

Digitization as Gatekeeper. Reflections on the History of Science and Technology

Ever since the early modern period gatekeepers have been essential players within the scientific enterprise. As series editors or journal board members as well as publishers, referees, and translators, and of course, as members of prize and program committees, they have been, and still are, inextricably related to science as a professional(ized) activity. Spaces and powerful opportunities for scholars' lives and work were co-created together with regulations and limits for accessing these spaces.

Digitization transforms materially bound data into immaterial electronic formats that are accessible – only – by digital means. In my talk, I will argue that digitization may be considered as a new kind of gatekeeper. Texts are set free from the inaccessibility of rare books and are at the same time subjected to new procedures of canonization. Scientific collections are similarly affected by 2D- and 3D-digitization. Digital finding aids facilitate archival researches ever so much – and yet their existence may hide all the more efficiently what is not to be shown to anyone...

Considering examples from the history of science and technology, I will show that the characteristic gatekeeper ambiguity of both enabling and restricting, of opening and closing, is part and parcel of digitization. I will argue that this new, ever more powerful, and seemingly neutral actor has to be scrutinized for its interdependences with academia's established economic and epistemic power relationships.