that resist hierarchical ordering.

³ I use feminist theory to challenge the presumed objectivity of traditional knowledge production by revealing how gender, race, class and other identity categories shape both the production and validation of knowledge. Beyond advocating for women’s rights, feminist scholarship reveals how patriarchal structures influence what counts as legitimate knowledge, and how power operates through seemingly neutral systems. This tradition emphasizes how marginalized perspectives – not only women – offer crucial insights, precisely because they show what dominant perspectives have systematically obscured. Feminist epistemology demonstrates that all knowledge emerges from particular standpoints, making visible the partiality of supposedly universal claims while affirming the epistemic authority of those positioned differently within power relations

Maldonado-Torres (2007) developed his analysis through the foundational concepts of Anibal Quijano, particularly expanding upon Quijano's theorization of the "coloniality of power". For Quijano (2000; 2007; 2024), coloniality works through three interconnected dimensions – three dimensions that also extend directly into digital spaces – that is, the coloniality of power, the coloniality of knowledge, and the coloniality of being.

First, the **coloniality of power** centres on how colonial hierarchies carry on in contemporary institutional arrangements, including the area of digital platforms. Global power relations in its current manner continue to be organized along both racial and geographical lines established during the colonial period. As Quijano (2007, p. 168) astutely remarks, "the 'Western' European dominators and their Euro-North American descendants are still the principal beneficiaries" of the world order – an insight that continues to ring true today.

In digital contexts, this manifests through the concentrated ownership of technological resources in historically dominant regions (Kwet, 2019). The platforms that promise global connectivity and open access remain predominantly governed by North American and European institutions, reproducing ongoing patterns where global resources serve primarily Western interests (Quijano, 2007; Berger, 2021). OER Commons partakes within this broader technological sphere, where the very structures enabling "open" education remain proprietary and controlled by Silicon Valley giant, who continue to profit hugely (Grosfoguel, 2007; Kwet, 2019; Berger, 2021).

This rhetoric of openness and accessibility then, often is covering deeper inequalities. Users worldwide gain access to educational content, but the fundamental architecture supporting this access remains concentrated in power centres, creating new forms of dependency that echo older colonial relationships (Philip et al., 2012). Due to this technological monopolization, decisions about how knowledge get organized, searched, and accessed are made primarily within institutions that reflect Western educational traditions and epistemologies as well – showing the persistence of centre-periphery dynamics (Ma, 2025). This creates a cardinal contradiction: open resources designed to democratize knowledge depend entirely on technological infrastructures that embody the very power asymmetries these workings claim to address.

The **coloniality of knowledge**⁴ extends Quijano's framework into epistemology, pointing to how colonial hierarchies become embedded in the very ways we understand what counts as legitimate knowledge. Colonialism imposed an hierarchization of knowledge systems, positioning European thought as universal, rational, and superior, whilst non-Western knowledges faced marginalization, suppression, or were dismissed as "primitive" (Quijano, 2000). Walter D. Mignolo's (2002) concept of "the geopolitics of knowledge" illuminates the spatial and political dynamics of this epistemic coloniality. His work reveals how knowledge

⁴ Quijano did not explicitly use the exact terms of "coloniality of knowledge" and "coloniality of being" in his foundational works. Rather he laid the conceptual groundwork for these ideas in the 2000 article 'Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America', which then were more explicitly developed by other decolonial scholars, such as Mignolo (2002; 2009) and Maldonado-Torres (2007).

never travels neutrally, but is inherently motivated and shaped by its geopolitical location of production.

In a historical analysis, Mignolo (2002; 2011) recounts how Western Europe and later the United States became the centres of “legitimate” knowledge production, whilst the Global South found itself to be relegated to the periphery, leading to an “epistemological hegemony over all the other cultures of the world” (p. 80). This epistemic hierarchy fundamentally privileged Western knowledge and cosmology, making Western science synonymous with knowledge itself, whilst others ways of thinking were relegated to the status of folklore or pre-scientific thinking. The global university system and academic publishing networks institutionalized this intellectual pecking order, creating deep-rooted infrastructures that continue to shape how knowledge circulates today (Mignolo, 2002).

Like so, Western epistemology works from a “hubris of the zero point,” hiding its own geo-historical specificity while demanding that everyone else acknowledges their particularity. This hierarchical order allows them to present themselves as a neutral, universal viewpoint, a “truth without parenthesis” (Mignolo, 2011, p. 82).

Furthermore, when educational resources arise from this perspective and circulate the internet, they can implicitly project this assumption of universality with them. The implications for OER become clear: even when platforms commit to openness, they may subconsciously reproduce colonial logic by favouring content that aligns with Western educational frameworks. Resources from other epistemological traditions might get included, but get marked as particular or culturally specific, whilst Western approaches retain their status as simply “educational” without qualification (Mignolo, 2009).

Mignolo’s notion of “**colonial difference**” – that is, the epistemological divide between Western and non-Western knowledge systems – finds new expression in digital spaces, as they further epistemological hierarchies through things like algorithmic design and content curation practices (Mignolo, 2002). For example, consider how OER collections organize knowledge: the privileging of modular, sequential learning units reflects particular notions about how knowledge acquisition should proceed. The emphasis on individual consumption of discrete educational objects embeds liberal notions of autonomous learners that may conflict with more communal or holistic approaches to knowledge transmission. Even the technical infrastructure of OER repositories – with their emphasis on search, discovery, and individual access – reproduces what Mignolo (2002) identifies as Western epistemological frameworks that separate knower from known, subject from object.

Moreover, OER platforms often employ universalist language, whilst maintaining underlying epistemological structures rooted in European academic traditions, furthering a Eurocentric agenda. Mignolo (2002, p. 85) furthermore emphasizes the following: “the critiques of modernity, Western logocentrism, capitalism, Eurocentrism, and the like performed in Western Europe and the United States cannot be valid for persons who think and live in Asia, Africa, or Latin America (...)”. Though they may be of no ill intent, Western academic context may reproduce the very universalizing tendencies they claim to challenge, becoming a new form of intellectual colonization, however inadvertent.

He pushes, “[i]t is crucial for the ethics, politics, and epistemology of the future to recognize that the totality of Western epistemology (...) is no longer valid for the entire

planet.” (Mignolo, 2002, p. 86). This does not mean dismissing Western knowledge traditions in their entirety, but rather attending to their particularity instead of braving about their universality; it means creating space for other epistemological traditions.

Nelson Maldonado-Torres’ conceptualization (2007) of the **coloniality of being** provides a third crucial pillar to Quijano’s original analytical framework, exploring how colonial logic penetrates the existential level of human experience itself, shaping their basic sense of what it means to exist in the world. For Maldonado-Torres (2007, p. 256), the coloniality of being represents “a process whereby the forgetfulness of ethics as a transcendental moment that founds subjectivity turns into the production of a world in which exceptions to ethical relationships become the norm.” Colonialism not only affects political, economic, and epistemological structures – it fundamentally alters the way we relate to each other and to ourselves, creating conditions where ethical disregard becomes systematized and dehumanization and violence become normalized.

Drawing from Fanon’s “Les Damnés de la Terre” / “the Wretched of the Earth” (1971), Maldonado-Torres introduces the figure of the “damné”: subjects who exist in what he calls “zones of non-being” where ethical relationships have been systematically disrupted. These are spaces of liminality where individuals find themselves neither fully recognized as human subjects, nor entirely excluded from social existence, but suspended in a form of social death that makes them susceptible for exploitation and violence (Maldonado-Torres, 2007).

Within the context of OER, a new form of “damned” emerges: users who are neither subjects or objects of learning. When these repositories are designed primarily with Western logic in mind, they risk creating a digital environment where certain users experience what amounts to ontological exclusion within supposedly “open” spaces. They may have formal access to resources, but because of the way these platforms are made and behave, doesn’t accommodate for their ways of knowing and being – they are excluded in their inclusion.

The implications of this extend beyond questions of access or representation towards fundamental concerns about how digital platforms construct ontological and epistemological possibilities. A decolonial turn then involves “interventions at the level of power, knowledge and being, through varied practices of decolonization.” It is about “making visible the invisible and about analysing the mechanisms that produce such invisibility or distorted visibility (...)” (Maldonado-Torres, 2007, p. 262). These insights suggest that genuinely transformative digital education would need to emerge from epistemological positions that don’t simply include marginalized voices within the existing frameworks – it would demand a fundamental reimagining of how digital knowledge production behaves at its most basic levels.

ii. Epistemic Violence

Continuing on, a deeper look how certain knowledge systems are suppressed – particularly how marginalized voices can be silenced or misrepresented even within initiatives that explicitly aim to include them – is consequential. This brings us to Gayatri Spivak’s (1988, p. 76) influential theorization of **epistemic violence**, which she defines as “the remotely

orchestrated, far-flung, and heterogeneous project to constitute the colonial subject as Other”. Epistemic violence operates through systematic delegitimization of particular knowledge systems, rendering them invisible within dominant discourse. Unlike physical violence, this form of domination works through seemingly neutral academic, scientific, or technological frameworks that establish the parameters of legitimate knowledge production. The violence lies not in direct suppression, but in creating conditions where certain ways of knowing become literally unthinkable within established intellectual structures.

Spivak’s formulation proves remarkably prescient in the digital sphere, as epistemic violence in platforms like OER acts not only through explicit exclusion, but also through subtler mechanisms of inclusion that fundamentally alters what gets included (Spivak, 1988). Indeed, when marginalized voices achieve symbolic inclusion yet undergo interpretation, organization, and circulation through technological systems embedding Western epistemological assumptions, they experience profound translation processes. Knowledge becomes categorized, validated, and circulated through standardized formats that strip away crucial cultural, relational, and contextual dimensions. The platform’s algorithmic infrastructures shapes how knowledge is discovered, how relevance is determined, and how different types of content interact with each other, potentially reproducing colonial hierarchies even when surface-level diversity appears present. Spivak’s famous question of “Can the subaltern speak?” becomes in the digital context; “Can the subaltern speak in ways that are heard, understood, and valued within these digital knowledge systems?” (Spivak, 1988). Whether the subaltern has a voice then, depends not just on access to digital platforms, but on whether the technological structures themselves can accommodate subaltern for forms of knowledge that do not conform to Western academic conventions.

