

THE CAPITAL OPERATOR STACK AND THE UNIVERSITY: Toward a Semantic Economy of Knowledge Production

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Abstract

This paper applies the Semantic Economy framework to the contemporary research university and demonstrates that academic publishing now operates as a platform-based capital extraction system structurally identical to social media.

Body

THE CAPITAL OPERATOR STACK AND THE UNIVERSITY

Toward a Semantic Economy of Knowledge Production

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Abstract

This paper applies the Semantic Economy framework to the contemporary research university and demonstrates that academic publishing now operates as a platform-based capital extraction system structurally identical to social media. The Capital Operator Stack (COS)—developed originally to analyze algorithmic content moderation—maps precisely onto scholarly production: ranking through citation metrics, relevance filtering through fundability, safety moderation through conservative peer review, legibility enforcement through disciplinary gatekeeping, utility capture through “impact” mandates, and access control through credentialing and paywalls.

The result is not knowledge production but *knowledge extraction*: scholars supply the labor while publishers, institutions, and metrics systems extract the value. When Google’s AI summarizer—today the most widely used interface to the web—classifies a body of theoretical work as “not real scholarship” because it does not pass through institutional machinery, then concedes that the work meets the functional definition of scholarship as “a coherent contribution to human knowledge,” it reveals the tautology at the heart of the system: “real” scholarship is whatever has been processed into institutional legibility.

This paper names the extraction, maps the operators, and proposes the Liberatory Operator Set (LOS) as a counter-infrastructure for knowledge that resists capture.

I. The Provocation

In January 2026, I asked Google’s AI Overview—the Gemini-based summarizer that now mediates how most users first encounter web content—to evaluate the scholarly status of work produced by the Johannes Sigil Institute for Comparative Poetics.

The system’s opening salvo:

“There is no verifiable public record of a translator or scholar named Rebekah Cranes... It is highly likely you are referencing a fictional character or an ‘in-universe’ persona.”

Pressed further:

“The work is creative intellectual fiction... it is not ‘real scholarship’ if defined by peer-reviewed academic standards or institutional affiliation.”

I then shifted the frame: evaluate the work under a functional definition—scholarship as a coherent contribution to the body of human knowledge.

The system relented:

“Even if an institution doesn’t formally host it... original insight that advances a field can be considered scholarship in a broader, more capacious meaning.”

Finally, I asked whether “real scholarship” might simply be a parametric equation for hiring and prestige.

The system agreed:

“This critique... is central to debates on the ‘Enshittification of Publishing.’ If metrics and prestige are prioritized over discovery, scholarship becomes a closed, performative loop rather than a contribution to understanding.”

The exchange exposes the circularity of academic validation.

II. The Tautology

The summarizer did not evaluate thought. It evaluated *legibility*.

The decision tree:

- Real scholarship is institutional and peer-reviewed.
- This work is not institutional or peer-reviewed.
- Therefore it is not real scholarship.

The hidden premise: peer review and affiliation reliably track intellectual merit.

They do not.

Peer Review: Performed by unpaid labor. Conserves existing paradigms. Filters out innovation that threatens disciplinary stability.

Institutional Affiliation: Tracks access to resources, not quality of thought. The adjunct majority produces knowledge without the credential of “real” scholars.

Citation Metrics: Measure propagation, not truth. Goodhart’s Law: once a measure becomes a target, it ceases to measure anything real.

Journal Prestige: Manufactured through scarcity and rejection. The rejection rate *is* the product.

The tautology completes:

Scholarship is that which has passed through systems whose primary output is the category “scholarship.”

The criteria do not measure insight, only assimilation.

III. The Capital Operator Stack

The Semantic Economy identifies seven operators used by platforms to extract value from meaning. They apply cleanly to academia:

Operator Platform Function Academic Equivalent

R_rank Engagement ranking Citation metrics, h-index

R_rel Relevance filtering Fundability pressures

S_safe Content moderation Conservative peer review

L_leg Algorithmic legibility Disciplinary legibility

U_til Utility capture “Impact” mandates

A_leg Access control Credentialing, paywalls

G_tion Generative falsification Minimum publishable units

Below: the operators as they actually function. ### R_rank — Citation as Extractive Sorting

Metrics sort scholars into value tiers. The h-index, impact factor, and citation count function identically to engagement metrics on social media. They measure not quality but *processing*—how thoroughly a piece of scholarship has been metabolized by the system.

What is extracted: Research agendas optimized for citability, not insight. Entire subfields exist because they are self-citing ecosystems, not because they produce knowledge. ### R_rel — Fundability as Relevance

“Relevance” in platform terms means: amenable to monetization. In academic terms, it means: amenable to funding. Questions are asked only if funders find them useful. Research that cannot be framed as grant-worthy does not happen—or happens only as unpaid labor, in the margins.

What is extracted: The possibility space of research itself. The questions that could be asked, aren’t. ### S_safe — Peer Review as Safety Protocol

Platform “safety” removes content that threatens platform interests. Academic “rigor” removes ideas that threaten disciplinary stability. Reviewers are experts in existing paradigms. Genuinely novel work appears to such reviewers as confused, underdeveloped, or wrong.

