

## **The day my M.Sc. thesis turned open**

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### **Why my M.Sc. thesis turned open**

I wouldn't call myself a dedicated Open Access advocate yet, but only for the reason I'm just getting familiar with the mechanics of the "academic industry". There might be cases where handing over your content to a commercial publisher provides the biggest lever for disseminating the academic work. However, in my opinion in the majority of cases academic work under an open license provides the bigger benefits for society. Although I'm officially enrolled at a university, I run into pay walls almost everyday when I'm researching for my dissertation. Without some generous people out there on Twitter, combined with the #CanIHazPDF hashtag, my research would be highly inhibited, just because my Alma Mater apparently (and for a good reason) refuses to pay some of the tremendous subscription fees the publishing oligopolists are asking for. I don't want to go into detail with Open Access business models and the debate around impact factors, as I know these topics in good hands of the [OKF's Open Access working group](#) (amongst others of course).

Besides my desire for good academic practice there is another reason I feel obliged to publish my results as open as possible. Doing a masters degree in the UK, as I did mine at the University of St. Andrews, is without a doubt a costly experience. To be precise the tuition fees for my one-years program amounted to £8,900. Whilst many of my friends managed to pay these fees by themselves, I was in the fortunate position to be backed by a governmental scholarship from Germany. In Germany there are twelve organizations, which receive funds from the Federal Ministry of Education and Research and pass them along to their own selection of scholars, which qualify by their academic results and extracurricular activities. Eventually I became one of these scholars and after some transformation processes the German taxpayers subsidized my education and subsequently my dissertation.

What I do advocate for is the release of Public Sector Information under open licenses turning it into Open Data, arguing that the taxpayer should have access to the data he previously paid for. Therefore the only consistent line of argumentation must be that the taxpayer should also get as much access to the academic publications he paid for, may it be on a cutting-edge Max-Planck-Institute level or "just" on the level of a masters dissertation.

### **How my M.Sc. thesis turned open**

Copyright is a tricky thing and setting up a proper license agreement for publishing a masters thesis might even take a lay person longer than writing the whole academic piece. Thank god there's [Creative Commons](#). The modular licenses allow everyone to design his or her favorite license agreement for opening up content within a moment. For opening up my dissertation I picked the CC BY-SA 4.0 International license. Hereby "4.0" indicates the newest update of the license package and "International" indicates that there are no adaptations for a single jurisdiction included. For my customized license I picked two out of the four possible modules: "BY" indicates that others can redistribute my work but have to refer to my name. "NC" [see update below: not included in my license anymore] stands for non-commercial and therefore prohibits others to use my dissertation commercially. Although this restriction clashes with the general [Open Definition](#), I feel that this is the right choice for a simple reason. It is quite common to upload masters dissertations on book-on-demand websites where you can earn some Euros if someone wants a copy of your work. However, i find these services a bit dodgy and

with the NC-restriction I want prohibit others to upload my dissertation to these pages and make the quick buck themselves. Finally the “SA” component requires copies or adaptations of my work to be released under the same or similar license as the original. I did not include the “ND”-module which prohibits derivative works of the original work. As I want to encourage others to use part of my work in their work, but just under the other three modules’ constraints, the NC-module makes little sense in my case.

To apply the selected license to my work I included the sentence “This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.” to the front page of my work and [placed a link to the full text of the license online on this blog](#). Done. Now, it’s your turn!

## **Update**

After a brief but dense Twitter discussion with Andrew Stott ([@DirDigEng](#)) I came to the conclusion to give my CC-license a small but distinct tweak towards the Open. Andrew pointed out that my CC BY-NC-SA might be good academic practice but is not compliant with the Open Definition due to the NC-module.

In my blog post I already mentioned this weakness but pointed out why I think the NC-module is a good compromise to publish a Bachelors or Masters thesis under a copyleft license. For the reason I gave there (others could easily upload the text on a book-on-demand page) I still think that there should be a difference between the openness of such a thesis and e.g. Public Sector Information. However, I claimed to open up my dissertation as a signal towards my belief in the Open culture and therefore there should be no doubt about my intentions. Eventually I came to the conclusion that my signal towards digital openness has significantly more weight than my assumptions what could happen to my work without a NC-restriction and excluded this module from my license.