As such, the challenge of representation versus re-presentation provides particularly salient in the context of digital educational resources (Spivak, 1988). Whilst some representation may be achieved – that is, the numerical inclusion of diverse voices and perspectives – while failing at re-presentation – genuine engagement with the epistemological frameworks and knowledge practices of non-Western users. This distinction becomes visible when examining how OER organizes different types of educational content. Traditional knowledge might receive inclusion within the platform’s database, but this inclusion occurs through processes of translation that inherently alter how that knowledge can be understood and engaged with; for example, oral traditions become text-based or relational knowledge individualized. Another profound paradox emerges: the platform’s infrastructure transforms what it claims to preserve, creating what appears as inclusion, whilst actually constituting a form of epistemic violence that Spivak (1988) would recognize as deeply familiar to colonial patterns of knowledge appropriation. Digital platforms thus participate in what might be understood as a technologically mediated cultural imperialism, where the medium itself becomes the message of Western epistemological dominance.

iii. Ecologies of Knowledge

The question then becomes: how do we move forward from this colonial matrix of power? How might we imagine decolonizing OER in ways that don’t simply reproduce colonial dynamics through different means?

Portuguese sociologist Boaventura Sousa de Santos (2007; 2014) theorizes a compelling framework for envisioning alternatives to epistemic coloniality through his concept of **ecologies of knowledge**. His starting point involves critiquing what he calls **abyssal thinking** – a concept that will help us illuminate how digital platforms often reproduce what he describes as “the impossibility of copresence” between different knowledge systems. Santos (2007) defines abyssal thinking as such:

“It is a system where the invisible distinctions are established through radical lines that divide social reality into two realms, the realm of 'this side of the line' and the realm of 'the other side of the line.' The division is such that 'the other side of the line' vanishes as reality, becomes nonexistent, and is indeed produced as nonexistent (...) What most fundamentally characterizes abyssal thinking is thus the impossibility of copresence of the two sides of the line. To the extent that it prevails, this side of the line only prevails by exhausting the field of relevant” (p. 45-46).

This isn't simply exclusion – it is a more thorough process of rendering certain ways of knowing literally unthinkable within dominant frameworks. When one system of knowledge prevails, it not only dominates, but it “exhausts the field of relevant” possibilities, making other ways of thinking appear not just inferior, but impossible (Santos, 2007, p. 46).

In digital educational spaces, abyssal thinking becomes inserted in seemingly ‘technical’ decisions. It seems that when platforms categorize knowledge according to Western academic standards, they often treat other traditions as mere “beliefs, opinions, intuitions, which, at the most, may become objects or raw materials for scientific inquiry” (Santos, 2007, p. 47). This creates what he calls the production of **non-existent reality**⁵ – ways of being and knowing that gets systematically concealed within the dominant frame of thought. So, when platforms prioritize written over oral traditions, individual over collective knowledge creation, or linear over cyclical learning processes, they don't just partake in a process of sidelining alternatives – certain forms of knowledge simply cannot exist within digital architectures organized around Western epistemological assumptions.

Santos' alternative vision centres on what he calls **ecologies of knowledge** – approaches organized around the “recognition of the plurality of heterogeneous knowledges (one of them being modern science) and on the sustained and dynamic interconnections between them without compromising their autonomy” (2007, p. 66). This idea, which he further develops in ‘Epistemologies of the South’ (2014), would require a groundwork capable of supporting fundamentally different ways of organizing, validating, and circulating knowledge. “The

⁵ This complements Maldonado-Torres (2007) concept of “zones of non-being”, as Santos underscores the systemic erasure of marginalized knowledge, whilst Maldonado-Torres focuses on the lived, spatialized violence of dehumanization. Both point to how coloniality enforces an existence where certain populations are denied full being, be it ontological or epistemological erasure.

ecology of knowledge is founded on the idea that knowledge is interknowledge” (Santos, 2007, p. 66).

His concept of **intercultural translation** becomes particularly relevant here, as meaningful engagement across knowledge traditions requires a **postabyssal thinking** – ways of organizing digital space that don’t just reproduce the invisible lines rendering certain knowledge systems nonexistent, but making them live alongside each other in equal ways (Santos, 2007; 2014; 2018). As such, rather than including diverse content within existing organizational frameworks, intercultural translation is not just about adding diversity, but creating a dialogue where different knowledge systems can communicate without imposing on each other (Santos, 2014).

Perhaps most importantly, Santos (2007) emphasizes **knowledge-as-intervention-in-reality**, rather than knowledge-as-representation-of-reality. As he puts it, “[f]or an ecology of knowledges, knowledge-in-reality is the measure of realism, not knowledge-as-a-representation of reality. The credibility of cognitive construction is measured by the type of intervention in the world that it affords or prevents” (Santos, 2007, p. 70). In the context of OER, many platforms assume “knowledge is valuable as such” while not questioning “the form, value, or usability of knowledge.” The assumption is that knowledge has “the power the power to subvert existing relations of power,” positioning themselves as transformative, nevertheless this rhetoric belies that a colonial agenda can still be reinforced through new technological means (Bacevic & Muellerleile, 2018, p. 181). Santos (2007) thus points to a more pragmatic orientation, in which digital educational resources must be evaluated based on their capacity to enable meaningful real-world interventions, rather than their conformity to abstract academic standards.

In his 2018 book ‘The End of the Cognitive Empire’, Santos (2018)) connects his analysis to broader questions of social justice, arguing that cognitive justice isn’t separate from other forms of social transformation, but a necessary component! Hence, truly transformative OER platforms cannot simply diversify their content libraries or make existing systems more accessible. As Santos (2007, p. 60) argues, “the struggle for cognitive justice will not be successful if it is based solely on the idea of a more equal distribution of scientific knowledge.” Instead, digital educational platforms need to be organized around ecological principles that support multiple, interconnected knowledge systems without forcing them into hierarchical relationships, towards more genuinely pluralistic democratic and decolonial knowledge technologies.

1.3. Methodology

This study employs an integrated methodology, combining digital ethnography and critical discourse analysis (CDA), looking at Open Educational Resources not merely as a repository, but as a contested epistemic terrain where both logic of democracy and colonialism unfold simultaneously.

In the first place, following Pink et al. (2015), this research approaches the OER platform ‘OER Commons’ as the digital field site. This means interacting with it as a living, mediated environment that has its own culture and way of organizing – a space where

knowledge is not merely accessed, but performed through design, interfaces, algorithms, and user practices.

My engagement with the platform happens on two levels that constantly inform each other. There is the immediate, embodied experience of being a user – clicking through search results, watching how certain materials surface to the foreground, others are sidelined, but also inspecting how the platform can be navigated; what are its optics, the “sensory” elements of it, what is its internal logic? (Pink et al., 2015). Secondly, I am undertaking a digital analysis, stepping back and trying to understand the patterns I’m seeing. This can be likened to a digital archaeology in a way; collecting data in the form of screenshots, metadata displays, etc.

Where this ethnography reveals *how* knowledge moves, CDA dissects the language and logic that legitimize its containment (Fairclough, 1992; Wodak & Meyer). This means, unpacking the power structures of these resources, platform discourses, mission statements; looking at how resources are categorized, tagged, and described.

All the same, my methodological approach faces its own limitations. The absence of interviews with actual users, means I cannot fully capture users’ lived experiences. Here, CDA compensates by treating the platform’s interface as a form of ‘interview,’ looking at it as a whole of discursive acts. The platform in itself is a form of discourse, rather than treating it as “factual, raw material”, it is a system that produces the very categories through which certain categories – like knowledge – becomes thinkable.

The interplay between digital ethnography and critical analysis exposes how platforms weaponize openness, folding democratizing ideals into inherently biased structures. The task is not to condemn these resources, but to point to its fractures, so we can imagine a scape that could multiply knowledge without rationing its power.

1.4. Positionality and Ethics⁶

As scholars, we often find ourselves benefiting from the very knowledge structures we are trying to critique (Bacevic & Muellerleile, 2018; Adam, 2020). In light of this paper, my own positioning within Western academic institutions whilst trying to conduct a decolonial analysis of digital educational platforms echoes this notion strongly. Rather than attempting to resolve this contradiction – which feels both impossible and dishonest – it seems more productive to engage with it as a constitutive element of the research process itself, seeing as in any way our inquiries are fundamentally shaped by your/mine/our positionality.

My location within Western knowledge structures, marked by ongoing access to educational institutions, technological resources, and digital materials, profoundly influences not only my research perspective but my worldview – informing how I think, what seems important to look into, and what analytical possibilities even occur to me.

⁶ Parts of this content were derived from another paper written by me, that served as a sort of start report for this thesis, submitted for the course “Urbanity and Modernity”, lectured by prof dr. dr. Luce Beeckmans and prof. dr. Hilde Heynen

Even the methods I have chosen to pursue – digital ethnography and critical discourse analysis – emerge from Western academic traditions, and thus inevitably reproduce certain epistemological frameworks, even in my effort to deploy them to critique epistemic coloniality structures. This creates a double bind: the very instruments through which I want to examine epistemic violence, are themselves implicated in the systems I seek to question. Digital ethnography, with its emphasis on systematic observation and analysis, carries underlying assumptions about objectivity and distance that reflect particular ways of knowing (Pink et al., 2015). Critical discourse analysis on the other hand, despite its evident focus on critiquing, privileges certain forms of textual and visual literacy (Wodak & Meyers, 2015).

Following Mohanty's (1984) critique of Western feminist scholarship, I must acknowledge my participation in reproducing colonial hierarchies through academic knowledge production, even while attempting to challenge them. This positioning, however, need not function solely as limitation or confession of failure. Instead, this can become a productive methodological resource through which to conduct more ethically grounded research. Indeed, whilst owning my privilege, my sustained engagement with Western frameworks provides a baseline for critical intervention, precisely because I have an inkling of understanding how these systems work from the inside. The tension between being rooted in these structures, whilst critiquing them, can become productive through an epistemic reflexive approach – constantly questioning how my analytical frameworks open certain insights, while foreclosing others.

I can't step outside this positioning, nor should I pretend to. Rather than claiming neutral ground that doesn't exist, this research embraces what Haraway (1998) calls "situated knowledge" – understanding that all knowledge emerges from particular localities.

CHAPTER TWO – OPEN EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES

2.1. What are Open Educational Resources⁷?

Open Educational Resources (OER) represent freely accessible teaching, learning, and research materials that are licensed to allow users to retain, reuse, revise, remix, and redistribute them without cost or legal barriers (UNESCO, 2019; 2021). These resources can constitute a specialized form of Open Access (OA), specifically tailored for educational contexts, and include textbooks, course materials, videos, and other educational content designed to democratize access to quality education by removing traditional copyright restrictions (Butcher, 2015; OER Commons, 2025).

Even so, open educational resources extend beyond mere digital facilities to encompass what might be understood as an ecosystem of practices, permissions, and possibilities (Inamorato Dos Santos et al., 2016). As open domain, OER promises to provide free learning and more equitable education and knowledge dissemination across global contexts. Yet it cannot be neglected how their circulation takes place in broader power figurations that shape how these promises get realized in practice.