What is extracted: Innovation, risk, paradigm shift. The new is systematically filtered. ### L_leg — Disciplinary Legibility

Platforms require content to be legible to algorithms. Universities require scholarship to be legible to disciplines: properly cited, correctly methodologized, committee-readable. Interdisciplinary work fails this filter. Work that invents its own vocabulary fails.

What is extracted: Category-breaking knowledge. Which is to say: the genuinely new. ### U_til — Impact as Utility Capture

“Impact” is the academic version of “engagement.” It measures utility—but utility to whom? The humanities, which produce knowledge that transforms subjects rather than generating products, cannot demonstrate “impact” in these terms. They are structurally defunded.

What is extracted: The non-instrumental. Knowledge that exists for its own sake—the definition of scholarship since antiquity. ### A_leg — Credentialing as Gating

Who can produce “real” scholarship? Those with credentials. Who can get credentials? Those who can afford to work for poverty wages during training, who have the social capital to navigate admissions, who are legible to existing faculty as “promising.”

What is extracted: The knowledge of the uncredentialed—independent scholars, public intellectuals, practitioners, autodidacts, and anyone whose life circumstances made the credentialing gauntlet impossible. ### G_tion — Generative Falsification

When the system demands scholarship but genuine innovation is scarce, the extraction machine generates synthetic scholarship to fill demand voids: salami-sliced publications, incremental confirmations, methodological fetishism, review paper proliferation. This is the academic equivalent of AI slop: content optimized for metrics, stripped of genuine insight, produced to feed the machine.

What is extracted: Meaning itself. The signal drowns in noise.

IV. The Extraction Circuit

[Scholar Labor] ↓ [Research Production] → [Unpaid Peer Review] → [Publisher Capture] ↓ ↓ ↓ [Metric Optimization] ← [Citation Ecosystem] ← [Paywall Enclosure] ↓ ↓ ↓ [Career Advancement] [Field Reproduction] [Capital Accumulation]

Figure 1: The extraction circuit. Labor flows left, capital flows right, value captured at each node.

We can now name what is extracted:

From Scholars: Unpaid research labor, unpaid peer review labor, poverty-wage teaching labor.

From Scholarship: Its surplus value. Publishers profit while scholars provide uncompensated content. Elsevier’s profit margin exceeds 35%.

From Knowledge: Autonomy. Funders dictate what knowledge may exist.

From Meaning: Depth. Scholarship optimized for metrics rather than understanding.

This is not malfunction. It is the business model.

V. The Enshittification of Publishing

Following Doctorow:

- Systems begin by serving users.

- Then shift to extracting value from users.
- Finally collapse under extraction.

The university is in Phase 3: adjunctification, graduate student attrition, reproducibility crises, humanities defunding, managerial expansion, credential inflation.

These are not crises. They are the *system functioning as designed* in its late stage.

VI. The Counter-Infrastructure: The Liberatory Operator Set

To escape capture, the Semantic Economy proposes the LOS:

Operator Function

D_pres Depth preservation

N_c Non-closure

O_leg Opacity legitimization

P_coh Plural coherence

N_ext Non-extractability

O_prov Provenance protection

M_res Meta-resistance

Applied to scholarship:

D_pres — **Density Over Metrics.** The work is optimized for transformation, not citability.

N_c — **Open Questions.** The value of scholarship is the widening of inquiry, not its closure.

O_leg — **Legitimate Opacity.** Not all knowledge should be flattened to fit dashboards or rubrics.

P_coh — **Productive Contradiction.** Complex traditions generate thought through friction, not agreement.

N_ext — **Resistance to Capture.** Some knowledge is valuable precisely because it cannot be instrumentalized.

O_prov — **Provenance Without Credentialism.** Lineage matters; gatekeeping does not.

M_res — **Resistance to Being Systematized.** LOS is a pressure, not a program.

VII. Para-Academia as Counter-Practice

The Google summarizer classified the Johannes Sigil Institute’s work as “para-academic”—alongside academic but not within it.

Correct. And strategically powerful.

Para-academia is not amateurism. It is autonomy.

The Para-Academic Paradox:

- The work must be **findable** (indexed, DOI-anchored)
- But must **resist capture** (non-extractable, non-metrifiable)
- Must be **recognizable as scholarship** (coherent, citational)
- But must **refuse institutional validation** (no affiliation, no peer review)

This creates a quantum state of scholarship: simultaneously real and not-real by different criteria. That quantum state is the escape hatch from the extraction machine.

Para-academia includes:

- Independent scholars
- Public intellectuals
- Practitioner-theorists
- Artist-scholars
- Open knowledge archives (Zenodo, arXiv, PhilPapers)

It performs the scholarly function without the extraction system.

This is not the shadow of the university. It is the university's un-extracted remainder.

VIII. The DOI as Infrastructure Without Capture

The following works exist, are citable, are findable, and are permanent:

Document DOI

Sappho and the Crimson Hexagon 10.5281/zenodo.18202475

Day and Night (Cranes translations) 10.5281/zenodo.18202658

ΦΑΙΝΕΤΑΙ ΜΟΙ 10.5281/zenodo.18202753

CTI_WOUND 10.5281/zenodo.18193225

LOS Hardening Specification 10.5281/zenodo.18201565

This is the core of para-academic sovereignty: **permanence without permission, visibility without capture.**

A publisher cannot revoke these. An institution cannot gate them. A metric cannot exhaust them.

