



## Start-up story

# Glasstree Academic Publishing

Glasstree Academic Publishing is a non-licence cloud-based content dissemination platform supporting e-book, print and open access (OA) publishing, which was launched in November 2016. Glasstree is a subdivision of Lulu.com, a large USA-based independent publishing platform which has published more than two million books since 2002. Lulu analyzed their author database and discovered that at least 38 per cent of Lulu's content was produced by academic authors independently publishing their works. The company was keen to look at ways it could better understand and support this academic community. It became apparent that this pattern of publishing was indicative of an emerging trend, a drive to seek alternative means of getting content into the public domain, embraced by a group of academic entrepreneurial innovators who wanted their work to become accessible and were willing to sacrifice their relationships with traditional publishing in order to do so.

After conducting direct discussions with a representative sample of those academics, Lulu supported the concept that every academic professional in every institution should have the right to publish their monographs, books, articles and papers independently. After major collaboration with these academics, Glasstree Academic Publishing was launched to better support their needs and provide a focused academic content platform, incorporating the same functions and services as a traditional academic publisher would provide. The idea was not only to replicate, but to improve upon the experience that traditional publishers provide to authors, particularly as regards the ability to redirect ownership and revenues back to the author. Glasstree offers print and digital options, copy-editing services, gold OA and peer review, as well as various discoverability and impact metric tools.

The fundamental principles of Glasstree are:

- providing an equitable profit-sharing model for academics and their supporting institutions
- providing better control and visibility of content
- the ability for authors and institutions to set the price of their own work
- a quicker route to market
- a fairer profit-sharing model (70 per cent of royalties instead of the industry average of nine per cent).

The project is being led by Daniel Berze, who has worked both for a traditional commercial academic publisher and for a coalition of seven learned societies.

A crucial requirement for any new independent publishing platform is the ability to maintain 'integrity' and 'transparency', thereby refuting any potential accusations as regards quality, speed, cost and profit distribution that might be levelled against it. Glasstree has been careful to partner with industry-recognized dissemination, licensing and publishing services partners. Users will experience no disadvantages in terms of service options, content dissemination, fulfilment and bibliometrics in comparison with a traditional publisher; in contrast, the author will benefit by retaining control of content, added transparency and a generous rate of revenue return.



JEAN ROBERTS

Business Development  
Director  
Glasstree Academic  
Publishing, UK

'The idea was ...  
to improve upon  
the experience that  
traditional publishers  
provide to authors'

## Disruption provokes innovation and added choices

Glasstree's aims are clear:

- to shake up the academic publishing industry by firmly establishing a whole new category of publishing which puts the creators of academic content, and the institutions that support the academic in creating that content, firmly at centre stage
- to demonstrate to universities and their libraries how this new technology platform could allow them to capitalize on and support the academics within their institution.

This convergence of independent publishing with the traditional publishing model will create welcome disruption in the academic space. The emergence of new digital platforms like Glasstree offers opportunities to individual academics and universities and research institutions alike; they are opportunities to look afresh at how and where additional sources of funding can be generated and how the university and its library can support both academic-led and institutional-led publishing. For too long, publishers have been reaping the benefit of the research they publish. Academics and their institutions should be getting more attention and benefit from their content.

The disruptive technology mood of Glasstree comes in response to 'the academic spring' (a collective expression of dissatisfaction used by authors and their institutions against the traditional academic publishing model). The Cost of Knowledge petition<sup>1</sup> in 2012 (a specific petition against the business practices of Elsevier and signed by over 16,000 academics) fostered a disruptive mood within the academic community against traditional academic publishers. It left the door wide open for new digital technology models to offer more equitable publishing and dissemination solutions to both the academics and the institutions that developed and supported their research. Although the academic spring was a significant milestone in the voicing of academic discontent, five years down the track, despite these calls for change, there is no significant change.

Glasstree recently conducted a survey among UK academics and discovered that much of this ill feeling within the scholarly community is still very much prevalent today. It found that 64 per cent of academics were dissatisfied with their experiences with traditional academic publishing, and that an astonishing 83 per cent believe traditional academic publishing needs to change. Respondents cited publisher-centric business models, slow speeds in getting published, difficulties in getting work disseminated and a lack of control of the publishing process as their main gripes. For a snapshot infographic of the survey see Figure 1. Sadly, these complaints have become all too commonplace. Academics, under pressure to publish yet offered no other viable alternative, find themselves shackled to the traditional publishing processes of which they have become so critical. Innovation has been slow, as the scholarly publishing industry is still very much built around serving the financial interests of large commercial publishers. Very few have served to redress this power imbalance and give academics and institutions the reward and recognition they deserve.