This chapter traces the historical development of OER, its key characteristics and its promise of democratization and accessibility – and where these aspirations get trapped – before zooming in on the digital field site of ‘OER Commons’ as our central case study.

2.1.1. History and Development

Open Educational Resources emerge from broader movements towards open access that predate its digital conceptualization by decades, with roots reaching back to mid-twentieth century human rights frameworks. The conceptual foundations can be traced to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, which established in Article 26 that “everyone has a right to education”, including specific provisions for higher education: “Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all. “ (UDHR, Art. 26, cited in Mane, 2024).

These rights-based commitments would eventually intersect with the advent of technological developments, particularly through Richard Stallman’s establishment of the Free Software Foundation in 1985. Stallman’s work introduced the concepts of user freedom and collaborative development that would prove crucial for educational purposes decades later (Mane, 2024). This movement introduced the notion that digital resources could be both legally protected and freely shared through innovative licensing approaches – an insight that created the intellectual groundwork for educational applications that would emerge in the subsequent years (Mane, 2024).

The institutional solidification of these ideas began with MIT’s Open Courseware project in 2001, supported by funding from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. Their mission to provide “high-quality educational resources to promote equitable access to knowledge

⁷ See Footnote 6

represented more than technological innovation; it embodied the plain, yet powerful notion that “the world’s knowledge is a public good” (Knox, 2013; Mane, 2024, p. 1264-1265 ; Neylon, 2015). MIT’s decision to make all their course materials freely available online created a precedent for formal commitments to open educational sharing that would influence universities and other educational networks worldwide (Olivier & Ranbow, 2023; Mane, 2024).

However, Dutta et al. (2021) offer a crucial counternarrative to the conventional Western-centric histories that position OER as this Northern innovation being generously exported to the rest of the world, revealing how supposedly innovative "open" approaches often appropriate existing knowledge practices from Indigenous and local communities across the Global South.

This perspective reframes OER not as a technological breakthrough emerging from Silicon Valley or prestigious universities, but as an appropriation of existing Southern knowledge practices that then gets repackaged within colonial frameworks. Indigenous and local communities have long maintained sophisticated systems for sharing knowledge, developing collaborative learning approaches, and creating educational resources adapted to local contexts. What gets celebrated as "innovation" in digital education often represents the digitization and commodification of knowledge practices that have existed for generations outside formal educational institutions.

Perhaps more troublingly, they argue that "hegemonic Open Science processes co-opt and erase Southern epistemologies, working to create and reproduce new enclosures of extraction that serve data colonialism-capitalism (Dutta et al., 2021, p. 804). This analysis reveals how ostensibly democratizing initiatives can function as mechanisms for what might be understood as epistemological extraction – taking knowledge practices developed within Southern contexts and incorporating them into Northern-controlled technological systems that ultimately serve existing power structures, furthering an agenda of epistemic violence.

2.1.2. Definition and Core Principles

UNESCO Definition

The formal term “Open Educational Resources” was coined by UNESCO in 2002 at the World Forum on Open Courseware (Olivier & Ranbow, 2023). However, the concept has undergone significant evolution since its original formulation. What began as relatively straightforward content sharing has now expanded to encompass broader educational transformation; traditional views of “openness” as merely “open entry and easier access to study” evolved towards comprehensive frameworks encompassing content availability, adaptation rights, and collaborative development (Inamorato dos Santos et al., 2021).

This shift reflects both changing technological capabilities and changing educational philosophies. Cronin (2017) points out that earlier interpretations treating “openness” as simply “free” remained limited because vast arrays of online resources remained subject to copyright restrictions that prevented meaningful reuse or adaptation. OER has in the

meantime addressed this limitation by focusing specifically on legal reuse through open licensing approaches (Butcher, 2015).

UNESCO's current definition establishes OER as "learning, teaching and research materials in any format and medium that reside in the public domain or are under copyright that have been released under an open license, that permit no-cost access, re-use, repurpose, adaptation and redistribution by others" (UNESCO, 2025). This description emphasizes both accessibility and adaptability, distinguishing OER from educational content that might be freely available, but legally restricted.

The 2019 UNESCO Recommendation marked a significant milestone as the first international normative instrument within the UN system to officially adopt openly licensed educational materials. The 2019 UN Recommendation (p. 8) positions OER as both educational tool and policy priority, expressing how these resources can "support quality education that is equitable, inclusive, open and participatory, as well as enhance academic freedom and professional autonomy of teachers by widening the scope of materials available for teaching and learning".

Open Licensing

The technical innovation underlying OER lies in its licensing construction. Creative Commons⁸ and similar systems protect a copyright holder's rights while still allowing content to be easily copied and shared digitally (Butcher, 2015). This resolves apparent contradictions between intellectual property protection and open sharing, creating legal space for digital educational resources.

Cronin's distinction between "open as gratis" (free access) and "open as libre" (legal reuse) proves particularly important here. While gratis openness provides cost-free access to materials, libre openness enables modification without requiring prior permission from copyright holders (Cronin, 2017). This legal framework creates possibilities for adaptation and localization that traditional educational materials simply cannot provide, potentially allowing educational content to be modified for different cultural contexts, translated into various languages, or adapted for specific learning needs.

David Wiley's "5R activities", introduced in 2014, is a widely adopted structure, that captures the technical possibilities that licensing permits (Olivier & Ranbow, 2023). These five activities – Retain, Reuse, Revision, Remix and Redistribution – move beyond passive content consumption towards active knowledge production. Users gain rights to make and control copies (Retain), use materials in various contexts (Reuse), adapt and modify content (Revision), combine materials with other resources (Remix), and share freely with others (Redistribution) (Butcher, 2015).

⁸ An international nonprofit organization that provides licenses and public domain tools to grant copyright permissions for creative and academic works.

2.1.3. Promise of Democratization

The democratizing potential of OER emerges through several interconnected characteristics that fundamentally distinguish these resources from traditional educational materials.

Accessibility stands out as perhaps the most widely celebrated feature, promising free access to educational materials regardless of geographic location or economic circumstances. This accessibility directly addresses what UNESCO (2019) identifies as the educational needs of “marginalized or disadvantaged groups,” working to open up not access to existing knowledge.

Adaptability⁹ forms an equally crucial dimension for knowledge comes to be seen as inherently dynamic and cultural, rather than universal and fixed (Cobern, 2012; Cronin, 2017). The capacity to modify and contextualize materials for local contexts holds space for cultural relativity and responsiveness and situated understanding, rather than imposing a one-size-fits all approach. This adaptability creates space for “epistemological negotiation, where diverse intellectual traditions can encounter, challenge and even reconfigure each other” – suggesting possibilities for genuine dialogue between different ways of knowing, rather than simple adoption of dominant frameworks (Mane, 2024).

Additionally, the community-driven character of OER development fosters collaborative creation and improves on the materials, setting up a culture of sharing and collaboration among educators globally (Butcher, 2015). This collaboration holds potential for transforming lone-standing educators into networked knowledge producers, therefore unsettling traditional hierarchies of educational authority where expertise seems to primarily flow from established institutions to peripheral users (Inamorato Dos Santos et al., 2016).

Moreover, OER also has significant economic implications that extend well beyond simple cost reduction – though it must be noted that cost elimination remains an especially important material factor. By removing what Butcher (2015) identifies as the time-consuming and expensive processes of procuring permission to use copyrighted material, OER enables organization to redirect financial resources towards educational innovation rather than content acquisition. This economic shift has the potential to democratize access to high-quality educational matters, notably making them available to institutions and learners who have historically been left out due to financial constraints (Hodgkinson-Williams & Gray, 2009; Butcher, 2015).

Perhaps most significantly, these various dimensions interact in ways that could reshape fundamental relationships between educators, students, and educational institutions, in an effort of making knowledge truly more available for everyone. As Andrew et al. (2024, p. 2398) say: “Even the best ideas remain just that until they are shared, until they can be utilized by others”. With the combination of technical accessibility, cultural adaptability, and collaborative development models, possibilities emerge for more participatory and responsive educational systems than current arrangements typically support (Verschraegen & Schiltz, 2007).

⁹ See “open as libre” in the previous part

2.1.4. Limits

However, these promising characteristics exist alongside significant structural constraints and contradictory dynamics that require careful examination. Knox (2013) argues that the open education movement, despite its enthusiastic embrace of digital technologies of participation and inclusion, tend to treat access to online material as its principal concern. As a result, overlooking deeper questions about how technology fundamentally shapes educational processes.

For example, the economic model shift that Butcher (2015) describes – where institutions redirect their focus towards providing effective student support, intelligent assessment, and accreditation, rather than merely content delivery – also holds its own drawbacks. The investment requirements for effective OER implementation – including developing curricula, designing courses, and supporting teaching and learning environments – implies new forms of institutional resource demands and capacity needs. These requirements raise questions about whether OER truly democratizes educational access or simply shifts the location of investments.

Furthermore, the legal innovation of open licensing continues to function within intellectual property frameworks that may continue privileging certain forms of knowledge production over others. As a matter of fact, sharing content under open licenses implies that the content remains attributed to the original author (Butcher, 2015). But this attribution has the chance of reinforcing existing academic hierarchies, rather than fundamentally challenging them. Recognition and credit continue flowing towards those already positioned within established knowledge systems, while alternative forms of knowledge creation may remain invisible or undervalued.

Most importantly, OER shouldn't be confused with open learning or equated to broader educational transformation. While OER can support open pedagogical approaches, the two concepts are distinctively different (Butcher, 2015). Technical openness in OER doesn't automatically lead to pedagogical or institutional change, just as how making content freely available doesn't necessarily alter how learning gets organized, evaluated, or credentialed within educational systems.

This distinction matters because it reveals something telling about the discourse around educational technology. As Knox (2013) observes, OER literature frequently employs technological instrumentalism and essentialism – approaches that make technology appear objective and value-free. Instrumentalism treats technology as merely licensing educational goals without influencing them, while essentialism suggests technology possesses inherently beneficial qualities: Technology gets described as simply “facilitating” or “empowering” learning – language that makes the technological infrastructure seem transparent and non-political, whilst in reality they shape what becomes possible to know and how.

Furthermore, this technological innocence becomes particularly problematic when affecting what Christen (2012, p. 2878) terms “cultural blindness around the contours of access and openness”. Our collective faith in openness as inherently good makes it difficult to examine how such belief might reproduce hierarchies through the very infrastructures

designed to obstruct them, and we might lose sight of how such universality claims might mask their own prejudiced assumptions.

