

Building it together: collaboration in university-based open access book publishing

Open access (OA) book publishing in the humanities and social sciences is becoming technically more feasible and financially more desirable. After securing funding for the development of a business model based on a pilot book series, the University of Heidelberg is joining this development and building an infrastructure to publish OA books on campus. The challenges facing such new publishing outlets are considerable. This article argues that the best strategy to build the prestige, affordability and competitiveness necessary to succeed is collaboration. Accomplishing this within the OA community will prove less difficult than extending collaboration beyond it because many agencies and individuals still lack information about, and are often unconvinced of, the merits of open access. The key lies in offering excellence in manuscript development to revitalize the most important collaboration of all: that between publisher and author.

Introduction

On 19 December 2013, the German Research Council (DFG) announced that it would fund a pilot project by the University of Heidelberg's Cluster of Excellence, 'Asia and Europe in a Global Context'¹ and the University Library to produce open access (OA) books for a new humanities and social sciences series.² This means that over the course of the next two years, the Cluster and the Library can develop a business model and an infrastructure that will serve as a basis for the University's further OA gold publishing. The book series around which this business model will be built is called 'Heidelberg studies in transculturality' and it is aimed specifically at book-length projects – monographs and edited volumes – by junior researchers in the interdisciplinary field of transcultural studies.³

The project is intended as a first step towards establishing an OA book publishing service, housed in the Library and running on the Open Monograph Press (OMP) software platform provided by the Public Knowledge Project (PKP). All workflows for this pilot series will have to be developed: manuscript acquisition, editorial quality control (including peer review, copy-editing and preparing media content), rendering the finished book into three formats (HTML, PDF and EPUB), hosting, distribution and metadata management, as well as organizing the financial transactions of hybrid 'freemium' or print-on-demand (POD) solutions.

Concurrently, the project aims to augment and customize the capabilities of OMP and create a digital infrastructure which allows for an uninterrupted workflow from manuscript submission to billing. The goal is to build and insert into OMP a single-source document solution for the transformation from the MS Word fair copy to the HTML, PDF and EPUB end products.

Two years is a challenging time frame in which to accomplish all these objectives and this is why it is crucial to recognize and consequently avoid reinventing already-existing infrastructural building blocks, to pool resources and to collaborate with individuals and institutions pursuing similar goals. Based on the experience of Heidelberg's fledgling OA book publishing venture, this article argues that collaboration is the strongest



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"... an uninterrupted workflow from manuscript submission to billing."

27 strategy to build the prestige, affordability and competitiveness necessary to compete with established traditional publishers.

Benefits of collaboration within the open access movement

Collaboration lies at the core of the open access movement. This is reflected in its central initiatives and documents such as the Budapest Open Access Initiative Declaration or the Berlin Declaration on Open Access to Knowledge in the Sciences and Humanities, as well as the countless efforts in joint hosting, publishing and coding of open access projects that have brought forth a plethora of organizations, publishing alternatives, library consortia, and not-for-profit enterprises. These collaborative undertakings are fuelled by a common goal: to fix the broken academic publishing system that drains library resources and hides publicly funded research results behind often insurmountable paywalls.

“... prestige – that highly coveted attribute amongst academic authors.”

Because it combines prestige with affordability, collaboration offers the most feasible strategy to counter the entrenched mechanisms of academic publishing. For example, if several important academic institutions – be they universities, libraries, research institutes, or departments – lend their name and some of their resources to a collaborative OA book publishing initiative and thus imbue the resulting publications with their name (which often is an instantly recognizable brand), they establish a solid basis for prestige – that highly coveted attribute amongst academic authors. At the same time, the resources of these institutions are not significantly stretched further by large commitments, as long as the cost of OA book publishing is spread across their network and the project is augmented by infrastructural initiatives such as OAPEN, Jisc or DOAB, funding bodies, and non-for-profits such as Ubiquity Press or Knowledge Unlatched.⁴

But prestige and affordability can only take hold if the open access products are on a par with or, preferably, exceed the quality offered by many traditional publishers. This utterly depends on the expertise with which OA books are produced, distributed and archived. Many of the required skills are available on any given campus: libraries can host, distribute and run the infrastructures; language and literature departments can help with editing; IT departments or digital humanities can develop sophisticated metadata or plain data solutions. But to match the long-established and powerful machinery of the academic publishing industry, OA publishing initiatives must recognize and surmount the complexities and challenges that come with reappropriating academic communication. This can only be achieved by pooling available expertise across institutions.

For example, Heidelberg’s Cluster collaborates with PKP and the Open Library of the Humanities (OLH) to develop the above-mentioned single-source document solution: an XML conversion tool for the transformation from Word doc to various end formats. No single institution involved had all the skills required to produce this vital piece of infrastructure. But because such a tool will further the objective of the various undertakings that the collaborating institutions are pursuing, their developers formed a close, virtual team to create it.

Once a prototype is ready, its functionality will be tested by a second tier of collaborators: the members of the Open Access Toolbox Alliance (OATA), which was founded following Jisc’s 2013 London Conference on Open Access Books with the intention to facilitate the advancement of open access infrastructure solutions.⁵ Because many OATA members are interested in using the XML-conversion tool for their own projects, they are willing to invest their time and expertise in ensuring its functionality.

Extending collaboration beyond the open access network

Collaboration within the open access movement is possible and relatively uncomplicated to establish. However, the situation changes significantly when agencies need to become involved that are either unaware or sceptical of open access. This is where Heidelberg’s project – along with countless other similar initiatives – will face its greatest challenge.