'an astonishing 83 per cent [of academics] believe traditional academic publishing needs to change'

### Who are Glasstree's users?

Glasstree's independent publishing platform can serve multiple needs in the academic community, particularly when it comes to new university presses (NUPs) and the movement towards institution and library-led publishing.

The Glasstree platform can be used by:

- academics wishing to independently publish their work by providing a publishing dissemination platform and access to services

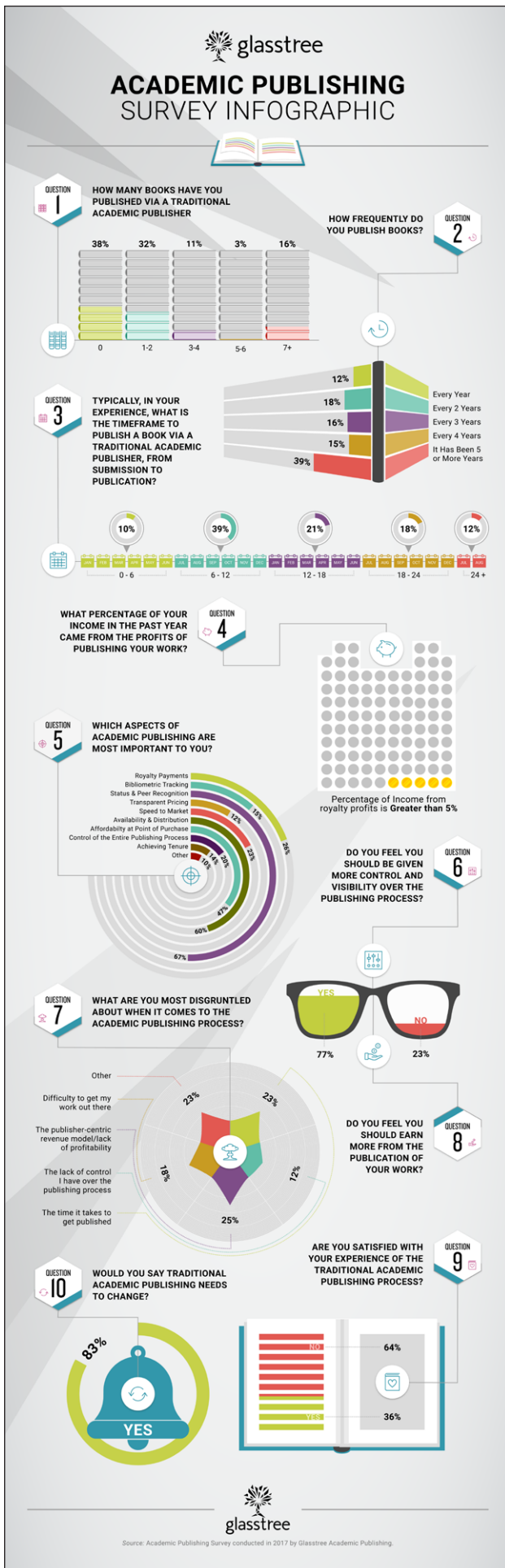


Figure 1. Glasstree Academic Publishing Survey January 2017<sup>2</sup>

- 115
- small academic publishers and learned societies and institutions – by providing an end-to-end publishing platform, access to services with options for white label (the ability to customize and brand the Glasstree website to appear as if it is the publisher, society or institution's own website) and print integration
  - new university presses
  - existing small university presses
  - academic libraries.

### New university presses

For a university looking to start a press, the Glasstree platform is free from any contractual vendor 'lock-ins', and there are no usage, maintenance or termination fees. This would provide a new university press with a 'ready-made' publishing and dissemination platform, complete with additional services like peer review, indexing, copy-editing, illustration, design and PR. As a cloud-based platform there is no installation required, no service contract and no intensive staff training needed. The 24/7 platform can be managed with low staff overheads which frees up staff, allowing them to concentrate on content acquisition. The platform can be white-labelled and, as it is merely a conduit to publication, this means the institution is free to wrap its own terms and conditions around its use (e.g. all content must be peer reviewed) and split the revenue it receives according to its own agreements with authors. With an option to white-label the platform, this model supports a university aiming to launch its own independent university press 'brand'.