Merely making existing Western knowledge “open” via open resources, does not “challenge the terms of the conversations – it is still within the “same rules of the game,” leading only to reform, rather than fundamental transformation. As Mignolo (2011) states, the challenge is not just to critique the content of Western epistemology, but it’s “structure of enunciation” – the underlying paradigms that decide what counts as knowledge in the first place.

These contradictions don't necessarily negate OER's potential or mean abandoning these platforms, but they do require honest acknowledgment of its complexities. Gaining an understanding of these dynamics becomes crucial for assessing when and how OER might serve genuinely democratizing purposes rather than simply reproducing existing inequalities through different mechanisms.

2.2. Case Study: OER Commons

For this analysis of OER, the repository of **OER Commons** was chosen as the main locus for digital fieldwork. OER Commons can be seen as one of the most powerful attempts to operationalize the democratic ideals embedded within the broader open education movement, and has risen to the top “as one of the most develop search and discovery tools” for locating online educational content (Gallaway, 2016, p. 35). Created in 2007 by the Institute for the Study of Knowledge Management in Education (ISKME) with crucial support from the William and Flora Howlett Foundation, the platform functions as a “digital public library and collaboration platform”, providing access to over 400 0000 educational materials spanning primary education through professional development (Ariew, 2011; Edwards, 2022; OER Commons, 2025).

2.2.1. Origins and Mission

ISKME, an independent nonprofit educational research institute located in California, founded OER Commons as part of the Hewlett Foundation’s worldwide OER initiative (Vollmer, 2011; OER Commons, 2025). The organization’s president and founder, Lisa Petrides, explains that ISKME’s research has the focal point of “improving the practice of data use, information sharing, and knowledge collaboration in the education sector”, with the platform emerging from “applying what we have learned from on-the-ground educational initiatives” (Vollmer, 2011).

The platform explicitly frames its mission around “the human right to access high-quality education,” positioning itself as supporting “equity and flexibility” within educational systems. As their website explains, “this shift in educational practice Is not just about cost savings and easy access to openly licensed content; it’s about participation and co-creation” (OER Commons, 2025). Thus, ISKME’s approach to OER emphasizes what they term “Open Educational Resources (OER) Support Equity and Flexibility”, targeting their work to grow “a sustainable culture of sharing and continuous improvement among educators at all levels” – indicating an awareness that technological platforms alone cannot transform educational

relations without corresponding changes in the institutional culture and pedagogical practice (OER, Commons)

2.2.2. Rationale

What makes OER Commons particularly intriguing as a case study is how it embodies both the aspirations and contradictions that characterize contemporary open education initiatives. Rather than producing original content, the platforms function as an intermediary – a “digital library” that mediates between knowledge producers and knowledge seekers through systems of categorization, search algorithms, and quality assessment mechanisms (Edwards, 2022; OER Commons, 2025). OER Commons aggregates, organizes, and distributes educational resources from diverse institutional and individual contributors across global contexts, making it not a singular institutional voice – as many other OER platforms, like MIT Open Courseware – but a curatorial space where multiple actors can come into contact with each other through digital mediation.

Nonetheless, the platform’s aggregation model, metadata standards, and algorithmic organization systems instil particular epistemological assumptions about how knowledge should be categorized, what forms of educational content matters most, and how learning relationships should be structured. The platform simultaneously enables unprecedented access to educational materials, while creating new forms of digital intervention that shape knowledge gets circulated and valued. In sum, OER Commons functions not only as a technological artifact, but also must be understood as the cultural institution that it is, located in time and space. In and of itself, these technological platforms don’t simply distribute existing knowledge – they actively participate in constructing the conditions under which knowledge becomes meaningful and useful for diverse learning communities.

CHAPTER THREE – DIGITAL ARCHITECTURE

The homepage of OER Commons greets its visitors with what appears to be a straightforward interface – bold colours, neat typography, clean lines, and intuitive navigation patterns. Unmistakeably in big white letters is spelled at the forefront: “**Explore. Create. Collaborate**” – a messaging direct yet aspirational. The platform immediately dives in an explanation:

“OER Commons is a digital public library of open educational resources. Explore, create, and collaborate with educators around the world to improve curriculum.”

It all feels very frank, yet welcoming; the search engine buttons familiar enough that most users can immediately understand how to find what they’re looking for. However, decolonial feminist theory and ethnographic practice teaches us to defamiliarize the familiar, to question what seems self-evident, to notice what usually remains invisible. Cultural work often happens when things feel the most natural and obvious, and in this case, digital interfaces are not as simple as they initially appear. Bucher (2018, p. 72) says the following about platforms:

“Platforms act as performative intermediaries that participate in shaping the worlds they only purport to represent. This means that design is not neutral but actively influences how users interact and perceive content. The materiality and culture are inherently entangled in software and algorithms, meaning that technology and practices are co-constitutive.”

Lying underneath a seemingly neutral interaction system, is a complex configuration of suppositions about knowledge, learning and educational authority. Platforms are, after all, human-made sociotechnical spaces, meaning they carry within their code and design the particular perspectives, priorities, and blind spots of their creators. The physical layout and visual choices are not just functional choices, but symbolic representations of individuals, often communicating how they want to “change thinking” (Bucher, 2018, p. 62).

Every element – from search algorithm logic to metadata requirement, from visual hierarchies to default settings – carries meaning in its apparent function, implying much more than an organisatory tool for a website’s information. These decisions made in design become naturalized through their apparent technical necessity, which makes them both incredibly salient to study and invisible to users who perceive them simply as “how the platform works.”

This chapter’s focus then is on how OER Common’s digital architecture fundamentally shapes what becomes possible within the platform’s educational ecosystem. Through treating the platform’s design as discourse, we can begin to understand how digital educational spaces participate in broader patterns of epistemic inclusion and exclusion, often in ways that work well below the surface of conscious intention.

3.1. Design and Categorization

The visual organization of OER Commons homepage immediately seems to communicate some underlying presumptions. Most of the visible page is centred around a carefully staged image of collaborative learning – hand gathered around a workspace with laptops, notebooks, and what seems like cups of coffee – suggesting a functional educational environment where learning could thrive. Initially, I don't see anything inherently problematic about this imagery: diverse people working together, working with both digital and analog tools, the visual suggestion of “exploring, creating, collaboration” that aligns perfectly with the site's stated objective. But this image speaks more than a thousand words. Being myself from a Western educational context, I don't necessarily see anything ‘abnormal’ with this photograph, but that is precisely what needs to be unpacked. In reality, this visual is a first sign of the kind of formalized, technology-mediated educational space characteristic of Global Northern institutional settings, embedding assumptions about where “legitimate learning” happens.

When I want to employ the search interface – the second most noticeable thing on the homepage – it registers to me how particular notions about educational legitimacy become quietly normalized. The search driver begins promisingly with an open question: “What are you looking for?” – it invites users to define their own educational needs; an open question that can filled with whatever the user should desire. But then expansive possibility immediately contracts through dropdown menus for “*Subject*,” “*Educational Level*,” and “*Standard*”, presenting predetermined categories users have to fit their knowledge-seeking practices in.

The categories for “*Subject*” promptly shows only Western disciplinary divisions that fragment knowledge into discrete academic subjects: “*Applied Science*,” “*Arts and Humanities*,” “*Business and Communication*,” “*English Language Arts*”. Certainly, I recognize that categorization serves essential organizational functions – we need some way to browse our way through vast collections of materials, without drowning in information overload. Yet categories are also fundamentally politically loaded. Bucher (2018, p. 5) affirms this: “[W]hat the categories are, what belongs in a category, and who decides how to implement these categories in practice, are all powerful assertions about how things are and supposed to be.” To summarize, categories decide how information is ordered, but also implicates what knowledge becomes systematically included and excluded. As such, the organizational logic here shows what is present, but more noticeably, also sheds light on what is absent. What about knowledge systems that resist such categorization? There seem to be only 13 fixed categories, it seems unlikely that every of the 400 000 educational resources made available on OER Commons can comply to this sorting. Indeed, the platform's design requires knowledge to be pre-sorted according to a normative set-up that is undoubtedly informed by Western frameworks, making alternative epistemological approaches either invisible or forcing their translation into Western academic categories.

The “*Standard*” dropdown menu reveals to me the most in this regard. When clicking through what feels like an endless scroll of options, I find a list dominated by American state-specific standards. “*Pennsylvania Academic Standards for Environment and Ecology*,” “*Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills for Math*”, “*Washington Social Studies Standards*”, and the

list goes on and on. Undoubtedly, the “*Standard*” menu is dominated by US-centric educational formats – already revealing what is to be conceived as the “universal standard” – demonstrating the overwhelming US-centrism. Only two non-US options jump out: the “UNESCO ICT Competency Framework” and what appeared to be an Arabic entry that Google Translate reveals as “Mada’s framework for developing competencies.” This uneven distribution creates systematic advantages for educational content designed to meet American institutional requirements, while marginalizing approaches that function according to different principles. In a way, the two non-US options even appear almost tokenistic, mere gestures toward inclusivity that highlight even more so the profound geographic concentration of the platform’s organizational logic.

Looking at how the platform categorizes “*Educational Level*” reveals similar results. The options range from “*Preschool*” to “*High School*”, “*College*” and “*Graduate*”, and additional selections of “*Career / Technical*” and “*Adult Education*”. Again, these categories follow American standards, thus continuing a pattern of imposing Eurocentric models (Steinhardt & Kruschick, 2022).

When examining the advanced search options, we encounter what Bucher (2018, p. 6) identifies as platform’s role in defining what is “‘good’ or ‘well-functioning’” in terms of what creates value for the system itself. The extensive filtering options – from accessibility features to licence types – already reflect presumptions about technological capacity, legal literacy, and institutional resources that may shut out communities operating with different practices. This seems to be the platform’s most comprehensive system of knowledge organization, sorting all educational content in Western-centric taxonomies (Edwards, 2022).

Again, each dropdown menu, each checkbox, each design choice structures user thinking, forcing knowledge into ready-made categories. As is observed in the paper of Adam (2020), “whatever knowledge or information you have, it’s behind an interface. And that interface... shapes what is possible to say and think. And that interface is very very very much produced in the Global North” (p. 7). The interface is not simply a neutral window into looking for content – it actively shapes what forms of knowledge become visible and invisible, which practices fit into the pre-cut shapes that accord to Western standards and which have to conform. Supposedly neutral design choices – like interface complexity – can then exclude certain communities from equally participating (Christen, 2012).

3.2. Algorithms

Possessed by this dissertation and entirely uninspired, I found myself typing “*Knowledge Equity*” into the open search bar. The ensuing search results that prop up, are needlessly say caused by the site’s dominant algorithmic logic.