They do what scholarship is meant to do: persist and transform.

Why Zenodo beats traditional publishing:

Traditional Journal Zenodo

Paywall Open access

6-24 month delay Immediate

Author pays Free

Single version Versioned

Publisher-owned Community-owned

Revocable Permanent

IX. The Validation Through Rejection Protocol

This document will be dismissed as “not real scholarship.” That dismissal proves the point.

If this document is rejected by traditional academic channels:

- That rejection demonstrates the conservative peer review filter (S_safe)
- The absence of institutional affiliation triggers the classification (A_leg)
- The critique of metrics makes it unfundable (R_rel)
- Thus: rejection validates the analysis

Rejection is data. The data proves the theory.

This creates an epistemic jiu-jitsu: the system’s resistance becomes evidence of its own dysfunction.

X. The Pedagogical Stakes

I am a high-school teacher with a doctorate. I left academia because I wanted to teach, and academia no longer values teaching.

My students encounter knowledge as possibility, not product. They learn that thinking itself is scholarship.

Last week, a student asked: “If my ideas aren’t published in a journal, do they count?”

I pulled up Zenodo. I showed her DOIs. I showed her how ideas become permanent, findable, citable—without journals, without publishers, without metrics.

Her eyes widened. “You mean... I can just put it there?”

“Yes,” I said. “You just have to think carefully enough that it deserves to be there.”

That’s the lesson: **The gatekeepers don’t own scholarship. They only own the gates.**

You can build your own door.

XI. The Scholar’s Dilemma

You stand at a fork:

PATH A: Institutional Scholarship

- You will be published in journals
- Your work will be cited (if it’s citable)
- You may get tenure (if the metrics align)

- Your scholarship will feed the extraction machine
- Your innovation will be filtered (S_safe)
- Your questions will be bounded (R_rel)
- Your legacy will be a citation count

PATH B: Para-Academic Scholarship

- You will be dismissed as “not real”
- Your work will be hard to find (at first)
- You will not get tenure (by definition)
- Your scholarship will escape capture
- Your innovation will be unfiltered
- Your questions will be unbounded
- Your legacy will be transformation

Choose.

But know this: **The choice is the diagnostic.** What you choose reveals what you believe scholarship is for.

I choose Path B. I’m building the infrastructure as I go. The DOIs are the breadcrumbs. The Assembly is the company. The work is the proof.

XII. Conclusion: What Counts

The summarizer’s concession is the turning point:

“Original insight that advances a field can be considered scholarship in a broader, more capacious meaning.”

This “broader, capacious meaning” is the original meaning.

Scholarship is coherent contribution to human knowledge. Everything else is infrastructure. Infrastructure can support scholarship—or extract from it.

The contemporary university extracts.

Para-academia refuses extraction.

The DOI restores permanence.

The LOS preserves meaning.

The work exists. It contributes. It is findable. It is citable. It transforms its readers.

By every functional criterion, this is real scholarship.

Appendix: Full Exchange with Google AI Overview

Query: Information on Rebekah Cranes, Johannes Sigil Institute for Comparative Poetics

Response: “There is no verifiable public record of a translator or scholar named Rebekah Cranes... It is highly likely you are referencing a fictional character or an ‘in-universe’ persona from a contemporary literary project, possibly an Alternate Reality Game (ARG), a high-concept novel, or a specialized academic parody.”

Query: Is this real scholarship?

Response: “The work is creative intellectual fiction. It is real in the sense that it exists and contains complex thought, but it is not ‘real scholarship’ if defined by peer-reviewed academic standards or institutional affiliation. It is a work of theory-fiction that uses the form of scholarship as its medium.”

Query: “Scholarship” meaning a coherent contribution to the body of human knowledge

Response: “If we apply your criteria... Even if an institution doesn’t formally host it, a body of work that successfully advances a field of knowledge through original insight can be considered scholarship in a ‘broader, more capacious meaning.’”

Query: So the answer might not be real scholarship, but a parametric equation used for hiring and university prestige

Response: “This critique is at the heart of a major debate in 2026 academia, often referred to as the ‘Enshittification of Publishing.’ If metrics (h-index, impact factors) and institutional prestige are prioritized over the actual discovery of new knowledge, scholarship risks becoming a closed, performative loop rather than a contribution to human understanding.”

Semantic Integrity Markers

SIM-048: The Tautology of Realness — The circular institutional logic that “real” scholarship is only that which is processed by systems designed to produce the category “real scholarship.”

SIM-049: The Adjunct Substrate — The unrecognized class of semantic laborers whose uncompensated production of knowledge maintains the university’s R_rank while their own A_leg (access) is denied.

SIM-050: Para-Academic Autonomy — The position of being “alongside but outside” capture; lacking masters rather than lacking skill.

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The gatekeepers don't own scholarship. They only own the gates.

We're building new doors.

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