Taking Stock of Open Access Book Publishing

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Efforts continue to transform academic book publishing in the humanities and social sciences from a user-pays to an open-access, stakeholder-funded business model. (The Elephant has previously covered some of these efforts here and here.) Two players in this field, the Open Access Scholarly Publishing Association (OASPA) and Toward an Open Monograph Ecosystem (TOME), took stock of the progress made and challenges remaining in fall 2021. Here is an update.

The umbrella group for open access publishers OASPA recently issued a report on two workshops it organized in summer 2021 to address what it would take to develop a healthy and diverse open access market. Thirty-one representatives of OA stakeholders, most of them from European and UK institutions, met virtually to discuss this question. The upshot, perhaps not surprisingly, is that stakeholders don’t agree on what kind or how extensive a role markets and governments should have in developing OA publishing. Also lacking are shared definitions of sustainability, quality, diversity, and equity. The workshop members did agree that scholarly communities—however defined—must play a key role, that OA publishing should not reproduce existing global inequities, and that whatever it looks like, a healthy OA market must include many diverse players of a variety of organizational sizes, with ready access by new entrants.

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During OASPA’s fall conference, Cambridge University Press (CUP) presented a poster on its Flip It Open pilot program. It offers a new approach to OA: it doesn’t charge authors a book processing charge (BPC), nor does it require institutional funding up front. Instead, CUP will “open” some ebooks after enough copies have been sold to meet a pre-established level of revenue (currently £8,000). The pilot, running for eighteen months, involves twenty-eight books that will be produced and sold in cloth and ebook formats just like every other Cambridge monograph. Once “opened,” the ebooks will be available via Cambridge Core, the press’s online publishing platform, and an affordable paperback will be issued. Publishers make a significant amount of revenue from their popular titles and typically protect their rights to such books carefully. A strong backlist of books that continue to sell for years is crucial to the ability of many scholarly presses to continue to publish new material.
Cambridge notes that Flip It Open relies on the willingness of libraries and other institutions to buy books that will become free after the revenue target is met, and it promises to recognize and thank those buyers in the open access and paperback editions. According to the website, “This pilot is our way of asking our customers to become actively involved in the funding of Open Access books. Libraries are paying to get the book early, and to fund a wider program that will benefit them, their customers and the wider Academy directly.”

This kind of investment in shared scholarly infrastructure is necessary to avoid the privatization-by-app that Tressie McMillan Cottom recently called out on Twitter in response to the University of North Carolina’s decision to cut its library budget by $5 million. Though OA publishing is often presented as saving money, the creation, publication, distribution, and preservation of scholarship aren’t free and only happen when people and institutions are funded to do the work and maintain the systems.

The need for broad-based shared investment was a key theme at the fall 2021 meeting of participants in the TOME initiative, who gathered to take stock in the fourth year of the five-year pilot project and talk about the future of OA for humanities and social sciences (HSS) book publishing. A collaboration between the Association of American Universities (AAU), the Association of Research Libraries (ARL), and the Association of University Presses (AUPresses), TOME has enlisted 20 universities to commit to making $15,000 available to each faculty member to use in publishing an OA monograph, and 60 university presses have agreed to publish works funded this way. Of the latter, 30 have actually published TOME-funded OA monographs by 2021, drawing on over $1.5 million in grants to support more than 100 titles.

The biggest question that this relative success raises is whether TOME is scalable. Can the TOME model become the norm for HSS book publishing? The answer seems to be, only if more universities can be persuaded to commit to providing monograph publishing funds to their faculty. So far only 20 of the 66 AAU institutions, among the largest and best-funded in the United States, have signed on. (Lever Press offers a counterpart centered on liberal-arts colleges.) But even if all 66 committed to TOME, this would not address the existing inequalities in funding among universities within and outside the United States.