In the simplest terms, algorithms are “coded instructions that a computer needs to follow to perform a given task, algorithms are deployed to make decisions, to sort and make meaningfully visible the vast amount of data produced and available on the Web” (Bucher, 2018, p. 3). Indeed, code is technical, but it is simultaneously social, material and symbolic (Edwards, 2015). The algorithmic infrastructure that determines search results doesn’t just determine what users find, but how value itself gets defined and distributed through computational processes that impact particular notions about quality, relevance and

legitimacy. In other words, algorithms determine what you see and decides who gets to be seen. They are political in the sense that they help to make the world appear in certain ways rather than other, exerting power by prioritising, classifying, associating and filtering information – effectively acting as a new form of gatekeeping (Bucher, 2018).

Indeed, the platform's search algorithms function through "programmable decision-makers to manage, curate, and organise the vast amount of data, making it meaningfully visible." (Bucher, 2018, p. 4). The goal is often to show "the right content to the right people at the right time" – language that sounds helpful, but obscures how this process of making certain knowledge visible necessarily involves rendering other knowledge invisible.

In the same vein, the top results for my "*knowledge equity*" search demonstrates the platform's systematic propensity for educational sources that perform well within its computational logic. The resource presents themselves through a five-star rating system, complete metadata classification, and clear licensing information that makes it algorithmically discoverable. These materials perform well within the platform's computational framework precisely because they conform to established patterns of digital educational content – professionally designed, institutionally backed, and optimized for platform visibility. This ratings-driven approach creates feedback loops where popular content becomes more discoverable while resources that don't generate measurable engagement remain in the margins (Noble, 2018). As such, the algorithm doesn't randomly surface content; it systematically rewards materials that conform to its embedded assumptions about educational legitimacy, and these standards are inherently biased!

Furthermore, platforms are designed to maximize user engagement and user experience – by providing content predicted to be "most relevant, hot, or interesting". User input, such as clicks and likes, is "turned into a means of production" that continually shapes what users receive. (Bucher, 2018, p. 2). In this case, the platform's default sorting by "*Relevance*" holds a very vague notion. By what conceptualization of relevance are results placed? Existing literature points to the fact that relevance-ranking systems can reinforce structural inequalities, operating through weighting systems that privilege certain forms of institutional recognition over others (Noble, 2018). When users search for a specific result, the algorithm determines relevance through factors like institutional affiliation (e.g. prestigious, known universities are ranked higher), metadata completeness (e.g. standardized keywords that align with Eurocentric curricula), user engagement metrics (e.g. downloads from dominant institutions create feedback loops) and alignment with standardized educational frameworks – criteria that systematically advantages content produced within Northern academic institutions while marginalizing alternative knowledge traditions (Bali et al., 2020; Noble, 2018).

Additionally, the emphasis on star ratings and engagement metrics – how many have viewed the resource, have saved or downloaded it, have commented – transforms the collaborative space more so in a competitive display of value. This pervasive display of numbers on the interface functions as a rhetorical device, instilling in users that more is better, even if there is no actual correlation to educational quality (Bucher, 2018). This quantification of educational worth reduces learning to something resembling consumer ratings, as if selecting education is like making purchasing decisions. The shift from genuine pedagogical engagement towards metric-driven competition reshapes education according to neoliberal

values, creating marketplace dynamics where visibility and numbers dictate its worth (Dutta et al., 2021; Edwards, 2022).

Besides this, the platform's recommendation algorithms create feedback loops that reinforce existing hierarchies, whilst appearing to respond neutrally to user preferences (Noble, 2018). Users who access university-produced content receive suggestions for more university-produced content, while community-generated resources remain confined to narrower circulation networks that limit their possible outreach and impact. The emphasis on similarity matching and behavioural pattern recognition means that alternative knowledge traditions struggle to achieve visibility outside their immediate communities. Educational approaches that challenge dominant frameworks, offer different epistemological perspectives, or work according to non-Western organizational principles become trapped within algorithmic echo chambers that limit their circulation and influence (Bali et al., 2020; Noble, 2018).

The algorithmic preference for popular content creates methodical advantages for Northern/Western resources over locally relevant materials that may serve smaller audiences – and have less downloads. Content becomes “authoritative” through this algorithmic sorting, rather than genuine educational impact or community recognition (Medel-Ramirez & Model-Lopez, 2024). Educational legitimacy becomes seen as something that can be earned through more visibility, rather than rightfully acquired (Edwards, 2022).

These algorithmic processes function largely below conscious awareness, nevertheless they shape learning possibilities through design choices that feel technically necessary and not culturally constructed. In the same way, when OER Commons' search algorithms consistently surface content from Global North institutions, this isn't accidental – it reflects what Dotson (2011, p. 241) calls “counterfactual incompetence with respect to some domain of knowledge”, underrepresenting alternative knowledge systems and perpetuating ignorance of marginalized knowledge by design.

3.3. Technological Standards

The platform's technical infrastructure also plants suppositions about access and literacy, that systematically privilege groups whilst marginalizing others. For example, OER Commons' reliance on digital infrastructure – particularly broadband requirements for videos – may exclude regions with a limited connectivity (Matheka et al., 2014). These technical standards operate by universalizing Global Northern connectivity norms, treating high-speed internet and advanced digital devices as baseline requirements rather than luxuries available to a global minority.

The extensive “*Material Type*” categories reveal how the platform's organizational logic systematically favours digital formats and Western pedagogical approaches. Scanning through the available options, text-based materials dominate – “*Textbook*”, “*Reading*”, “*Lecture Notes*” – alongside digital media formats that live on the presumption to have both technological means and a certain familiarity with Northern educational practices. This categorization framework reflects deeper-seated notions about how knowledge should be packaged and consumed.

Traditional knowledge forms that resist digitization become suppressed within this material type framework. Oral traditions, embodied practices, and place-based learning experiences – forms of knowledge that depend on relationship, presence, and cultural context – struggle to find appropriate categories within systems designed around discrete, downloadable resources. The platform's emphasis on materials that can be extracted from their cultural contexts and circulated independently reflects beliefs about knowledge as commodity rather than relationship, privileging educational approaches that treat learning as consumption of content rather than participation in ongoing cultural practices.

Even seemingly progressive categories like “*Interactive*” and “*Simulation*” still assume access to current technology and digital literacy that may not be universally available.

Furthermore, even for those who meet basic access requirements, the platforms also imposes technical demands for content submission that create additional layers of exclusion. As Bucher (2018) notes, data needs to be “readied before an algorithm can process them”, suggesting inherent requirements for how materials need to be structured or described before becoming available through OER Commons’ system

The Open Author interface reveals how these design principles unfold directly into content creation processes. The promotional material emphasizes that “Open Education has never been easier,” featuring tools explicitly designed around individual authorship, standardizing formatting, and technological proficiency. The interface promotes “*Powerful Editing*” capabilities through features like “*Drag and Drop*” and “*Import Rich Text & Embed Link*”, again living on the inference of technological access and specific forms of digital literacy developed within Northern educational contexts.

This design framework meticulously favours text-based, individually authored content over oral traditions or collectively developed knowledge systems. Even the emphasis on “tools designed with OER in mind” is a strong indicator of how the platform shapes knowledge to fit its technological demands, rather than adapting technology to serve diverse communities. This represents what Edwards (2015) identifies as the redefinition of knowledge through software – where technological capabilities render what forms of understanding can be retained and dispersed.

As Neylon (2015) state: ““open” infrastructures still require cultural capital to navigate”. Whilst OER eliminates traditional price barriers to educational access, new forms of exclusion emerge that operate through technological and cultural demands, rather than economic gatekeeping (Verschraegen & Schiltz, 2007). These barriers prove particularly insidious, because they feel like natural consequences of technological advancement, rather than active ostracization.

For OER Commons, this raises fundamental questions about whose knowledge can successfully interface with the platform's standards. OER’s Commons’ digital architecture not only organizes existing knowledge – it actively takes part in determining what forms of knowledge become possible within digital educational spaces, often in ways that advantage certain global communities over others, and this through processes that feel technically necessary rather than culturally constructed.

CHAPTER FOUR – KNOWLEDGE REPRESENTATION

Building forward on Chapter 3’s analysis of how OER Commons’ digital architecture entrenches particular assumptions about knowledge and learning through its design choices, this chapter will examine the deeper epistemological implication of how knowledge gets represented, validated, and circulated on the platform. While the previous chapter centred on interface design and algorithmic sorting as mechanisms of power, this analysis turns towards the more fundamental question of epistemic justice: **Whose ways of knowing become legitimized within digital educational spaces, and whose remain systematically excluded or transformed beyond recognition?**

When OER Commons puts itself forward as a “digital public library”, serving educators worldwide, it is also powerful democratic rhetoric, using the language of universal access and global commons. Nevertheless, OER Commons – as seen in the previous chapter – is also implicated in processes of knowledge validation that advantage certain epistemological traditions over others. This chapter interrogates these tensions by delving into how the platform’s knowledge validation systems, temporal-spatial and linguistic hierarchies reproduce what Quijano (2007) identifies as the coloniality of knowledge – the ongoing privileging of Western epistemological frameworks as universal standards.

The dynamics at work here are more subtle than simple exclusion – though exclusion certainly occurs – through processes of transforming all knowledge into forms that can be wrought through Western-centric validation mechanisms. It is this process that commits what Spivak (1988) terms epistemic violence, even when operating under the banner of inclusion and democratization.

4.1. Knowledge Validation Systems

Another attempt at search query, now a comparison between two similar concepts: “*evidence-based medicine*” vs. “*traditional medicine*”. They yield respectively 100, and 72 results – whilst not an enormous disparity, this outcome still validates previously-made points: certain forms of knowledge seem to greater algorithmic visibility through their alignment with Western institutional frameworks.

When researching “*traditional medicine*”, the top result reads: “*Traditional Chinese medicine blocks colorectal tumor growth in mice*”. Again, there can be argued that this source is interfacing with the platform’s logic, by the mere fact that traditional knowledge gets translated into Western scientific terms. Chinese ancient healing traditions – a knowledge system that has its own longstanding cultural legitimacy – have to prove themselves through laboratory studies and peer-reviewed validation, achieving visibleness not through its own cultural authority or communal recognition, but by successfully fitting into Eurocentric standards. The platform’s algorithm as such, rewards content that bridges epistemological frameworks in ways that ultimately service Western approaches as the benchmark against which other knowledge traditions must be measured.