28 To reinvent and rebuild the academic publishing system will require not only permeating a considerable array of networks within institutions – ranging from government via administration to faculty and students – but will also test the mettle of networks between institutions, funding instruments and academics, as well as their ability to communicate with each other. In the humanities and social sciences, which are the academic target group for Heidelberg’s pilot project, much will ride on the latter.

There is still a remarkable dearth of clarity and information, not to mention involvement, as regards open access amongst humanities and social science scholars, be they junior or senior. For such academics to trust the fledgling publishing alternative with their work as authors, and as readers to accept the resulting OA books on a level with volumes produced by traditional publishers, the builders of publication outlets must involve them from the start to formulate desirable outcomes, communicate concerns and find acceptable compromises in production.

“...a real university press – for academics by academics ...”

In other words, librarians, administrators and academics will have to negotiate what a real university press – for academics by academics – should and can deliver.

In the case of Heidelberg’s pilot project, the editors will play a crucial role in mediating these discussions. Now that funding is secured, we are forging the book series’ multi-disciplinary editorial board and an editorial working group. The former will take decisions on greater issues, such as the development of the series or peer review, while the latter (which is a subgroup of the editorial board) will attend to the daily challenges of building and running the series.

All board members will play a pivotal role in introducing the series and its open access context to their respective disciplines and departments and communicating clearly and openly the goals, advantages and challenges of the undertaking. For the series to gain credibility, the editors must persuade prospective authors that although publishing in the series may take courage, it will be a worthwhile endeavour. This will not be an easy task. Old habits are hard to break and hesitation on the part of junior academics to place manuscripts with an ‘unprestigious’ publisher, lest such a move diminish their chances of enticing hiring committees, is well known.

The necessary diplomatic efforts by editors and advocates will be significantly strengthened if they can point to a convincing catalogue. Authors are much more likely to hand over their manuscripts if they find themselves in good company. But series editors can only ensure that the output bearing their name is of a high standard if their effort is supported by a clear vision of where the institution’s overall publishing project is headed. Since list-building is not a skill easily found on a university campus, it will take the concerted effort of series editors, the hosting libraries and university government representatives to ensure that the fledgling publishing venture is sustainable, reliable and attractive enough to academic authors from across campus and beyond.

The most important collaboration of all: scholar and publisher

Attracting the best possible content may very well become the deciding factor in the competition between open access book publishing and traditional publishers. As different venues develop and more reliable OA gold options become available, scholars – who in only the rarest of cases receive or even seek financial gains from their publications – can and should seek out the best possible production of their manuscripts by using markers including editorial quality, manuscript development, citations and distribution.

Many traditional publishers are restricted in providing such services by the expectations of their shareholders. In an ongoing effort to maximize profit, and with substantial infrastructural overheads to boot, many have gutted the editorial process in their academic book production. Long gone are the times when it was standard to invest in two rounds of copy-editing before having a manuscript proofread and sent into layout to produce galleys.

29 As a result, most academics in the humanities and social sciences who publish with traditional publishers not only deliver their book manuscript for free; if they want to ensure their work's high linguistic quality, they have to organize (and pay for) a thorough copy-edit before they deliver to publishers. For non-English-native authors, who wish to make their work available to a global audience, this can be an insurmountable obstacle, particularly if they are recent PhDs. The targeted authors of Heidelberg's pilot project belong to this category of authors.

To OA book publishers, this clipped production value of many 'prestigious' traditional publishers presents a valuable strategic opening to accelerate acceptance and thus submission rates. Offering excellence in manuscript development can help revitalize the most important collaboration of all: that between scholar and publisher. If these two, who are at the centre of all academic communication, strive together to produce the best possible output for the advancement of universal knowledge and if their efforts are made globally available by an OA publishing network that is both affordable and prestigious, then the current publishing crisis will become a thing of the past.

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References and notes

1. The Cluster is part of the German government's Excellence Initiative, which "aims to promote top-level research and to improve the quality of German universities and research institutions in general, thus making Germany a more attractive research location, making it more internationally competitive and focussing attention on the outstanding achievements of Germany universities and the German scientific community": http://www.dfg.de/en/research_funding/programmes/excellence_initiative/ (accessed 10 February 2014). Clusters of Excellence "enable German university locations to establish internationally visible, competitive research and training facilities, thereby enhancing scientific networking and cooperation among the participating institutions." Heidelberg's Cluster 'Asia and Europe' is one of only six in the humanities and social sciences. See: <http://www.asia-europe.uni-heidelberg.de/en/> (accessed 10 February 2014).
2. http://www.dfg.de/foerderung/info_wissenschaft/info_wissenschaft_13_70/ (accessed 2 January 2014) and http://www.uni-heidelberg.de/presse/news2014/pm20140115_open_access_en.html (accessed 10 February 2014).
3. <http://www.asia-europe.uni-heidelberg.de/en/research.html> (accessed 2 January 2014).
4. For a cost-analysis of open access books see Ferwerda, E, Snijder, E and Adema, J *OAPEN-NL – A project exploring Open Access monograph publishing in the Netherlands: Final Report*, 39–53: www.oapen.org/download?type=export&export=oapen-nl-final-report (accessed 8 February 2014).
5. <https://www.jisc-collections.ac.uk/Jisc-Collections-events/oabooksconf/> (accessed 10 February 2014).

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