TOME is far from the only business model for OA monographs, however, and the stakeholder meeting provided profiles of others, including MIT’s Direct to Open (D2O) and the University of Michigan’s Fund to Mission. Both presses incentivize libraries to invest in open access titles by offering access to...
their deep backlists. Both have stopped relying on BPCs in part or in whole because of the inherent inequity of this model. Interestingly, US and Canadian libraries have been signing up but the two presses have not seen the levels of participation from UK, European, and Australian libraries that they had expected.

Also profiled was mediastudies.press, a scholar-founded platform that fosters “mission-aligned funding exchanges” (MAFE), linking authors with donors who will support publication. It’s not just crowdsourcing for scholars; these are multi-year, community-vetted commitments to areas of study.

Although the TOME stakeholders agreed that having a variety of approaches is beneficial, most libraries would prefer a broadly shared system, so they don’t have to make separate arrangements with individual publishers (as in MIT’s and Michigan’s initiatives). LYRASIS, an organization dedicated to enabling equitable access to knowledge, helps librarians who are overwhelmed with the gush of OA publications and need ways to identify vetted, quality scholarship in affordable forms by negotiating deals between libraries and publishers. Also addressing this problem is Open Access Publishing in European Networks (OAPEN), which offers vetted OA collections, along with deposit and discoverability services, and the Directory of Open Access Books (DOAB), a community-driven discovery service that certifies OA book publishers based on their peer review procedures and licensing policies. As OAPEN and DOAB indicate, there is more governmental support in the European Union (where the “Open Science” rubric includes HSS) than in the United States. Some stakeholders suggested that TOME should play a role in advocating for US federal funding.

An important way to overcome the current fragmentation and unevenness in access is to create shared, interoperable infrastructure. One initiative in this area is Educopia’s OAeBU data trust, which aims to create a shared, community-governed system for tracking and displaying OA ebook usage data. In addition, Project MUSE is analyzing how subscribe to open is working for journals and hopes this system might work at scale for smaller university presses. Making OA publishing feasible for small and medium-size university presses, which largely can’t afford initiatives like MIT’s D2O and Michigan’s Fund to Mission, is a major issue in remaking scholarly publishing. Building OA to a sustainable scale also requires bringing universities without presses into the system. The central takeaway of the meeting seemed to be that universities, not just libraries, must commit to funding publishing as crucial HSS research infrastructure. If this happens, the initiative is scalable.

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Mentioned but not profiled at the TOME meeting are some additional initiatives:

Opening the Future: In this collective subscription initiative, libraries subscribe to a package of fifty non-OA titles from a publisher and make them available only to the library’s users. After three years,
the library gains perpetual access to the titles in the package. The publisher then uses the revenue earned in selling these subscriptions to fund new, open access publications. Membership (or subscription) fees vary by package, but the highest is significantly cheaper than a single journal article processing charge. It also avoids the book processing charges that few authors can pay while minimizing risks for publishers. Opening the Future titles would be hosted by Project MUSE, thus enabling small and medium-size publishers who do not have their own online content platforms to participate. In addition, MUSE-hosted titles would have good metadata and would provide usage numbers. The more libraries subscribe, the lower the costs for all the members. Currently the Central European University Press and Liverpool University Press are participating.

Community-led Open Publication Infrastructures for Monographs (COPIM): This is an international partnership of researchers, universities, librarians, and open access book publishers and infrastructure providers building community-owned, open systems to enable open access book publishing to flourish. The intention is to avoid the domination of OA by large commercial publishers and other for-profit institutions, in preference for a broad, diverse array of scholar-led, community-owned, not-for-profit publishers. COPIM aims to build infrastructure and facilitate global collaborations to allow more productive partnerships among librarians, publishers, and researchers in promoting open access.

The Open Access Community Investment Program (OACIP), supported by LYRASIS, “provides a community-driven framework that enables multiple stakeholders (including funders, institutions, libraries, authors, and editors) to efficiently and strategically evaluate and collectively fund open access content initiatives.” It partners with TSPOA, an organization focused on transitioning society publications to open access.

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