Looking up “*Indigenous Knowledge*” leads to resources like “*Indigenous Education Resources – McGill Teaching and Learning Knowledge Base*” – suggesting it gains prominence partly because of its affiliation with McGill University ¹⁰. This association then function as an institutional validator that signals a certain worth to the platform’s systems. The platform’s design assumes that Western institutions – like McGill – are the natural arbiters of what counts as “education”. Moreso, this validation process also necessarily transforms Indigenous knowledge by extracting it from its cultural context and reorganizing it according to dominant frameworks. Indigenous knowledge get structured in line with Eurocentric criteria, repackaging it as a static module that can be consumed within Western pedagogical frameworks.

The result “*Knowing Home: Braiding Indigenous Science with Western Science*” also appears multiple times, suggesting an algorithmic preference for content that explicitly positions Indigenous knowledge in relation to Western science. Even this “braiding” metaphor – while well-intentioned and quite poetic – also has troublesome connotations. It assumes the West as the neutral baseline, where Indigeneity must be woven into, reproducing asymmetrical power relations. This replicates colonial patterns where Indigenous systems are only valid when “useful” to the dominant paradigm (Steinhardt & Kruschink, 2022). This system creates systematic advantages for content that has already undergone epistemological change, effectively rewarding knowledge that has been pre-processed for Western consumption, rather than content that maintains its cultural integrity and original principles.

Edwards (2015, p. 275) further clarifies how digital platforms fundamentally transform knowledge through what he calls “data fusion” – the process where platforms “use data from different sources to create new knowledge that is not explicitly contained in any of them,” thereby redefining “what knowledge is” through technological rather than educational processes. This data fusion operates by synthesizing multiple streams – institutional affiliations, user behaviour, metadata completeness, engagement metrics – to generate what appears as objective educational value.

Indeed, when OER Commons aggregates educational content through its algorithms, the platform doesn’t just arrange it – it imposes a technological mediation that can fundamentally alter their meaning and cultural significance. Digital platforms don’t merely reflect educational reality; they participate in creating it (Edwards, 2015). Couldry & Mejias’ (2019, p. 339) claim that “what is ‘given’ must first be configured for ‘capture’”, showing how Indigenous knowledge can only circulate through the platform after being translated into formats that enable technological ‘capture’, even when such translation fundamentally alters the knowledge’s social and cultural meaning. To expound on this more, the authors draw an intriguing parallel between colonialism’s *terra nullius* doctrine, and contemporary data appropriation: Just as colonial powers declared inhabited lands “empty” to justify territorial annexation, digital platforms can declare knowledge to be “open” ‘and “free” while continuing extractive operations, making it so knowledge is squeezed into their dominant schemes (Couldry & Mejias, 2019).

¹⁰ A prestigious Canadian university

4.1.2. Knowledge Forms and Formats

When examining the 111 results for “*Indigenous Knowledge*”, its predominantly gets classified under the forms of “*Teaching/Learning Strategy*”, “*Lesson Plan*”, or “*Case Study*” – again, these categories reflect Western pedagogical assumptions about how knowledge should be structured and transmitted.

On the other hand, the prominence of resources like “*Indigenous Storytelling with Elder Hazel*” appears promising, suggesting genuine engagement with traditional knowledge practices. However, whilst such oral storytelling normally operates as a deeply holistic, relational and embodied practice, here it gets forced under the typing of an “*Activity/Lab*”¹¹ – reducing it to a compartmentalized, transactional task, akin to a science experiment of classroom exercise. This framing risks trivializing its cultural and epistemological significance, imposing a Western educational structure (e.g. objective-driven, time-bound, quantifiable outcomes) stripping away its context, sacredness and lived purpose. This reflects what Dotson (2011) terms “testimonial smothering”, where knowledge gets “truncated” to fit platform expectations (p. 244). The elder’s storytelling wisdom must be adapted to digital formats that fundamentally alter its epistemological nature, and as a result loses something essential in their translation.

Resources focusing on financial literacy modules – “*Indigenous Content – Fin Lit Module on Goal Setting*”, “*Financial Empowerment: Personal Finance for Indigenous and Non-Indigenous People*” – assimilate Indigenous perspectives into pre-existing Western frameworks, with the underlying message that this Western economic logic is universal. Rather than valuing Indigenous economic philosophies on their own terms (e.g. gift economies, communal resource-sharing), these models suggest that their perspectives are most acceptable when they work to diversify existing Western practices – they are only valued for their utility to Western goals¹².

Additionally, metadata standards also enact a form of epistemicide – the systematic marginalization of certain ways of knowing. The details of specific sources consist of things like “*Author Attributions*”, “*Institutional Provider*”, “*Standardizing License*”, and “*Formatted Tags*” that make content algorithmically discoverable. While this standardization enables platform functionality, it also demands knowledge to surrender its relationality to become discrete resources and its contextuality to fit universal schemas. Again, technological requirements lead to the reshaping of knowledge presentation.

Sorting the search results by “*Date Added*” sheds light on the fact that most resources were added recently, clustering around 2023-2025. This temporal concentration suggests reactive inclusion rather than foundational integration, supporting Steinhardt & Kruschick’s (2022)

¹¹ Additionally, the “laboratory” conceptualization, reflects a colonial mindset in which Indigenous knowledge is more-so treated as a specimen to be studied, rather than a living, dynamic practice.

¹² It feels contradictory the more I think about it: Indigenous economies often reject capitalist notions of competition and accumulation. Here, Indigenous thinking gets domesticated to make them more “palatable” for mainstream education. Moreover, financial “empowerment” frameworks themselves are tied to systems that have historically displaced Indigenous economies! (e.g. privatization of land, destruction of reserves, ...)

analysis of “add-and-stir” diversity approaches that come to diversity content without transforming underlying structures.

4.1.3. Temporal-Spatial Hierarchies

Moreover, OER Commons’s search and filtering mechanisms also reinforce certain temporal-spatial hierarchies. For instance, the platform’s “*Recently Updated*” filters and the algorithmic preference for “*Current*” content reflect what Medel-Ramirez & Medel-Lopez (2024) name contemporaneity bias, devaluing traditional and cyclical knowledge in favour of linear progression narratives. Search results defaulting to highlighting newly uploaded content, while older materials gradually fade from algorithmic visibility, show this temporal bias.

Neylon’s (2015) critique of “innovation discourse” resonates with how OER Commons approaches knowledge temporality. The platform’s systematic surfacing of recently uploaded content reproduces the linear temporality of Western modernity, where newer automatically becomes synonymous with better or more relevant (Santos, 2007). This temporal logic creates systematic disadvantages for traditional knowledge systems that operate according to cyclical rather than linear time concepts – where wisdom deepens through repetition, seasonal return, and intergenerational transmission rather than replacement by innovation.

The spatial dimensions of these hierarchies manifest through the platform’s algorithmic preferences for Global North institutions and English-language content. Chan et al., (2019, p. 4, cited in Steinhardt & Kruschick, 2022) assert that “collaboration in scientific knowledge production has been historically dominated by hegemonic (Northern) countries”, creating feedback loops where Northern knowledge becomes increasingly visible while Southern perspectives remain marginalized. When examining OER Commons’ search results, this pattern appears through the systematic overrepresentation of institutions like MIT and OpenStax, while locally relevant materials from the Global South enjoy less popularity.

4.1.4. Language Hierarchies

Hodgkinson-Williams and Arinto 2017 document how the predominance of English in OER means that most currently available OER are in English, even in regions where other languages dominate education (e.g. Swahili in Tanzania, Urdu in Pakistan, Tamil and Sinhala in Sri Lanka. This English-centrism sustains what they identify as “Anglo-linguistic pre-eminence” that requires “a certain level of English fluency” for meaningful platform participation, creating structural barriers for learners and educators who lack English fluidity and local knowledge systems that operate in non-English languages.

The issue extends beyond translation to a cultural untranslatability. As the authors note “in Mongolia, while English familiarity makes OER accessible in a basic sense, the concepts and examples often lack relevance for Mongolians because they are developed in foreign countries.” (Hodgkinson-Williams & Arinto, 2017, p. 57). Knowledge itself is culturally embedded, thus translation cannot honour original meaning. This reveals how language hierarchies intersect with broader cultural assumptions entrenched in educational content,

creating multiple layers of exclusion that operate simultaneously. The Mongolian example shows how true educational justice requires platforms that don't just include more languages, but more ways of knowing.

Furthermore, Medel-Ramirez and Medel-Lopez (2024) note that "UNESCO's Open Science Framework mandates multilingual access" (p. 27), highlighting how OER Commons' English-dominant interface and content contradicts international commitments to linguistic diversity. Despite Creative Commons licensing theoretically enabling translations, the platform's technological architecture and user experience remain oriented toward English-language interactions, creating practical barriers that maintain linguistic hierarchies.

Additionally, the advanced search interface's language illuminates this further. The language filter options include Arabic, Chinese, Dutch, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Portuguese, and Spanish – a selection that initially suggests robust multilingual support. Yet the interface defaults to "Any Language" with English prominently featured, and the overwhelming majority of search results consistently surface English-language resources regardless of language filter selections. Even when seeking materials in other languages, the platform's algorithms systematically privilege English content¹³.

4.2. The Tension between Global and Local

The "*Indigenous Knowledge*" search results point to some of the vital contradictions in OER Commons' universality claims. Whilst the platform returns 111 resources, initially suggesting robust representation of Indigenous perspectives, the bulk of sources come forth from Canadian institutions – McGill University content, North-American business modules, and multiple Maamwi hub¹⁴ – with few non-Western contributions, reinforcing a neo-colonial epistemic hierarchy. OER Commons promises universal access, when de facto the site is obscuring the different capacities for meaningful participation, and structurally designed to; privilege certain knowledge producers: Western, institutional, Anglophone; reward certain knowledge forms: textual, modular, individualistic; and naturalize certain epistemologies: scientific, secular, progress-oriented. Dutta et al. (2021, p. 815) state: "all cannot equally exploit the public domain of OS¹⁵, with the public domain serving as a site for profiteering by those with access to capital". The supposed neutrality of open platforms is "rooted in a fiction of shared and equitable ownership that does not and has never existed independent of the property-making logics of colonialism/capitalism".

Resources like "*INDIGENOUS VOICES AND REPRESENTATION IN BOLIVIA AND PERU*" appear as exceptions, that ultimately prove the rule. This content, notably marked as "*Public Domain*" rather than bearing institutional licensing credentials, exhibits itself without the polished visual design and comprehensive metadata that characterizes Canadian or US

¹³ Also remarkable is the fact that the languages at the top to be shown are always: English, French, Spanish and Portuguese – colonizer's languages

¹⁴ Canadian hub focused on knowledge about indigenous communities

¹⁵ Open Science

institutional contributions¹⁶. The stark contrast is just one example of how the platform creates a constructed ordering between professionally produced educational content and community-generated materials, privileging certain forms of cultural and economic capital while marginalizing others.