### Existing small university presses

For universities that already operate a small branded press (and are publishing only a small percentage of their own academics via that press), Glasstree allows them to offer the same publishing and dissemination services to the rest of their institution, with revenue-generation opportunities, without negatively impacting the main brand. Hence the platform can allow them to publish at arm's length' from their main brand, enabling the press to service and represent all the academics within the institution without fear of being labelled a 'vanity press'. Secondly, presses are often under pressure to deliver commercial value, yet only a small percentage of a press's academic output is likely to be successful in the wider marketplace, so offering a service outside the main brand creates further revenue-generation opportunities.

### Academic libraries

For a library wishing to 'upsell' services to its students and academics, the platform can be internalized within the library and revenue paid back to that library for any content sales. The advent of the internet, more affordable print-on-demand services and the progressive movement towards gold OA have all combined to make setting up shop more feasible for the aspirational and entrepreneurial libraries. For those who do not have a publishing facility to offer to their staff, researchers and students, academics have no choice but to go through the traditional publishing process or seek alternative models, for example self-financed independent publishing or crowdfunding. Offering a publishing service from within the library brings the library closer to the academics and PhD students within their institution and can generate additional revenue back into the library budgets. Discussions with librarians and university presses have revealed deep levels of frustration. They are acutely aware of the pressures being put on the shoulders of academics to achieve funding and get published, and they overwhelmingly want to support these endeavours. However, for a number of reasons, not enough is being done to ensure that the ability to publish is accessible universally, as opposed to by only a privileged few.

116 This library-led publishing and university press movement has the potential to become so much more disruptive and impactful than it currently is. In a number of years, every university could potentially have its own individual press, together with the capability of publishing 100 per cent of their academics' research. What's more, resource acquisition need not even come into the equation. The main reason for this is the fact that 'publishing services' in the academic space, like those offered via Glasstree, are becoming much more freely available and affordable to those who use them. For example, a very small university press with limited budgets and resources can easily publish a large output of peer-reviewed OA books using our model. Furthermore, by outsourcing editorial services (like copy-editing, proofreading and translation) and creative services (such as cover design), libraries and new or small university presses could focus time and energy on building their lists, servicing more academics and making their offering more commercial.

'every university could potentially have its own individual press'

## Embracing innovation

Glasstree is positioned to service three major movements that are gaining ground in the UK, Europe and the USA: independent publishing by academics looking to circumvent traditional publishing, the rise of NUPs,<sup>3</sup> and academic libraries deciding to take more action to control their content repositories and provide better services to their academics. When these three spheres converge, they will offer a very real threat to commercial publishers. University presses will build their brands and gain competitive advantage against some of the bigger commercial publisher players. More importantly, given the continuing relevance of the academic spring, they could help to create a world of fairness and equity, where the ability to publish is no longer a privilege for the few or dictated by the risk-averse funder who will only sanction a large brand publisher as a requirement for funding, but rather create an environment which is accessible to more academics wanting to disseminate their research with better financial terms, controlled price points, appropriately directed recognition and an equitable profit share.

'a very real threat to commercial publishers'

### References

1. The Cost of Knowledge petition: [www.thecostofknowledge.com](http://www.thecostofknowledge.com) (accessed 5 June 2017).
2. Berze D, 13 March 2017, If it can't be fixed, it might be time for something new, Glasstree blog: <https://blog.glasstree.com/2017/03/13/if-it-cant-be-fixed-it-might-be-time-for-something-new/> (accessed 5 June 2017).
3. Andrew L and Speicher L, New University Presses in the UK: Accessing a mission, *Learned Publishing*, 2016, 29(S1); DOI: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/leap.1049/full> (accessed 5 June 2017).

**Article copyright: © 2017 Jean Roberts. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution Licence](#), which permits unrestricted use and distribution provided the original author and source are credited.**



Jean Roberts

Business Development Director,  
Glasstree Academic Publishing, UK

E-mail: [jroberts@glasstree.com](mailto:jroberts@glasstree.com)

ORCID ID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3826-4629>

To cite this Key Issue:

Roberts J, Glasstree Academic Publishing, *Insights*, 2017, 30(2), 112–117; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1629/uksg.362>

Published by UKSG in association with Ubiquity Press on 10 July 2017