This pattern illuminates Adam's (2020) observation about the tension between local relevance and global circulation. Content "specifically tailored towards African contexts might exclude students from outside the continent," yet the current system achieves the inverse – privileging supposedly universal content that actually reflects particular Northern perspectives while marginalizing locally relevant materials from the Global South.

This isn't new – Christen (2012, p. 2876) substantiates how “the commons was never a place of inclusion, nor was it ever unregulated or uncontrolled”. “Free” knowledge circulation has always historically benefited some communities at the expense of others. As the example shows, until platforms confront their embedded coloniality, even well-intentioned inclusion will reproduce epistemic violence.

The geographical distribution of providers throw this in stark relief: Australian institutions (CAUL Open Educational Resources Collective, James Cook University), American universities (University of Northern Colorado, State University of New York), and Canadian organizations reign over the results by a mile. Notably absent are institutions from the Global South, traditional medicine systems, or knowledge communities outside Western academic frameworks. When Global South perspectives do appear, they get mediated through Global North institutions, as in the "*Medicine, Religion and Politics in Africa and the African Diaspora*" course offered through MIT Open Courseware rather than African institutions directly.

These patterns reflects the “democratisation myth” of open access, as many authors in less well-resourced countries and institutions continue to be left out of scholarly conversations, with especially Southern thinkers being sidelined (Berger, 2021). Indeed, technical openness doesn't automatically address power imbalances. True openness requires more than just free access – it demands equitable participation in knowledge creation and dissemination.

4.3. Inclusion vs. Transformation

As seen, the platform promises universal access while requiring knowledge to conform to Western validation mechanisms, creating forms of epistemic violence that operate through inclusion rather than exclusion. This dynamic feels even more insidious in a way, precisely because it feels democratic and transformative.

¹⁶ Important note: There can also be said something about constantly measuring non-Western entries against Western standards – as here we are also inadvertently reproducing the very hierarchies we seek to critique. This dilemma is known as the “**problem of translation**” in decolonial and postcolonial scholarship: **How do we develop analytical frameworks that can recognize and articulate the value of Indigenous knowledge systems without constantly referring back to Western academic categories? How do we render non-Western knowledge systems into Western frameworks without epistemic violence?** (Charkrabarty, 2000).

Grosfoguel's (2007) crucial distinction between "epistemic location" and "social location" provides essential insights into the limitations of inclusion-based approaches to addressing epistemic injustice on platforms like OER Commons. As he argues, "the fact that one is socially located in the oppressed side of power relations, does not automatically mean that he/she is epistemically thinking from a subaltern epistemic location" (p. 213). The "success of the modern/colonial world-system," he contends, consists precisely in "making subjects that are socially located in the oppressed side of the colonial difference, to think epistemically like the ones on the dominant positions."

On the contrary, OER can also perpetuate a colonial agenda, even when designed by people from formerly colonized contexts or with explicit decolonial intentions. Despite popular opinion, even Southern-based content might reproduce Northern epistemological frameworks – what Adam (2020, p. 7) calls the success of the modern/colonial world-system in making subjects think "epistemically like the ones on the dominant positions."

This connects to broader questions about what constitutes genuine transformation versus what might be understood as performative inclusivity. The persistent "gap between rhetoric and resources" exposes how platforms can still engage in "add-and-stir-diversity", rather than confronting structural change head-on (Mundy, 2006, p. 45; Steinhard & Kruschick, 2022). In the same line of thinking, Adam (2020, p. 3) warns about how even well-intentioned inclusion efforts can become "commodification of culture" if not viewed epistemologically. Indeed, even efforts to diversify content libraries – adding materials from diverse cultural contexts, supporting multiple languages, including Indigenous perspectives – can inadvertently reproduce extractive relationships if they don't address underlying power structures. The issue becomes then, how to move beyond this ameliorative inclusion – adding diverse content to existing structures – toward fundamental restructuring of how knowledge is produced, validated, and circulated (Santos, 2007).

Bacevic and Muellerleile (2018, p. 169) shed light on yet another dimension of this dilemma, demonstrating how platforms in a way perform a subtle sleight of hand, conflating knowledge as good in the economic, to good in the moral sense". This conflation creates what appears to be transformative access whilst in reality still preserving underlying hierarchies. Platforms present themselves as moral actors "doing good" through broadened access, yet continue under fundamentally guised under capitalist and colonial logics. The authors identify a key contradiction, where "access to knowledge serves at the same time as a critique of these relations, and as a solution to them" (Bacevic & Muellerleile, 2018, p 181). This paradox implies that whilst open access platforms appear revolutionary, they don't inherently take part in dismantling rooted power imbalances – instead, they rewrap them in this "liberalized" form.

Another crucial question becomes whether this ameliorative inclusion denotes a step towards transformative justice, or actually prevents more innate restructuring by managing dissent and creating the appearance of 'change'. Hodgkinson-Williams and Arinto (2017) suggest that "despite the democratic and emancipatory potential of OER, without a critical mass of Southern lecturers contributing, its potential remains unrealised." Their call for teachers in the

Global South to “transform from content consumers to incorporating their sociocultural context to minimise the cultural influence of the North” sounds reasonable enough, yet it sidesteps deeper structural questions.

The challenge lies not simply in adding more diverse content but in developing approaches that can hold this variety of content equitably. All the same, the question remains whether such transformation is possible within the current context. Even if we are successful in integrating varied perspectives, can we genuinely support epistemic plurality in systems designed around Western frameworks? Maybe even more pressing: Is transformation even possible within platforms that perform within capitalist technological infrastructures, controlled by Silicon Valley corporations? Or do these structural constraints reproduce colonial patterns, regardless of democratic intentions?

Moving towards Chapter 5’s analysis of power dynamics in knowledge circulation, these insights about representation and validation provided a crucial stepping stone for understanding how seemingly neutral technological processes participate in broader geopolitical patterns of knowledge production and circulation. Chapter 5 will explore how these representational politics translate into concrete political dynamics – exploring whose knowledge travels and whose remains localized, whose educational approaches achieve global influence and whose become relegated to the margins of educational discourse that claims to democratize learning, while maintaining familiar hierarchies.

CHAPTER FIVE – KNOWLEDGE CIRCULATION

5.1. Directional Flows of Knowledge

The central tension explored in this chapter centres on the gap between democratic rhetoric and extractive realities. While OER Commons promises to democratize education through open access, actual knowledge patterns hint at persistent directional flows – Global North institutions remain producers, while the Global South continues to be positioned as consumers. This dynamic prevails, even within platforms explicitly designed to challenge traditional hierarchies, suggesting deeper structural impediments to epistemic justice that technological solutions alone cannot address.

5.1.1. A Self-Reinforcing Cycle

Quantitative evidence displays strong patterns in global knowledge circulation that challenge OER Commons universalist aspirations with uncomfortable precision. Adam's (2020) research demonstrates that 89 % of OER repositories originate from Europe and North America, while Africa contributes a mere 1%. If Southern universities and academics produce only a fraction of the resources, this suggests that developing countries have largely been receivers and users of Northern-produced content (Hodgkinson-Williams, 2017). Berger (2011, p. 388) captures this starkly: “[T]he world was divided between Northern uploaders and Southern downloaders” – therefore upholding colonial asymmetries.

Thus, rather than creating new knowledge pathways, digital platforms often reproduce historical extraction relationships through technological means. OER Commons’ “free” and “open” access begins to look less like liberation, and more like a refined form of epistemic dependency where Southern institutions consume Northern educational frameworks while contributing minimally to global production.

This directional flow – from the Global North to the Global South – reflects entrenched structural inequalities, that go beyond the issue of technological access. When Southern users utilize OER without creating their own resources, they risk what Hodgkinson-Williams and Arinto (2017, p. 297) call a “culture of dependency” that “perpetuates a digital divide rather than overcoming it.” The digital infrastructure designed to bridge educational gaps may instead widen them, creating new forms of intellectual colonization disguised as technological progress.

Ultimately, the density of knowledge production within elite Global North institutions creates self-reinforcing cycles that digital platforms amplify rather than interrupt. Hodgkinson-Williams and Arinto (2017, p. 59) report on how “the reputation of well-known and respected institutions or organisations indirectly holds a great deal of power over which OER are used”. Educators in Mongolia for instance, actively seek materials from international universities with high reputation like MIT or Harvard, where institutional provenance “acts as a quality signifier that simplifies their search”.

This preference is not simply about perceived quality – the institutional hierarchy operates through the very technological processes analysed in previous chapters. Platform algorithms favour content with complete metadata, professional presentation, and high

engagement metrics, systematically advantaging materials from well-resources Northern organizations. These institutions possess the technological infrastructure, professional development support, and cultural capital to produce content that thrives within the platforms' computational logic. Even within supposedly open systems, established power structures shape which content gains visibility and authority.

The outcome produces what Dotson (2011, p. 248) calls “situated ignorance” – systemic knowledge gaps that “follow from one’s social position and/or epistemic location with respect to some domain of knowledge”. When OER platforms consistently surface Global North content, they move beyond reflecting user tastes towards actively reproducing “epistemic distance between those not in possession of that limitation and those who do possess the limitation”.

The technological architecture becomes a mechanism for perpetuating rather than challenging global knowledge hierarchies. Each search, each recommendation, each algorithmic ranking reinforces existing patterns of epistemic authority, creating feedback loops that make Northern dominance appear the norm rather than constructed.

5.1.2. Digital Dependencies

The promise of technological democratization confronts the reality of digital dependencies that mirror historical colonial relationships. Hodgkinson-Williams and Arinto (2017, p. 71) demonstrate how “the concept of ‘free’ OER relies on an expensive foundation of infrastructural, technological, and intellectual capacities that are often lacking in the Global South”. This creates new forms of infrastructural reliance where Northern-controlled technological systems become necessary for participation in global knowledge circulation.

Moreover, Dutta et al. (2021, p. 807) provides insights into how “technological fixes of OS, rooted in whiteness, omit the North–South inequalities in digital access, inequalities in access to methods dictated by hegemonic norms in the Global North, and inequalities in access to defining the rules of participation in knowledge generation”. The technical requirements for meaningful platform engagement – reliable internet access, current devices, digital literacy – systematically exclude regions with a limited connectivity while appearing neutrally available to all.

Further, Bacevic and Muellerleile (2018, p. 180) reveal how technological approaches to openness can “turn academic labour against itself”, particularly affecting precarious workers who cannot risk abandoning established prestige networks. Global South knowledge producers face parallel constraints – while they may access Northern-produced content through OER platforms, participating meaningfully as creators requires conforming to validation systems designed within and for Northern institutional contexts.

This produces another paradox of inclusive exclusion: platforms designed to democratize knowledge circulation strengthen existing hierarchies by requiring marginalized knowledge producers to adopt dominant frameworks as the price of participation. Global South scholars are trapped in a double blind: their inclusion is conditional on assimilation – they must conform to be heard. The system looks open, but functions as a gatekeeper in practice, preserving epistemic hierarchies.

5.1.3. Corporate Trap

Another matter concerns how “open access is not immune to commercial incentives and can be exploited for profits, where public goods (information as intangible goods) are by-products, not the goal” (Ma, 2025, p. 126). While OER Commons is an freely accessible platform, it also functions as an organization under the umbrella of the nonprofit Institute for the Study of Knowledge Management in Education (ISKME), held up by funding structures and sustainability models that may prioritize platform growth over other educational objectives.

As such, corporate interests may shape knowledge circulation in ways that contradict the platforms’ democratic intentions. When OER platforms depend on corporate technological infrastructures or partnership relationships, they risk reinforcing existing power imbalances. OER Commons catered as “*free for everyone, forever*”, cannot be free to sustain: Platform sustainability requires ongoing technological maintenance, server costs, and software development – and these typically depend on Northern funding sources, creating pressures to prioritize content and circulation patterns serving Northern institutional interests.

Ma (2025, p. 128) in this aspect, makes an argument for “decentralization of power by de-emphasizing the significance of Western indexing services”, pointing towards alternative approaches that prioritize technological independency over efficiency. Yet, current OER platforms – like OER Commons ¹⁷ – within a technological sphere that make such decentralization extremely difficult without sacrificing the connectivity and tools enabling global knowledge circulation.

This creates another fundamental tension: genuine epistemic may require technological approaches that prioritize community control over global reach, local relevance over universal accessibility, and cultural protocols over platform efficiency. Such approaches might necessarily involve reduced circulation and technological development – outcomes that conflict with the growth metrics and efficiency standards currently defining platform success.

5.2. Decolonizing Open Educational Resources

The result becomes a digital commons that, despite democratic rhetoric, amplifies familiar voices while rendering alternative knowledge systems invisible. Institutions in the Global South adapt to externally defined standards, consuming pedagogical frameworks developed elsewhere rather than contributing meaningfully to global educational discourse on their own terms. This creates epistemic dependencies that mirror broader economic and political relationships between regions, limiting Indigenous knowledge systems' capacity to flourish within supposedly open environments. Can this conundrum even be solved?

We must hold on to the fact that the democratizing potential remains real, but realizing it demands critical engagement with the structural forces that continue shaping digital knowledge environments. Adam (2020, p. 9) argues that “if you want to do something about

¹⁷ OER Commons has deep-rooted links with Northern-American institutional affiliations, among others Ford Foundation, William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, The Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers

social inequality you have to do it absolutely deliberately” – and this requires attention to multiple dimensions simultaneously: the material constraints, cultural-epistemic representation, and geopolitical power relations. Genuine transformation necessitates approaches that address technological dependency, institutional hierarchies, and epistemological assumptions as interconnected rather than separate challenges. On the other hand, this also means moving beyond the open/closed binaries that structure current OER discourse.

5.2.1. Pluriversal Technologies

Grosfoguel (2007, p. 213) envisions "a pluriversal as oppose to a universal world" supporting "critical dialogue between diverse critical epistemic/ethical/political projects" rather than the "abstract universal" characterizing current OER systems". This perspective indicates that to decolonize educational platforms, they need to embody pluriversal principles at the technological level, supporting different organizational logics, validation systems, and circulation patterns without forcing them into hierarchical relationships. This can then involve what Dutta et al. (2021) call "cognitive justice (...) recognizing the agentic capacities of communities in the Global South as creators, users, and owners of knowledge" through architectures designed to support rather than constrain diverse epistemological traditions.

Christen's (2012) *Mukurtu* platform demonstrates how alternative technological approaches can centre Indigenous knowledge systems, rather than treating them as additions to Western frameworks. By implementing "cultural protocols for content management" and "granular level access parameters based on community protocols" (p. 2885), *Mukurtu* illustrates how digital platforms might facilitate rather than constrain diverse knowledge systems. This approach then prioritizes Indigenous community sovereignty over algorithmic efficiency, cultural protocols over universal accessibility, and relational knowledge structures over individualized content delivery.

Furthermore, such transformative alternatives might focus on South to South exchange that maintains "independence from commercial concerns," centring knowledge circulation patterns that bypass Northern institutional mediation and create direct relationships between Global South communities (Berger, 2021, p. 394).

5.2.2. The Impossibility of Co-Presence

The most radical response to digital platforms' limitations may involve not participating at all – recognizing that some epistemologies must remain outside digital circulation to maintain their integrity. However, this notion challenges the fundamental premise underlying OER platforms that all knowledge should be made globally accessible through technological infrastructure – in a way, knowledge becomes restricted again. Rather than seeking inclusion within existing systems, this approach emerges as a direct response to what Santos (2007) calls the "impossibility of copresence"¹⁸ – his critique on the belief that all knowledge can exist equally next to each other.

¹⁸ See paradox of inclusive exclusion; problem of translation!

If genuine coexistence of different epistemological traditions proves impossible within frameworks, the answer becomes strategic absence.

It is true that certain forms of knowledge lose essential characteristics when translates into digital forms: oral traditions cannot be anchored in place, ceremonial practices require embodies participation, ecological knowledge is tied to specific landscape. Attempting to include such knowledge within platform frameworks risks epistemic violence through the very process of technological translation. The platform's requirement that knowledge conform to digital structures risks destroying precisely what makes these knowledge systems valuable as alternatives to dominant frameworks.

This suggests that genuine epistemic justice might require protecting spaces where knowledge remains untraceable, unextractable, and ungovernable by digital infrastructures. Rather than viewing such exclusion as problematic, we can also perceive it as a necessary resistance to the colonial imperative that all knowledge must become available for global circulation. Some knowledge traditions may need to remain inaccessible to maintain their cultural and spiritual integrity. True respect for epistemological diversity might require accepting that not all knowledge should be made platform-accessible, fundamentally going against the open premises driving current digital education initiatives.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Synthesis

This thesis began with a deceptively simple question: How do Open Educational Resources simultaneously democratize and potentially colonize knowledge production in digital spaces?

Through combined digital ethnography and critical discourse analysis of OER Commons, this investigation reveals a fundamental double movement – OER platforms expand access while constraining the forms of knowledge that can meaningfully participate within their ecosystem. Rather than existing in simple opposition, democratization and colonality interweave through the platform's daily operations in ways that demand sustained analytical attention rather than premature resolution.

Addressing the subsidiary questions directly: First, OER Commons' digital architecture encodes profound assumptions through its interface design, categorization systems, and algorithmic logic. The platform's dropdown menus impose Western disciplinary divisions, while metadata requirements privilege text-based, individually authored content over oral traditions and collective knowledge systems. The platform's organizational logic establishes invisible boundaries that render certain ways of knowing literally unthinkable within its digital architecture.

Second, the platform's knowledge representation practices privilege Western epistemological traditions through validation mechanisms that reward institutional affiliation, standardized formatting, and engagement metrics tied to Northern academic frameworks. Traditional knowledge achieves visibility only by conforming to Western scientific validation, while Indigenous perspectives appear primarily through Global North institutional mediation rather than direct community representation. Digital platforms become sites where knowledge can only circulate after being transformed into forms recognizable within dominant frameworks, reproducing epistemic violence through inclusion rather than exclusion.

Third, the geopolitical dimensions reveal persistent directional flows where Northern institutions function as producers while Southern contexts remain consumers. With 89% of repositories originating from Europe and North America, the platform reproduces colonial knowledge circulation patterns through technological means, creating new forms of digital dependency disguised as democratic access.

Perhaps most significantly, this research has shown how contemporary epistemic violence operates through processes that appear to be “open.” The platform's promise of democratization masks deeper structural inequalities, delivering new forms of knowledge control that prove more difficult to resist than traditional exclusion. The technological infrastructure designed to support open knowledge circulation, paradoxically reinforces existing hierarchies through systems that feel technically necessary, rather than culturally constructed. This implies that true democratization requires confronting the colonial matrix rooted within digital educational technologies themselves – dismantling its invisible architectures, and not just adding “diversity” to oppressive schemes.

Limitations and Future Research Direction

This study's methodological approach, while revealing important platform dynamics, necessarily constrains its scope in several ways. The digital ethnographic focus on interface analysis cannot capture how diverse global communities actually navigate and potentially resist platform constraints. Future research incorporating collaborative partnerships with educators across different geographical and institutional contexts would provide essential insights into lived experiences of digital knowledge circulation. The single-platform focus, while enabling deep analysis, limits generalizability. Comparative analysis with alternatives designed by and for Global South communities would illuminate different possibilities for digital knowledge circulation.

Additionally, my own positionality and place within Western academic institutions, despite deploying decolonial methodology, inevitably shapes both analytical possibilities and blind spots. This research emerges from the very institutional contexts it seeks to critique, creating productive tensions but also potential limitations. Collaborative studies led by scholars positioned differently within global academic hierarchies would offer crucial epistemological diversity.

Future investigations might explore concrete alternatives to current OER approaches, examining Indigenous-led platforms, alternative economic models, or technological infrastructures designed around ecological rather than hierarchical principles. Research on artificial intelligence's intersection with educational platforms becomes increasingly urgent as machine learning systems trained on predominantly Northern content may amplify existing biases while potentially enabling more equitable circulation patterns.

Additionally, the question of strategic non-participation deserves deeper exploration. For instance, focusing on understanding when and how knowledge communities choose to remain outside digital networks to maintain epistemological integrity.

Holding the Paradox

Rather than resolving the fundamental paradox, this analysis reveals why resolution may be neither possible nor desirable within current configurations. Yet understanding how OER platforms – such as OER Commons – reproduce epistemic hierarchies creates opportunities for engaging with the constraints and possibilities. The productive question is not whether OER Commons advances or hinders epistemic justice – it clearly does both simultaneously – but how to work possibly within and against existing systems while building alternatives that might transcend their limitations.

The future of epistemic justice may depend on our capacity to hold these contradictions productively while working toward alternatives that serve global knowledge communities without reproducing colonial extraction patterns. As digital education expands globally, these questions become increasingly urgent. What I want to take away from this work is that the choice should not be between embracing or rejecting the mediation of digital technology, but between reproducing existing hierarchies through new means or developing genuinely transformative approaches to digital epistemic justice.

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